

Protests in Georgia spread as PM defiant

US condemns 'excessive force' used on protesters

Felix Light
REUTERS

TBILISI, Georgia – Protesters and police skirmished in Georgia's capital for a fourth straight night on Sunday, with signs that opposition was spreading across the country to the government's decision to suspend talks on joining the European Union.

Tensions have been rising for months in the country of 3.7 million people between the ruling Georgian Dream party and opponents who accuse it of pursuing increasingly authoritarian, anti-Western and pro-Russian policies.

The crisis has deepened since Thursday's announcement that the government would freeze EU talks for four years, with thousands of pro-EU demonstrators facing off against police armed with tear gas and water cannon.

Protesters gathered again in Tbilisi on Sunday night on central Rustaveli Avenue, tossing fireworks at police, who responded with volleys of water cannon.

Well after midnight, after hours of standoff, police began moving demonstrators away from the parliament building and down Rustaveli Avenue toward the Tbilisi opera house and began erecting barricades with whatever materials they could find.

"Quite frankly, it's been very tiring to see that our government does not hear what the people desire," said protester Nikoloz Miruashvili.

"I'm here for a very simple reason, to defend my European future and the democracy of my country."

Four opposition groups urged protesters to demand paid leave from their



Fireworks explode in front of police officers during a protest against the government's decision to suspend the European Union accession talks and refuse budgetary grants until 2028, in Tbilisi, Georgia. IRAKLI GEDENIDZE/REUTERS

jobs under the labor code to attend protests and asked employers to provide the time off.

Georgia's pro-Western President Salome Zourabichvili called for pressure to be brought on the Constitutional Court to annul elections last month won by Georgian Dream. Both the opposition and Zourabichvili say the poll was rigged.

Beyond the capital, Georgian news agency Interpress said demonstrators had blocked an access road into the country's main commercial port in the Black Sea city of Poti.

Georgian media reported protests in at least eight cities and towns. Opposition TV channel Formula showed footage of people in Khashuri, a town of 20,000 in central Georgia, throwing eggs at the local Georgian Dream office.

The EU and the United States are alarmed by what they see as Georgia's shift away from a pro-Western path. Georgian Dream says it is acting to defend the country's sovereignty.

Russia is following developments closely. Security official Dmitry Medvedev, a former Russian president, said an attempted revolution was taking place and wrote on Telegram that Georgia was "moving rapidly along the Ukrainian path, into the dark abyss. Usually this sort of thing ends very badly."

The Kremlin itself has yet to comment, but has long accused the West of fomenting revolutions in post-Soviet countries that Moscow still regards as part of its sphere of influence.

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze dismissed criticism by the United States, which has condemned

the use of "excessive force" against demonstrators.

Kobakhidze also shrugged off Washington's announcement on Saturday that it was suspending a strategic partnership with Georgia. He said this was a "temporary event" and Georgia would talk to the new administration of President-elect Donald Trump when it takes office in January.

President Zourabichvili said on Saturday she would not step down when her term ends this month, saying the new parliament was illegitimate and had no authority to name her successor.

Kobakhidze said he understood Zourabichvili's "emotional state."

"But of course on Dec. 29 she will have to leave her residence and surrender this building to a legitimately elected president," he said.

'Foreign agents'

Hundreds of diplomats and civil servants have signed open letters saying the suspension of EU talks is unlawful as the goal of joining the bloc is enshrined in Georgia's constitution.

Georgia's foreign ministry said that foreign states were trying to "interfere in the functioning of the institutions of a sovereign state," and such action was unacceptable.

For much of the period since the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia has tried to loosen the influence of Russia, to which it lost a brief war in 2008. It has been promised eventual NATO membership, and became an official candidate for EU entry last year.

The EU's foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas, who took office on Sunday, voiced solidarity with the demonstrators. "We stand with the Georgian people and their choice for a European future," she posted on X.

Senegal seeks answers 80 years after massacre

Anait Miridzhanian and Ngouda Dione
REUTERS

THIAROYE, Senegal – Senegal on Sunday commemorated the 80th anniversary of a massacre of African soldiers who fought for France during World War II, and were gunned down by French troops in 1944 for demanding fair treatment and payment on their return.

The West African country has long demanded its former colonizer take responsibility, officially apologize and properly investigate the massacre that took place in Thiaroye, a fishing village on the outskirts of Senegal's capital Dakar.

The event, which renewed these demands, comes as France is losing influence over its former African colonies, many of which have turned to Russia for security instead.

"The riflemen sacrificed everything. They gave of their youth, they gave of their blood, they gave of their flesh for freedom and world peace," Senegalese President Bassirou Diomaye Faye told guests and reporters.

Accounts of the massacre vary, as does the death toll, which French ex-president Francois Hollande raised to at least 70 from 35 during a visit to Thiaroye in 2014. Historians say hundreds may have died in the confrontation with colonial authorities.

