

What is Meant under Georgia's Current Political Crisis?

Khatuna Chapichadze

(Khatuna Chapichadze is a Ph.D. in Social Sciences, political scientist, Associate Professor and a Supervisor of the Bachelor's Educational Program in European Studies at the Department of Politics and International Relations, Faculty of Engineering Economics, Media Technologies and Social Sciences, Georgian Technical University (GTU, Georgia). She has also been an Adjunct Faculty Member at the Department of Political Science, San Diego State University (SDSU), San Diego (CA, United States) and a Politics Professor at San Diego State University Georgia (SDSU-G) since 2017. Prof. Chapichadze is an Expert of the Central-European Institute of Research and Strategic Analysis CIRSA, Ostrowiec Świętokrzyski, Poland (since 2017) and has been a Visiting Professor at the Faculty of Humanities, AGH University of Science and Technology in Krakow (Poland) (since 2015), as well as a Lecturer at the Józef Gołuchowski University of Applied Sciences, Ostrowiec Św., Poland (since 2021). Since 2015, she also serves as a Member of the Editorial Board and a Reviewer of the Scientific Journal "Ante Portas - Security Studies", indexed in Index Copernicus and ERIH PLUS and issued by the Józef Gołuchowski University of Applied Sciences (Poland).

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The parliamentary elections of October 26, 2024 have been broadly regarded in Georgia, as well as outside of the country, as a de facto referendum, the most crucial one, - between the revitalization of the traditional pro-Western path of the post-Soviet Georgia towards joining the EU and NATO, and or turning the country closer to the major threat to its independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the overall security – Russia and the sphere of the influence of the latter.

On the other hands though, the same issue of the factual referendum was promoted by the ruling Georgian Dream Party (GDP) during their pre-election campaign. However, in this case, there has been constructed almost primitive and rather suspicious existential narrative enforcing the simple public choice between a "war" (if people would be supporting the opposition) and a "peace" traded nearly as a guarantee supplied by GDP in case of the victory of the latter.

The political situation has particularly started to boil since the spring of 2024 with a series of controversial laws and other decisions made predominantly by the legislature - Georgian parliament under the leadership of the majority party – GDP, that aimed at restricting especially NGOs, media, but also evidently affecting the rest of the wider society, diminishing democracy, and the overall state with civil rights and freedoms in Georgia. These Georgian laws are claimed to be just in line with and analogous to those used by the Kremlin to crack down on freedom of speech and perhaps the most vulnerable - LGBTQ+ rights in Russia. Among the most contestable laws, which sparked

the massive civil protests throughout Georgia, has been the so-called Russian Law, initially the draft law on “foreign agents” targeting NGOs and media organizations that was withdrawn shortly due to mass protests in 2023, and a year later, when it got reintroduced in 2024, with just a little, formal modification, under the new title - the law “On the Transparency of Foreign Influence”, it was eventually passed amidst the continuing protest demonstrations.¹

Another strong wave of widespread protests erupted when the long awaited parliamentary elections of October 26, 2024 as a chance for a peaceful and democratic change of power, along with its deeply disputed results within the country and abroad, enraged hundreds of thousands frustrated reportedly by the massively manipulated victory of GDP, which the opposition alleges was rigged with Moscow’s help, delegitimizing the whole electoral process since even the pre-election campaign times. This obviously includes its problematic outcomes, and every decision made after the elections from the part of so-called MPs and de facto government. The formal and just a very easy election by a 300-seat electoral college controlled by GDP, replacing direct presidential elections in 2017, - of the only candidate on the ballot for a new president of Georgia, - Former soccer player Mikheil Kavelashvili beng popularly mocked for lacking higher education, has also been regarded as lacking any legitimacy nationally and internationally.

The turning point for the protest outbreak has been November 28, 2024, when Georgia’s disputed Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze announced suspension of the country’s EU accession talks and refusal to receive the bloc’s budget grants until 2028, while accusing Brussels of “blackmail”. The announcement is seen as a response to the European Parliament’s non-binding resolution adopted hours earlier that day, which rejected the results of Georgia’s October 26 parliamentary elections due to “significant irregularities”. By the move, only after “securing the victory in elections” and avoiding before any discontent from the part of the broader society, including also its pro-Western supporters as GDP kept utilizing quite vague and controversial slogan - “Only with peace, dignity, and prosperity to Europe”, GDP dared to reflect on EU’s June 2024 decision to put Georgia’s accession on hold and cut financial support, following approval of the “foreign influence” law. Such a set of crucial democratic backslides and the overall decline for the country’s progress happened shortly after Georgia gained the EU candidate status in December 2023, even though on condition that the country would meet the bloc’s recommendations.

Thousands of demonstrators keep gathering majorly in front of the parliament building in the capital Tbilisi every night with regional protests, after the “government” announced the suspension of EU accession talks on November 28. Riot police used water cannons and tear gas almost daily to disperse and beat scores of protesters, some of whom threw fireworks at police officers and built barricades on Tbilisi’s central boulevard. Hundreds have been detained and injured. Several journalists were beaten by police, while media workers accused authorities of using thugs or so-called the Titushky to deter people from attending anti-“government” rallies, the fact denied by GDP. The crackdown has drawn strong condemnation from US and EU officials.

¹ Khatuna Chapichadze, The Limitations Faced by Georgia in Terms of Geopolitical Options, Romania and the New Dynamics of International Security, Proceedings of the International Scientific Conference STRATEGIES XXI, Annual Conference of the National Defence College, “Carol I” National Defence University Publishing House, Bucharest, Romania, June 26, 2024, pp. 25-30.

Despite not being led by particular politicians and parties, who from the opposition rather join them, and while distancing themselves loudly from any revolutionary scenarios, the protesters only recognize the fifth president of Georgia, former diplomat with the solid European background, - Salome Zourabichvili, being called the genuine “Public President”, remaining the only legitimate power according to many, who stands as a certain significant symbol of current protests.