

Georgia: internal tensions and a new crisis in relations with Russia

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The protests in Tbilisi which have been ongoing since 20 June have revealed the potential for discontent in Georgian society; the public has been disillusioned by the country's bad economic and social situation (high unemployment, rising prices, and the weakening of the national currency), and the broken promises of the Georgian Dream-Democratic Georgia (GD) party, which has been ruling for nearly seven years. The demonstrations have also exacerbated the political struggle between GD and the increasingly strong opposition, dominated by the United National Movement (UNM) party of former President Mikheil Saakashvili, and European Georgia (EG), which was established after a split in the UNM.

During the protests anti-Russian slogans and symbols appeared; this, together with a speech by the President of Georgia Salome Zurbishvili calling Russia "an enemy and an occupier", provoked sharp reactions from Moscow, including a statement by President Putin's spokesman Dmitri Peskov which spoke of "a Russophobic provocation". Moscow has also introduced sanctions hitting the Georgian economy; President Putin signed a decree suspending air links between Russia and Georgia and recommending that travel agencies withdraw from Georgia; also Rospotrebnadzor (the consumer protection service) has banned the import of certain brands of Georgian wine in connection with an alleged deterioration of its quality.

Commentary

- The immediate cause of these incidents was when the Russian parliamentary deputy Sergei Gavrilov sat in the speaker's chair of the Georgian parliament during a session of the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy (Gavrilov is the chairman of this body). This met with an outcry from Georgian opposition deputies, who called on their supporters to take to the streets. As a result the proceedings were discontinued, and the Russian delegation returned home. On the night of 20/21 June a crowd attempted to seize the parliament building. More than 300 people were detained, some of whom were jailed, and over 200 people required medical assistance. In the following days, the protests reduced in size. The demonstrators demanded the release of all the detainees, the resignation of the interior minister, and early parliamentary elections (scheduled to be held in autumn 2020). Despite the presence of anti-Russian slogans and symbols, the protests are directed not so much at Russia itself as the Georgian government

(everything indicates that the incident was a result of an oversight by the protocol service of the Georgian Parliament).

- The opposition has supported the protests, but has not become directly involved in them (some figures from the political opposition were jeered by the crowds). Despite this, the demonstrations have objectively strengthened the government's opponents, who argue that it has not been fulfilling its tasks. This has led to an escalation of internal political conflict, and exacerbated the rivalry between the major political forces. GD has twice won the parliamentary and local elections in recent years, and both the current president and her predecessor won thanks to the party's support. However, the presidential elections in autumn 2018 showed that GD's popularity is beginning to fall. In the first round, the candidates of the UNM and EG obtained more votes in total than Zurabishvili, and her win was made possible by using administrative resources to put pressure on voters, as well as the announcement that the credit liabilities of several hundred thousand people indebted to the banks would be paid. However, GD's decline in popularity, due to natural fatigue with the long-ruling party and its failure to keep its electoral promises (such as creating more new jobs), does not automatically translate into an increase in support for the opposition. Some voters are worried that a return to power by the post-Saakashvili parties could lead to new tensions and clashes. Saakashvili, who is in exile but still arouses extreme emotions, resigned from the UNM's leadership in order to change this mood. The opposition is not pushing for early elections, as it hopes that over the next year GD will become even weaker, which will enable it to achieve a better result.
- The fall in GD's poll ratings could be reduced by the tactic of 'escaping forwards' which they have adopted: GD's leaders condemned the Gavrilov incident and placed the political blame for it on the speaker of parliament Irakli Kobakhidze, who then resigned. The party's leader Bidzina Ivanishvili has already said that the next elections will be held under a proportional system, which the opposition had demanded (this system was to have been implemented starting with the 2024 elections; the current mixed system is preferred by the ruling party, which can win a majority of the single-mandate constituencies). In addition, everyone arrested after the first demonstration has finally been released.
- The protests are gradually dying down, partially because the summer season is starting; if they do continue, GD may decide to replace the head of the interior ministry. However it is possible that a serious political crisis may break out in the autumn, especially if the economic crisis comes because of a large-scale outflow of Russian tourists, and the Russian embargo on Georgian goods expands. Considering the large number of Russian tourists visiting Georgia (1.7 million in 2018) and the scale of wine exports to Russia (60% of Georgian wines' total exports), the Russian sanctions could prove harmful to the Georgian economy. Further waves of protests could lead to early elections, in which the traditional opposition would probably be joined by new social movements portraying themselves as a 'third force' (independent activists and cultural representatives participated in the protests).
- Despite the pragmatic cooperation between Tbilisi and Moscow which has flourished since GD took power, Moscow remains unsatisfied with the state of its relations with Georgia and the latter's consistent policy of integration with the West. Moscow's irritated

reaction to the incident in parliament and the protests is an attempt to discipline the authorities in Tbilisi, as well as a warning signal to the other countries which were created after the Soviet Union broke up. However, the Russian calculations fail to consider the public mood in Georgia after the war of 2008 and Moscow's recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. (Georgians generally state that 20 per cent of their country is occupied by Russia.) Moscow regarded the interruption of the session in which the Russian delegation was participating as a humiliation, which also necessitated a strong reaction on its part in order to avoid losing face domestically. Making the protests in Tbilisi seem like an anti-Russian outburst serves to consolidate Russian society and reinforce the 'besieged fortress' feeling within it.

in cooperation with Jan Strzelecki