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'The "political" is discredited in Georgia'

Felix Hett in Tbilisi on what the protests in Georgia mean for the country – and its relationship with Russia

Since 20 June 2019, thousands have been demonstrating every evening in front of parliament in the Georgian capital Tbilisi against Russia's political stance towards Georgia. How did the protests come about?

The protests were triggered by a conference of the "Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy", which was supposed to take place in Tbilisi from 19 to 22 June. The organisation, founded in 1993 on Greece's initiative, brings together Christian Orthodox parliamentarians from around 25 countries every year. When, on 20 June, the President of the Assembly, the Russian Duma deputy Sergei Gavrilov, chaired the meeting in Russian from the Chair of the Georgian Parliament, a wave of outrage broke out. High-ranking representatives of the governing party "Georgian Dream" recognised – albeit too late – the explosive nature of the images and condemned the alleged "protocol error".

The majority of Georgians perceive Russia as a hostile occupying power, without which the separatist regimes in Abkhazia and South Ossetia would not be viable. Opposition members took the opportunity to occupy the plenary hall and called for a first rally in the evening. The conference had to be stopped. And Gavrilov, a member of the Russian Communist Party, had to be escorted from his hotel under police protection and left Georgia the same day.

The outrage was fuelled by the rumour, widespread in the Georgian media and denied by Gavrilov, that he had fought on the side of the separatists in Abkhazia in the early 1990s. The next day, the Speaker of Parliament took political responsibility and resigned. Majority leader Archil Talakvadze was elected as his successor.

What consequences did the protests have so far?

The violent escalation of the protests on the first night – with more than

200 injured – has already led to the resignation of the President of Parliament Irakli Kobakhidze on 21 June. On 24 June, multi-billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, chairman of the “Georgian Dream” party, announced that the parliamentary elections planned for autumn 2020 would be held on the basis of pure proportional representation. The existing voting system – half of the deputies are elected proportionally according to lists, the other half directly – had led to the “Georgian Dream” receiving three quarters of the seats in 2016 with less than 50 per cent of the votes.

The current concession could, however, prove to be a Pyrrhic victory, as Ivanishvili has announced that he will not apply an electoral threshold. Therefore, the parliament is threatened with splintering into numerous small parties. Whether such a chaotic fragmentation can bring about a change in political culture remains to be seen. So far, Georgia’s political culture has been dominated by confrontational “friend-or-foe” thinking, in which political change is only possible through revolutions. The development and implementation of an evolutionary political understanding characterised by a willingness to compromise remains the central task of political elites.

In addition to the reform of the electoral law, the protesters demand the resignation of Interior Minister Giorgi Gakharia and the release of some 120 people who were arrested during the night of Thursday to Friday. The protests will continue every evening until the demands are met.

What impact will the crisis have on relations between Georgia and Russia?

The crisis has caused a rapid deterioration in Georgian-Russian relations: following the August war and Russia's recognition of the “independence” of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia broke off diplomatic relations in 2008.

Since 2012, the ruling party "Georgian Dream" has implemented a cautious policy of normalisation. Its successes are now in question. Because of the alleged threat to Russian citizens, Russia is banning all direct flights to Georgia from 8 July; the Kremlin also recommends that Russian tour operators bring back tourists from Georgia. There is no objective reason for this; the security situation in the country remains good.

Obviously, Russia's leadership cannot not respond to the public humiliation of one of its lower-ranking representatives – Gavrilov was dashed with water in parliament and insulted by demonstrators. Russia now plans punitive measures – even a wine import ban could be added –

are disproportionate and could slow Georgia's economic growth: in 2018 the country recorded over 7.2 million international visitors, 1.4 million of whom came from Russia. The contribution of tourism to the gross domestic product is estimated at just under ten per cent.

While Georgia benefits from economic relations with Russia, these have not contributed to a more positive perception of Russia in Georgian society. The Gavrilov affair also shows that there is no social basis for further rapprochement as long as Russia's support for the separatist regions continues.

What does the crisis mean for Georgian domestic politics?

The “Georgian Dream” is badly hit. Before June 20, the party had repeatedly appealed not to take violent action against demonstrations, unlike the previous government of ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili. During the 2018 presidential election campaign, the “Georgian Dream” warned of the opposition candidate with shock pictures of bleeding demonstrators.

Many people are sick of the government but see no alternatives either. New parties, currently being formed in preparation for the 2020 elections, are dominated by familiar faces. Representatives of the opposition were not allowed to speak at the demonstration on 21 June – the organisers said the protests were apolitical. The “political” is discredited in Georgia, a consequence of the behaviour of the elites in the last 30 years. But how a leaderless protest movement can bring about change in a political culture focused on leaders remains unclear. The degree of mobilization is already declining noticeably, and the protests might subside in the next few days – unless another unforeseen escalation occurs.

This interview was conducted by Daniel Kopp.



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