

Georgia: Police break up protest aimed at preventing Independence Day parade

On the night of 25-26 May in Tbilisi, police broke up a group who had gathered by the Parliament building, demanding the resignation of President Mikheil Saakashvili. The excessive brutality attributed to the police led to a wave of criticism levelled at the Georgian government, both inside the country and abroad. These allegations are damaging to Tbilisi's image, although they will not affect the government's position.

The protest was organised by the former speaker of parliament Nino Burjanadze as part of the protests against the President which have lasted since 21 May. The immediate objective was to block the annual military Independence Day parade planned for 26 May. During the day, the protest gathered over one thousand people; however, at night only around three hundred demonstrators remained, who blocked the main avenue of the city. As a result of clashes with the police, dozens of people were wounded. Two deaths also occurred, but these probably had no direct connection with the actions of the police (the official version, which has not yet been disproved, says that a column of cars evacuating the protests' organisers ran over someone). The police action, which many observers called excessively brutal, has led to a wave of criticism of the authorities by the Georgian public (protests took place on 28 and 29 May in Tbilisi against police violence), as well as by Western countries and international organisations.

The protests organised by Nino Burjanadze have met with little support (considering the level of social dissatisfaction) from the public, and have risked compromising their organisers. The attempt to blockade the parade was a conscious desire to provoke a decisive response from the government. However, Burjanadze's confrontational approach has been poorly received by Georgian society (despite the criticism of the government), and has discredited both her personally, and the methods of political struggle which she has used. <MMat>