



INTERNATIONAL COALITION FOR DEMOCRATIC RENEWAL

Report of the Virtual Briefing of the International Coalition for Democratic Renewal titled: "Next Steps for the Global Support of Georgia's Struggle for Democracy" (January 30, 2025)

The virtual briefing tackled the current situation in Georgia, where massive social protests have been ongoing for over 60 days after the allegedly rigged elections in October 2024. These were subsequently followed by steps of the new government, led by the anti-liberal Georgian Dream party, leading to a shift in the country's political orientation away from the EU and towards Russia. The discussion involved voices from the civil society, policy analysis think tank sphere, and Georgian political opposition. Apart from debating the current crisis in Georgia and its internal and international dynamics, expected future scenarios of further development and possible solutions of the crisis were discussed.

The panellists agreed that the current situation is unprecedented and poses serious issue for the country's future. According to them, there is a clear danger that, under the leadership of the new government, the country will gradually fall into the sphere of political influence of Russia, China, and Iran. This outcome will also mean its foreign policy isolation and thus the end of the hopes of liberal-minded citizens for Georgia's pro-Western direction, which would be completed in the future by its integration into the EU structures. Although the plan to strengthen Russia's influence in Georgia has been latently underway since the 1990s, it gained momentum after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

The current government has been trying in various ways to suppress the opposition protests against the above-mentioned developments, which are taking place mainly in the western part of the country. In the first phase, these included financial fines for arrested demonstrators, but more recently the police have also started to use violent means, security measures, and restrictions (incl. the controversial ban on wearing face masks in public or blocking the streets). Several hundred participants in the demonstrations have been arrested so far. New criminal offenses or their harsher punishment have been recently installed, with clear trajectory of shifting from financial fines to confinement. These include publicly insulting politicians or high-ranking officials, prohibition of spontaneous protests in buildings without clear prior consent of the owner (targeting particularly universities) and increasing the administrative detention period from 15 to 60 days. Politicians and supporters of the Georgian Dream are also gradually occupying important state institutions, tightening the grip of state control, while the opposition movement and liberal currents in Georgia are gradually cut off from such key offices and places of appeal, particularly independent courts.

Nevertheless, the speakers underscored the positive significance of the continued extraordinary courage and determination of the protesters, alluding to the long historical experience with fighting off Russian influence, but also to the general national characteristics and qualities of the close-knit Georgian society, showing solidarity even in mutual payments of the fines for protesters. An equally significant and positive point in this regard is the non-violent conduct of the protests by the opposition and participants. The panellists also considered important that the protest movement consists of several diverse groups cutting across the society, and that though it lacks a clear leader, it has many organic and well-established groups capable of organizing the core protests, to which general citizens then join. On the other hand, this does make it more challenging to coordinate in a common approach against the regime and its tactics.

Looking ahead, there was a consensus that the outcome of the struggle depends heavily on both internal and external factors. The former allude to the already mentioned bravery of the opposition and the non-violent and society-wide nature of its protests, which must not falter if the



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situation is to be reversed. The latter involves the clashing of two foreign influences: one, stemming from Russia and its allies through the use of hybrid threats, anti-Western and anti-liberal propaganda and financial support for pro-Russian movements and politicians, altogether aiming to isolate Georgia internationally and lock it firmly and legally within the Russian sphere of influence (through engagement in international organizations like Commonwealth of Independent States, and disengagement from others like PACE). The opposite force takes the form of the support of pro-democratic forces, not least by economic and political sanctions enforced by the Western governments, EU accession talks etc. Importantly, the panellists stressed that the Georgian case holds global significance in the outplaying of the near-civilizational struggle between democracy and authoritarianism, with potentially far-reaching consequences, not only regionally. Though the speakers refrained from showing optimism, several crucial points for supporting Georgian democracy struggle were made:

- The Georgian civil society is currently the sole force capable of igniting change. It thus needs all the resources and support it can get from international allies. This goes as much for financial means as for knowledge transfers, particularly in how to combat hybrid threats, how to maintain safe communication and independent information channels, bypass the propaganda, and for know-how on how to organize and protest safely but efficiently in these particular circumstances. It was alluded that lessons from the democratization processes in the Balkans and solidarity with for instance the current Serbian student movement could be good starting points.
- As the nature of the internal protest is non-violent, its success rests on clear responses internally and internationally. Domestically, the dialogue and clear information exchange between the centre and the periphery about what's happening, must continue and be developed further, so that a decentralized, whole-country initiative is taking place. Georgian CSOs will need all the possible material and knowledge support in this regard.
- Similarly, the fire of the protest movement must not be allowed to wither. This can be further secured by ensuring support for a leaderful, resourceful movement capable of mobilizing key and wide segments of the society.
- On the other hand, the international community must press for the dismantling of the developing framework of criminalization, deterrence, and violent punishment of the non-violent protest, through both legislative change and practical safeguards in the field. Much the same holds true for action against the attack on free speech in the country.
- The international community must furthermore oppose all attempts to isolate Georgia from the democratic countries. Though targeted refusal of meeting the regime's leaders is meaningful, an active dialogue with the Georgian civil society and other democratic forces in the country must be upheld.
- Sanctions continue to be one of the most effective channels the global democratic community has to put pressure on authoritarian regimes. Continued and most importantly unified action in sanctioning the regime's leadership and violent oppressors, is paramount. This can be extended further to freezing of such persons' foreign assets, often residing in the West.