

# NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

*(Special Edition)*

**June 20-23**

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## **Protest Demonstrations in Tbilisi over Russian lawmaker's visit to Georgia**

### **What caused the protest?**

Russian Member of the Parliament from the Communist Party Mr. Gavrilov was taking part in the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy (IAO), a body set up by the Greek parliament in 1993 to foster relationships between Christian Orthodox lawmakers.

Opposition MPs in Georgia's parliament called for protests in response to his decision to deliver a speech from the speaker's seat.

He addressed delegates in Russian, angering politicians and Georgians vehemently opposed to Moscow's presence in the country.

Calling for the Speaker and other officials to resign, about 10,000 protesters breached the police cordon in the capital, Tbilisi. Some were carrying EU flags and placards reading "Russia is an occupier".

Giga Bokeria, an opposition MP for the European Georgia party, told AFP the rally outside parliament had been "a spontaneous protest by ordinary Georgians".

Inside parliament, opposition lawmakers blocked the presidium and demanded that the parliamentary speaker, interior minister and state security service chief all resign over the incident. The session was suspended and Mr Gavrilov has reportedly left the country.

"That was a slap in the face of recent Georgian history," Elene Khoshtaria, an opposition member of parliament, said.

Mr Gavrilov later said he had left the building under guard, blaming the clashes on fake reports that he had taken part in wars in Abkhazia and Trans-Dniester. He had "never taken part in any military conflicts", he insisted.

This demonstration gathered spontaneously in response to calls from the Georgian opposition to protest against what many Georgians say was an outrageous act - to see an MP from an "occupying" country entering their parliament.

Anti-Russian sentiment is strong in Georgia which fought a war with Russia over its breakaway region of South Ossetia in 2008. South Ossetia and another breakaway region of Abkhazia are supported by Russia both financially and militarily<sup>1</sup>.

## **Night of the violence, June 20-21**

The Parliamentary opposition addressed the society to start spontaneous demonstration in front of the Parliament from 7:00 PM on Thursday. The group of people has directly arrived to the parliament demanding the deportation of Gavrilov. Who had been transported to Radisson Blu Iveria and the demonstrators followed him, shooting eggs towards the hotel. Reportedly Gavrilov and Russian delegation was taken to the airport from the emergency exit.

For 7:00 PM thousands of people have arrived in front of the parliament demanding the resignation of the Speaker of the Parliament Mr. Irakli Kobakhidze and MP in charge for organizing the assembly Mr. Zakaria Kutsnashvili (Georgian Dream). For that time Kobakhidze was having business trip to Baku, Azerbaijan. By 10:00 PM Representative of the United National Movement, Mr. Nikanor Melia had given 1 hour ultimatum to the Speaker of Georgian Parliament for taking decision, which was immediately answered that Kobakhidze was not going to resign. After this information Melia called demonstrators to rush and break in the Parliament. The attempt was denied by the police mobilized in the entrance of the Parliament. After that the situation was relatively calm (not counted minor tensions between the police and demonstrators), law enforcement representatives were giving water to rally activists and behaved normally. Later Melia once more initiated attack on the Parliament and activists once more tried to break in. This time the pressure was tougher and the police could not stand without using tear gas. They have used this approach for 4-5 times but the demonstrators were returning all the time. The next step was using rubber bullets and this is the turning point for that night. The police was aiming directly to the rally activists some of them were shut in head as a result two persons have lost one eye (one of them was 18 year old girl who was not even participating in the demonstration, she was just walking through Rustaveli Ave). The rubber bullets used during the raid on rally activists usually are used for animals and reportedly these bullets have been purchased after the flood in Tbilisi on June 13 2015, when animals have escaped from the zoo. Special Operation Forces have been mobilized and they have been chasing down demonstrators and detaining them and during

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<sup>1</sup> Georgia protests: Thousands storm parliament over Russian MP's speech - *BBC, June 21, 2019*

the procedure they were not limiting themselves and definitely were exceeding power. More than 300 persons have been detained that night; some of them have been beaten during the detention. More than hundred stayed in the custody until June 23.

As a result more than 280 persons have been injured including 80 police officers. Overall injuries were soft, there were 4 harder injuries. Above mentioned two persons have left eyes and two persons' conditions are critical and they remain in the Regional Clinic, Reanimation Division. According to the organizers of the demonstration they are fighting for their lives. Reportedly the rubber bullet was stuck in one of the person's head.

For the overall evaluation of that night for objectivity it must be said that the oppositional forces provoked the use of force from the police, but on the other hand they have exceeded power, as utilized non-proportional force<sup>2</sup>.

### **June 21-23**

On the next day Georgian Dream Party council gathered and discussed the incident took place on June 20 and as later was announced Speaker of the Parliament Kobakhidze took political responsibility and resigned. Member of the Parliament Kutsnashvili, who organized the assembly had left mandate of MP. Georgian Dream thought that it would be enough to achieve consensus with the demonstrators, but raid on people had born new demands (in total three):

1. Resignation of the Minister of Internal Affairs, Mr. Giorgi Gakharia;
2. Releasing all detainees from custody immediately;
3. To hold proportional Parliamentary Elections.

