

# Clashes Erupt Outside Georgian Parliament Between Pro-EU Protesters, Police

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Fireworks thrown by demonstrators explode in front of riot police during a protest outside the Parliament Building after Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze said the country would suspend talks on its bid to join the EU until 2028. **Alexander Patrin / TASS**

Violent clashes erupted on Saturday outside Georgia's parliament between police and demonstrators protesting the government's decision to delay European Union membership talks amid a post-election crisis, AFP reporters witnessed.

Thousands of people gathered in Georgia's capital Tbilisi on Saturday for a third night of protests that saw dozens arrested.

The Black Sea nation has been rocked by turmoil since the ruling Georgian Dream party claimed victory in an Oct. 26 parliamentary election that the pro-European opposition said

was fraudulent.

Chaotic scenes unfolded for hours as police chased defiant protesters through the streets of central Tbilisi, beating them and making arrests.

Masked officers in riot gear fired rubber bullets, tear gas and water cannons as they moved in to disperse protesters hurling fireworks, while flames were seen coming from a window of the parliament building.

Demonstrators erected barricades on Tbilisi's main avenue.

"I am afraid — I won't hide it — that many people will get injured, but I am not afraid to stand here," 39-year-old Tamar Gelashvili told AFP near the parliament building earlier in the day.

Protests were also held in numerous cities across Georgia.

### **Embed:**

The interior ministry said "the actions of some individuals present at the protest became violent" and that police would "respond appropriately and in accordance with the law to every violation."

More than 100 people have been arrested in the last two days.

Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze's announcement on Thursday that Georgia would not seek accession talks with the EU until 2028 ignited a furious reaction from the opposition.

Critics accuse Georgian Dream — in power for more than a decade — of having steered the country away from the EU in recent years and of moving closer to Russia, an accusation it denies.

Hundreds of public servants, including from the ministries of foreign affairs, defense and education, as well as a number of judges, issued joint statements protesting Kobakhidze's decision.

Some 160 Georgian diplomats criticized the move as contradicting the constitution and leading the country "into international isolation."

A number of Georgia's ambassadors resigned in protest.

### **'Stable transition'**

On Friday, AFP reporters saw riot police fire water cannons and tear gas at pro-EU protesters gathered outside parliament who tossed eggs and fireworks.

Clashes broke out later between protesters and police, who moved in to clear the area, beating demonstrators — some of whom threw objects — and journalists, deliberately targeting those clearly identified as members of the media.

Georgia's special investigation service said it had opened a probe into "allegations of abuse of official authority through violence by law enforcement officers against protesters and media representatives."

More than 100 schools and universities suspended academic activities in protest.

Pro-Western opposition parties are boycotting the new parliament, while President Salome Zurbishvili — who is at loggerheads with Georgian Dream — has sought to annul the election results through the country's constitutional court.

In an exclusive interview with AFP on Saturday, Zurbishvili said she will not step down until last month's contested parliamentary elections are re-run.

The Paris-born former French diplomat said that on Saturday she had set up a "national council" consisting of opposition parties and civil society representatives, which will ensure "stability in this country."

"I will be the representative of this legitimate, stable transition."

## **U.S. suspends 'strategic partnership'**

After the October vote, a group of Georgia's leading election monitors said they had evidence of a complex scheme of large-scale electoral fraud.

Brussels has demanded an investigation into what it said were "serious" irregularities reported by election monitors.

Georgian Dream MPs voted unanimously on Thursday for Kobakhidze to continue as prime minister, even as the opposition boycotted parliament, deepening a serious legitimacy crisis at the legislature and the government.

The crackdown on protests has provoked international condemnation.

U.S. State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said: "We condemn excessive force used against Georgians exercising their freedom to protest and have suspended our Strategic Partnership with Georgia."

"Georgian Dream's decision to suspend EU accession is a betrayal of the Georgian constitution."

France, Britain, Ukraine, Poland, Sweden and Lithuania were among the countries to voice concern.

The human rights office of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe said: "The action of law enforcement officials while policing peaceful protests in Georgia is of deep concern and a serious breach of the right to freedom of peaceful assembly."

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