

Pre-election tensions in Georgia

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On 18 September the Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs revealed cases of prisoners being treated brutally in the Gldani jail in Tbilisi and announced that arrests had been made and that an investigation was being launched with regard to this scandal. Soon afterwards TV stations linked with the opposition broadcast a video showing brutality against prisoners (including a case of rape using a stick). This sparked off protests with several thousand people gathering together across the country. The protests were, however, calmed down, in part due to the opposition. In the aftermath of the scandal the minister responsible for the penitentiary system and the interior minister were dismissed. This scandal also added more tension to the already heated campaign before the parliamentary election scheduled for 1 October.

The unsettling situation in Georgian prisons has for years been the subject of severe criticism both within the country (including reports by the ombudsman) and by foreign observers (including reports prepared by the US State Department). After the scandal was made public, the Georgian government announced a thorough reform of the whole system – Giorgi Tugushi was appointed new prisons minister; he has been a critic of the penitentiary system to date and is a former ombudsman.

Commentary

- This scandal is an element of a heated election campaign, in which the main opponents are the ruling United National Movement (ENM) and the opposition party – the Georgian Dream (GD) gathered around Bidzina Ivanishvili. The scandal has shaken society, strengthened anti-government feelings and mobilised the electorate of the opposition. However, various factors have pre-empted and to a certain degree mitigated its political impact. These include: the fact that the scandal was exposed and followed up with arrests, dismissals and a level of self-criticism from the government previously unseen within the post-Soviet area. Ivanishvili decided to calm down protests which he thought to be premature. The Patriarch Ilia II, who enjoys huge authority in Georgia, also called for calm (and an investigation).
- The scandal has had a substantial impact on the electoral campaign; the opposition has been using it to mobilise its voters, to illustrate the “brutality of the regime” and to justify its demand for the president to step down. On the other hand, the government has been accusing the opposition of manipulation, links with the criminal world and of seeking to

destabilise the country (this last would be part of Russia's anti-Georgian policy and indeed inspired by Moscow). This tension is also illustrated by the arrests of opposition activists by the police in the last week before the election; according to the opposition, these arrests are of a political nature but the government claims they have been provoked by the opposition in order to aggravate the situation and discredit the ruling camp.

- The approaching election has special significance: for the first time since the Rose Revolution (2003) the government has had a serious (despite its internal incoherence) rival: the Georgian Dream (GD). Furthermore, following the amendments to the constitution and the approaching end of President Saakashvili's term in office (2013), the role of parliament will considerably increase. Opinion polls conducted at the beginning of September show that the United National Movement (ENM) could rally approximately 40% of the vote and GD – approximately 20%, with 40% of those surveyed remaining undecided. It is equally important – for Georgia itself but also for the country's image in the West – that the election will be held in compliance with democratic standards and that it will develop calmly. The political polarisation in Georgia, emotions linked with the election and actions undertaken and announcements made by the opposition prove that the electoral campaign will be getting tougher; the opposition will question the democratic character of the election and the prospect of post-election protests seems quite likely.