Once more people gathered in front of the parliament but this time politicians were not allowed to the microphones. Grigol Vashadze, the leader of the United National Movement had made an announcement that the rally belongs to the youth and they are giving the floor to them. The rally is not organized by any particular organization, everything is planned through Facebook group: Society for Spreading Liberty, approximately 10 000 Facebook users have united last year in this group and were planning different protest rallies throughout this time. The majority of people joining this group are liberals. They have chosen democratic path to choose leaders. The open poll indicated several persons (voters could add their candidates as well) and majority went to Misha Mshvildadze, Director of the Formula Creative (comedian) and Shota Dighmelashvili (from Forbes Georgia). Journalist Salome Barker is also involved in the organizational process. The next rallies have been held in a calm manner, speakers were addressing GD leaders to fulfill demands of the demonstrators and etc.

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<sup>2</sup> TV Pirveli, Rustavi 2, 1TV, Imedi, June 20-21, 2019

On Saturday the rally was finalized with march towards GD headquarters; Sunday they have marched to the Administration of the Government of Georgia.

Monday plans include two protest rallies:

1. From 2:00 PM they will go to the Ministry of Internal Affairs with cars and signals;
2. From 7:00 PM they will gather in front of the Parliament again.

**On June 24 Georgian Dream** held consultations in the headquarters after which Leader of the Party **Ivanishvili announced** that based on the demand of the society the decision had been made to hold Proportional Parliamentary Elections during 2020 with 0% barrier. "If 2020 elections are held through mixed system GD will win almost all majoritarian constituencies and but this will not help the development of multi-party system in Georgia. Plus the government should reflect ongoing problems in Georgia and proportional elections are the only way to ensure prosperity and development of the country." – said Ivanishvili during the announcement<sup>3</sup>.

**Bakhtadze, Prime Minister:** "Ivanishvili announced very interesting information that helps the development of Georgian Democracy. The decision for 2024 elections had been corrected and the youth had affected it. There are also parties that must be represented in the parliament, hence we'll hold elections without any threshold to strengthen our vision to transform Georgia into parliamentary republic. In terms of management it might be tough but it will strengthen democratic institutions. We will have consultation only with those politicians who respects this country and not those who are motivated to go out of the boundaries of Georgian Constitution. Consultations will be held with everyone including parliamentary and non-parliamentary opposition."

**Kaladze, Mayor of Tbilisi:** "Today chairperson of the party announced very important decision, the threshold is abolished and if political parties have any kind of support from the society they will be members of the parliament. This gives us opportunity to form the parliament where people with different viewpoint will have representatives in the parliament. I'm sure that GD will have very big support in terms of this reform. We'll do everything to respond every problem that the society faces today with dignity."

**Chugoshvili, Vice-Speaker of the Parliament:** "This is revolutionary reform in Georgian politics and it is correlated to the demand of the society. We will consult with any political actors. We have seen open call towards criminal from different political figures. I repeat we will communicate with all political subjects, regarding individual figures with whom we are not planning to talk will be known later. The main problem of the rally was that we were not able to abstain use of force, other things will be investigated as in some cases there was exercise of non-proportional power

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<sup>3</sup> TV Pirveli, Rustavi 2, 1TV, Imedi, June 21-23, 2019

from law enforcement representatives. Our political response was resignation of the Speaker of the Parliament. I don't think that there is any problem to hold protest rally, if someone thinks that it is necessary they are free. What we did understand from these demonstrations, it was time to make changes in the system"

**Elene Khoshtaria, European Georgia:** "Demonstrators have achieved the result, you are the main reason behind the decision of Georgian Dream. This is your victory. On the other hand it is shame that Gakharia had not been replaced, he does not hold moral or political capacity to hold the post. Do not bargain with us. Regarding procedures and negotiations, we will hold consultations with Georgian dream what is the structure of the next elections."

## **Russian Reaction**

***Grigory Karasin: We are concerned about the actions of radical political forces of Georgia***

We are concerned about the events developed around the Assembly on Orthodoxy in Tbilisi and the actions of radical political forces of Georgia, who used by the important international forum for demonstrating their anti-Russian sentiments, - Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin said.

"The MPs of Assembly were forced to stop working before the scheduled time because of their aggressive actions. Nevertheless, we are determined to continue the normalization of Russia-Georgia relations, which is in the interest to both countries," Karasin said.

***Sergei Gavrilov: I take a seat there, where a host asks me to sit***

"At the opening of the assembly we thanked Georgia for hospitality and good organization of the event. On June 20, we were invited to the parliament building. The Georgian side offered me to sit in the presidium. I take a seat there, where a host asks me to sit," Gavrilov said.

***State Duma Speaker slams Georgian government***

"The action of the Georgian authorities during the session of the Inter-parliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy on June 20 opposes the norms of international activities," the spokesman told reporters.

"Georgia as an organizer is responsible for holding an important international forum as well as the safety of its participants. These conditions were ignored - they failed to ensure holding the event and to protect the Russian delegation from attack and threats, "said Viacheslav Volodin.

