

Georgia: political crisis and Russian threats

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On 15 November, the centre of Tbilisi saw the first significant demonstration by the opposition United National Movement (UNM) in more than two years. Protesters under the banner of preventing the 'annexation of Abkhazia by Russia', supporting the exiled former president Mikheil Saakashvili, criticised the Georgian Dream government for failing to take decisive action in this matter. The demonstration coincided with tensions within the ruling camp. On 14 November, using the issue of Abkhazia as an excuse, President Giorgi Margvelashvili gave a speech in parliament including a veiled criticism of the informal leader of Georgian Dream, the former prime minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, for his opaque, behind-the-scenes management of the government. He also stated that some of the actions taken by Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili (allowing the most pro-Western politicians, including the defence minister Irakli Alasania, to resign from the government) may adversely affect Georgia's pro-Western foreign policy.

The deepening political crisis and the weakening of the pro-Western wing of Georgian Dream may lead to a slowdown in the processes of reform and the implementation of EU obligations (including those agreed under the Association Agreement and the DCFTA), although there is no indication that Tbilisi has made a geopolitical turn and openly given up its pro-Western course. Nor does it appear that the current events might generate a deep crisis which could threaten to destabilise the country. However, the tension on the Georgian political scene plays into the hands of Russia, fitting in with its more active policy towards Georgia. Its purpose is to call Tbilisi's pro-Western course into doubt, by means including taking advantage of internal centrifugal and destabilising factors.

Manifestations of the political crisis

The demonstration in Tbilisi was attended by between 4000 (according to the government) and 30,000 (in the opposition's version) people. It passed off in a peaceful atmosphere. Via a large video screen, the protesters were addressed by Mikheil Saakashvili, then in Kiev, who criticised the Georgian Dream government, stating that Bidzina Ivanishvili had "abolished the electoral system" and was seeking to create an oligarchic political system based on repression and modelled on Russia. He also condemned the authorities for their "policy of capitulation" towards Russia and their lack of action to block the Russian-Abkhazian integration agreement, which according to the opposition will lead to the *de facto* annexation of Abkhazia (the draft agreement provides for the integration of Abkhazia with Russia in the spheres of defence, customs, and the defence of internal order and external borders). Contrary to reports spread by the Russian media, however, Saakashvili did not call

for the current government to be removed by unconstitutional methods, but called for the public to come together in order to force the government to call early elections.

The aim of the demonstrations was to assert the presence of the UNM on the political scene, and to attempt to rebuild its socio-political base in the face of increasing pressure from the authorities (including arresting and sentencing a series of opposition activists to prison) and low social support (around 11% according to polls). To this end, Saakashvili has used the issue of Abkhazia (the public is concerned about Russia's formal annexation of the republic on the model of Crimea) to attract attention, while accusing Ivanishvili of favouring Russia (despite a drop in support for pro-Western policies and a rise in the number of supporters of Eurasian integration, as a whole the Georgian public remains pro-Western). The increase in activity by an opposition which has spent the last two years in a deep defensive posture may mean the beginning of a political campaign whose ultimate (albeit unrealistic in the near term) goal is to return to power.

Another manifestation of the political crisis is the deepening conflict within the ruling camp, which includes both personality conflicts and ideological dimensions. Alasania's resignation (4 November), the departure of the foreign minister Maya Panjikidze and the minister for Integration with the EU and NATO Aleksi Petriashvili, and the exit from the coalition of the strongly pro-Western Free Democrats, led President Margvelashvili to criticise the government and Bidzina Ivanishvili. In his speech, the President expressed the view that these departures sparked a controversy over the pro-Western foreign policy and was a symptom of a crisis in the country's democratic institutions. He also came out in defence of the ministers (on 13 November he met the departed Alasania), stating that their dismissals had been politically motivated. He furthermore criticised the decision-making system in the country, which according to him should be formalised, and should take place within the institutional framework (this last was a criticism targeting Ivanishvili's habit of backstage government).

Tensions between the President and PM Garibashvili have existed for a long time, although this was the first time that Margvelashvili had so openly criticised not only the government but also Ivanishvili himself. The ideas raised by the president are similar to some degree with the speeches of the opposition, although this does not mean that he is willing to cooperate with the UNM. Margvelashvili is probably trying to strengthen his own position in relation to Ivanishvili, and to build up an image of himself as the defender of the integrity of Tbilisi's pro-Western course, which could generate further conflicts within the ruling coalition.

The political crisis in Georgia and Russia's policy

Despite the negative impact on Georgia's pro-Western course, it does not seem that these tensions on the country's political scene will threaten to escalate seriously in the near future: Georgian Dream still has a majority of both parliamentary and public support, Saakashvili's camp and Alasania's party are too weak to threaten the authorities, and President Margvelashvili has no political base. The events in Georgia gain weight only in the light of Russia's increasingly active policy towards that country, in the context of the Ukraine situation as well as Moscow's broader efforts to restore maximum control over the post-Soviet area (its policy towards Moldova, pressure on Azerbaijan, the risk of exploiting the

Karabakh conflict, and so on).

Although Russian-Georgian relations improved after Georgian Dream took power in 2012 (as seen in Moscow's conciliatory gestures to Georgia, such as opening the Russian market to Georgian goods, the resumption of direct flights, Tbilisi's greater openness to contacts with Russia and its consideration of some of Russia's interests), this did not change Russia's overall priority for Georgia, which remains the derailment of Tbilisi's pro-Western course. Moreover, the Russian side has recently taken a number of steps to strengthen its position in Georgia and create potential sources of instability in the country. The Russian activities include: putting pressure on Abkhazia to integrate more closely with Russia (preceded by a Moscow-inspired coup in the republic this May); the activation of Ossetian separatists (including the declaration of territorial claims against Georgia); the creation and funding of pro-Russian political parties and Eurasian NGOs; increased propaganda activities (such as the Russian press stoking conflict between the Georgian authorities and the opposition, or the alleged threat to Russia by Islamic State militants coming from the Pankisi Gorge); strengthening cooperation with the anti-Western Georgian Orthodox Church; and the activation of Armenian migrants in Russia from the Georgian region of Javakheti (the diaspora has called for Javakheti to separate from Georgia in the event of a political crisis there).

The deepening conflicts on the Georgian political scene are part of the Russian strategy towards Georgia, the likely aim of which is to either take advantage of or bring about a serious destabilisation of the internal situation in Georgia, which could undermine Tbilisi's pro-Western foreign policy. It cannot be ruled out that (following the example of the Ukrainian scenario) Russia may seek the even greater territorial disintegration of Georgia (such as regional divisions, particularly in areas inhabited by ethnic minorities, like the Armenians in Javakheti), which would facilitate Russian intervention in the country under the pretext of protecting the civilian population. The risk appears to be even greater as the political crisis in Georgia and the Russian moves interact with the increasingly frequent symptoms of internal social conflicts (such as the friction between the Muslim and Christian populations; tensions between the Georgians and the Armenian minority; disputes between the local authorities and the Chechen community in the Pankisi Gorge; and a marked increase in crime). Another element is the increased tension in the Caucasus, especially concerning the Karabakh conflict.