



EETN Policy Brief

Power and Protest: Georgians Fighting for their European Dream

December 2, 2024

Jeff Sahadeo (Institute of European, Russian and Eurasian Studies (EURUS), Carleton University) David Sichinava (EURUS, Carleton University), Baia Kotrikadze (EURUS, Carleton University)

Summary: Mass protests have spread across Georgia since Prime Minister, Irakli Kobakhidze, announced the ruling party's intention to [suspend negotiations to EU accession](#) until 2028. Georgia's population remains [overwhelmingly pro-European](#) and this announcement sparked high-level resignations and statements of opposition from within the government. As protests intensify, Georgia's President, Salome Zurbishvili, has announced she will gather opposition to demand new, fair elections. The country risks sliding into chaos and violence.

Background: Georgian Dream (GD) claimed victory after Georgia's elections on October 26, which were marred by accusations of vote-buying, ballot-stuffing and other irregularities. GD is under the control of Bidzina Ivanishvili, [Georgia's richest man](#), who has close ties to Russia. GD has taken an increasingly anti-Western line since Russia's full-scale war on Ukraine, passing a [Russia-inspired Law on Foreign Agents](#) over massive protests in May 2024. Ivanishvili has referred to the West as the "Party of War," accusing it of wanting to open a second front in Ukraine through Georgia.

Georgian opposition see Ivanishvili's influence as a form of individual state capture but have struggled to counter his influence. GD has worked to gain the loyalty of the Interior Ministry and Security Services, which violently dispersed the May 2024 protests. [Inspired by, and allied with, Hungary's Viktor Orban](#), GD seeks to control Georgian society through an illiberal, conservative regime. GD's support base is in rural areas and it has the backing of Georgia's powerful Orthodox Church. President Salome Zurbishvili has become the main opposition voice; her role is largely ceremonial, however, and is slated to end in December, when her position is re-elected indirectly through a GD-dominated college.

Kobakhidze's announcement invigorated Georgians extremely unhappy with GD's drift away from Europe and towards Russia, whose client states occupy about 20% of Georgian territory. Reactions to GD's election win had been muted. Even as only six countries have recognized the victory, US and EU reaction had been [largely wait-and-see](#) as the OSCE/ODIHR monitoring mission prepares its final election report. Their energy spent following the May 2024 protests and the campaign, pro-European Georgians became despondent as GD celebrated. GD's subsequent arrogance is the best explanation their definitive move away from Europe, Georgia's largest trading partner and source of inspiration for centuries.

Current Protests: Leading to Kobakhidze's announcement, student-led protests, including [the partial occupation of Tbilisi State University](#), were diminishing, largely due to heavy-handed police tactics. After Kobakhidze's November 28 announcement, thousands gathered in front of the country's parliament for a



spontaneous rally in Tbilisi. Additional demonstrations erupted in larger urban centers such as Batumi, Rustavi, Kutaisi, Zugdidi, and Gori. Riot police in full gear responded with water cannons, rubber bullets, tear gas, and pepper spray. Human rights groups criticized police for [using prohibited tactics](#), such as mixing tear gas with water in cannons to increase potency. The clashes resulted in numerous arrests and injuries among protesters. Reports suggest that [journalists were deliberately targeted](#) by the police.

The protests spread over the weekend to smaller towns such as Chokhatauri, Kareli, Khashuri, and Ozurgeti. Demonstrators attempted to block access to Georgia's [strategic Poti seaport](#). In Tbilisi, another group entered the national public broadcaster's building, demanding "unbiased" [live coverage and access to airtime](#). The police at the parliament used excessive force that resulted in further injuries and numerous arrests. With additional protest rallies planned in other Georgian cities on Monday, it is yet to be seen whether protests will gain political momentum.

Domestic Reaction: Georgian Dream's sudden announcement prompted an unprecedented backlash within the government's ranks. High-ranking officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), including Deputy Minister Janjalia, and Georgia's ambassadors to the U.S., the Netherlands, Lithuania, and Bulgaria, as well as the envoy to Italy, resigned in protest. Additionally, over [200 MFA employees, including senior officials](#), signed a letter condemning the decision. The dissent spread to other departments, with significant numbers from the [Ministry of Defense](#), [Ministry of Education and Science](#), the [Constitutional Court](#), the [National Bank](#), the [National Center for Disease Control](#), [Tbilisi City Hall](#), and [other government agencies](#) also voicing their disapproval.

While some businesses strongly opposed the Georgian Dream's policy shift, others, including the country's two major communications networks, issued more measured statements. They focused on [condemning the violence against protesters](#) and [expressing support for Georgia's EU membership](#). Even the Georgian Orthodox Church, which had notably [signaled support for GD](#) in the last parliamentary elections, [denounced the police violence](#) and urged for quick and thorough investigations into the violations. Georgian diaspora members organized dozens of rallies [across the globe](#).

Zurabishvili has stated that she will continue as president given the "illegitimacy" of Georgia's new government. She has announced a "[national consensus](#)" from meetings with opposition parties, civil society organizations and others to restore Georgia's European path. Their main goal is to run new elections under fair conditions.

International Reaction: Russia's President Putin claimed to be "[surprised by the courage](#)" of Georgia's government in turning away from the EU. Western powers have reacted differently. The United States [suspended its Strategic Partnership with Georgia](#), which has guided the bilateral relationship since 2009. Kaja Kallas, the EU Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, has threatened "[direct consequences](#)" for the Georgian government given its violent response to peaceful protests. Hungary's support for Georgia limits the range of consequences, however, including efforts to impose sanctions. Georgian Dream believes that a Trump administration will reset US-Georgian relations.

Scenarios: Georgia is at a critical juncture in the nation's history. The processes unfolding in the next hours and days will have significant consequences for Georgians and their international partners. Domestic and regional stability and security, as well as human rights and democracy, are at stake.



Short term: As there is a [noted relationship](#) between protestors' support for Georgia's EU membership and their participation in domestic demonstrations, it is no surprise that protests have erupted to the degree they have across the country. As unfolding protests place pressure on GD, this will likely destabilize the regime's influence, bring its legitimacy into question, and allow civic actors to be heard.

Medium term: Protestors and Zurabishvili lack a clear mechanism for change if government support holds. The Constitutional Court has the power to order new elections, but it's unclear whether it would take that step. Zurabishvili and others will have to decide whether to form an alternate government. If two governing bodies declare legitimate rule and a constitutional crisis unfolds, a power struggle will ensue. Georgians will be left in an increasingly tense standoff with the police and military as potential powerbrokers. Violence is a serious possibility.

Long term: There will be [economic consequences](#) for Georgia should GD continue their pull away from Euro-Atlantic partners, which will lead to detrimental outcomes for Georgian citizens and businesses. Democratic processes face precarity with the threat of further [backsliding](#). The EU may very likely remove the country's visa-free travel status—one of the few actions it can take without unanimity—with upcoming talks on [December 16th](#) which will have a significant impact on the country.