According to him, the action of the "radical forces" was directed not only against the representatives of Russia but against the representatives of 25 countries participating in the Assembly.

Viacheslav Volodin noted the statements of the Georgian authorities after the attack on the Russian delegation give reason to cast doubt on their adequacy.

"It raised questions about whether Georgia can be a responsible international partner," said the Russian parliament's speaker<sup>4</sup>.

### **Russia imposes travel embargo on Georgia**

Russian President Vladimir Putin had already ordered a temporary ban on passenger flights from Russia to Georgia in the wake of Thursday's rallies.

After banning Russian airlines from flying to Georgia, Moscow is to stop its southern neighbor's airlines from landing at its airports. Relations slumped this week when anti-Russia protests erupted in Tbilisi.<sup>5</sup>

### **Milov: Abkhazia and South Ossetia belongs to Georgia**

"We have enough of our lands and we do not need Abkhazia and South Ossetia," said one of the leaders of the Russian opposition Vladimir Milov, a founder of the "Democratic Choice" in the program Panorama.

### **Slutsky: Georgia may lose membership in the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly of Orthodoxy**

"Of course, the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly will consider this situation. It is possible that Georgia will lose membership in this organization, and as for the riots that started out of this outrageous incident started in the capital and even outside Tbilisi, demands for the resignation of Irakli Kobakhidze and so on, - this is advantageous for those destructive forces in the West who would like to see a more radical Georgia today, who would like to see relations between Tbilisi and Moscow unrecoverable," Slutsky said to Sputnik Georgia.

### **Kadyrov addressed Georgia with the phrase "Only 200 kilometers to Tbilisi"**

The head of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, wrote in his Telegram channel that he was alarmed by the events in Georgia, where major anti-Russian protests began on June 20.

"I want to remind you that only 200 kilometers from Grozny to Tbilisi," Kadyrov said.

### **Russia threatens Georgia with new sanctions**

"I do not exclude that the continuation of anti-Russian hysteria in Georgia may make us take long-term measures that will exceed the tourist embargo," wrote Klintsvich, Member of the Defense and Security Committee of the Russian Federation on Facebook.

## **Russian Actives in Georgian Business Sector**

### **Energy sector:**

- Inter Rao – holds majority of shares in TELASI (electro company operating in Tbilisi) worth of 318 million GEL. They also hold two HPPs Khamhesi 1 and Khamhesi 2;

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<sup>4</sup> Different internet news agencies.

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- SakRusEnergO - High voltage transmission network operator, actives of the company – 93 million GEL. Shares are divided 50/50 through governments of Georgia and Russia.

### **Oil Products**

- Oil product import in Georgia (2018) 1'098'900 tons, from Russia 301'000 tons (27% increase). Lukoil, Kremlin associated company is importing oil products from Russia to Georgia. Assets are 75 million GEL, turnover in 2017 was 318 million GEL.
- Rosneft – 59% shares of Georgian operated oil company Petroka, second biggest shareholder is Georgian born businessman Davit Iakobashvili (operating in Russia). Petroka is big shareholder of Poti Oil Terminal. Rosneft is 54% shareholder of Gulf as well with 167 million GEL assets, 38% of shares is held by Davit Iakobashvili.

### **Mining and Mineral Industry**

- RMG Gold and RMG Copper shareholders are Russian tycoons Dimitry Troitsky and Dimitry Korzhov. Assets of the companies are up to half billion GEL.
- Borjomi – is under Russian ownership since 2012, Russian-Israeli tycoon Mikhail Fridman (top five richest man in Russia), in 2017 profit of the company was 289 million GEL, assets 389 million GEL.

### **Communications**

- Beeline – assets 200 million GEL, profit 100 million GEL (2017).

### **Banking**

- VTB Bank – Assets 1.6 billion GEL. 98% of the shares are held by Russian VTB Bank and 59% of this company is owned by Russian Government.

## **Georgian Business Reaction on travel embargo**

**Occupation Tax** – several hotels and restaurants in Georgia have imposed 20% occupation tax for Russian visitors;

**Anti-Occupation Discount** – Those who show social media posts reading: Russia is occupier, Putin Khuilo or etc. they will get 20% discount in different retail companies, restaurants, hotels.

**Signing for territorial integrity of Georgia** – Those who want to buy flat in Batumi Horizons (building company) have to sign the special list which recognizes territorial integrity of Georgia;

**No to Russian products** – Pet shop Zoomart will not import Russian pet food and products.

**Support Georgian tourism** – Mamuka Khazaradze, founder of TBC will finance 10 charter flights from Kyiv to Tbilisi.

**Occupied taxi** – Taxi Company Bolt shows 20% occupied taxies in the application.

**Promoting Georgian tourism opportunities** – Facebook page **Spend your summer in Georgia** was established in order to invite tourists from all over the world in order to replace number of Russian tourists. More than 100 000 users have joined the group in less than 3 days.

**Tourism Administration of Georgia starts campaign on CNN** – reportages will be prepared on CNN in order to raise awareness on Georgia's touristic potential, special column will be devoted to Georgia on CNN Travel. CNN Travel platform Great Big Story will publicize two videos on Georgia named: "Take Me There".