The ceremony, which France's foreign affairs minister attended alongside other African heads of state, started with a visit to the Thiaroye military cemetery to lay flowers.

A printed guide to the ceremony described the "horrific repression" of members of the Senegalese infantry unit, who were surrounded and gunned



A retired soldier attends the commemoration of the 80th anniversary of a massacre of African soldiers who fought for France during WWII, and were gunned down in 1944 for demanding fair treatment and pay. AMIRA KARAOUD/REUTERS

down for requesting due compensation.

A few days before the commemoration, French President Emmanuel Macron wrote a public letter to his Senegalese counterpart Faye in which he referred to the killings as a "massacre."

Faye said Macron's acknowledgment was a significant step in the process of rehabilitating the honor and dignity of victims.

France's foreign minister Jean-Noel Barrot said in a speech his country had recognized that on that day, "a chain of events was set in motion that led to a massacre."

Gaspard Mbaye, head of an association dedicated to the soldiers' memory, told Reuters he was disappointed because he expected more. "They continue to conceal the truth and try to divert attention," Mbaye said.

French far right: Govt spurned budget talks

Standoff could come to a head at Monday meeting

Leigh Thomas
REUTERS

PARIS – France's far right National Rally (RN) leaders said on Sunday that the government had rebuffed its calls for more budget concessions, raising the chances of a no confidence vote in the coming days that could topple Prime Minister Michel Barnier.

RN lawmaker Marine Le Pen had given Barnier until Monday to yield to the party's budget demands or face the threat that they would back a likely no confidence motion against his government, which would trigger its collapse.

But Le Pen said the government had in effect "put an end to discussions," she told French news agency Agence France-Presse in a major escalation of the standoff.

Earlier on Sunday she had said that Barnier faced a choice of either negotiating new concessions or face the threat that his government falls in a vote of no confidence.

Barnier already dropped a planned electricity tax increase last week, but the RN also wants him to raise pensions in line with inflation whereas he had aimed to raise some less than inflation to save money.

The RN also wants planned cuts to medication reimbursements to be scrapped and is unhappy the government may raise tax on gas. It also wants a cut in France's contribution to the European Union's budget among other demands.

The standoff between the govern-

"Through stubbornness and sectarianism, the minority government is putting an end to negotiations, running the risk of a vote of no confidence."

Jordan Bardella
RN party head

ment could come to a head as early as Monday if Barnier has to use aggressive constitutional powers to force a social security financing bill through, which would inevitably trigger a no-confidence motion from the left.

To survive the vote in the fractured lower house, Barnier needs the RN to abstain, otherwise his government and the budget bill could fall, plunging France deep into a political crisis.

Budget Minister Laurent Saint-Martin said on Sunday the government respected a compromise on the social security bill reached by lawmakers, which RN party head Jordan Bardella said he took to mean it would not make further changes.

"Through stubbornness and sectarianism, the minority government is putting an end to negotiations, running the risk of a vote of no confidence," Bardella said on X.

As the standoff worsens, Saint-Martin and Finance Minister Antoine Armand warned that French taxpayers and pensioners would suffer direct consequences in the event of a no confidence vote.

Armand said in le Journal du Dimanche weekend newspaper that would mean special emergency legislation would have to be passed to ensure that there would be a budget at the start of the year.

Crime family leader narrowly misses out on Dublin parliament seat

Padraic Halpin
REUTERS

DUBLIN, Ireland – Gerard Hutch, named in a court case last year as the head of a well-known crime family in Ireland, narrowly missed out on a seat in Ireland's parliament on Sunday despite a surge of support in deprived areas of the Dublin Central constituency.

Hutch, better known as "The Monk," finished in fifth place of a four-seat constituency. He had been widely seen as favorite to take the final seat earlier on Sunday before a late surge by Labour

Party rival Marie Sherlock.

Hutch was arrested in Spain as part of an international investigation into money laundering by the Hutch Organized Crime Group, but was released in early November on bail, Irish state broadcaster RTE reported.

He was followed by a huge group of journalists when he briefly attended the count center on Sunday and spoke to Sherlock. He jogged out of the center, surrounded by security.

Ahead of the vote Hutch said he was campaigning because he did not think the deprived inner-city community where he grew up was properly repre-



Hutch

sented. Hutch has for years donated to sports clubs in the area.

Gary Gannon, who also took a seat, said he saw Hutch's support as a protest vote. "Some parts of that community, actually significant parts, have been left behind by all the catastrophes of housing and the ability to access healthcare. That leaves a mark," he said.

Film director Jim Sheridan, who is making a documentary about Hutch, agreed, telling journalists Hutch's "shocking" level of support was down to

anger at "years and years of drugs and ... nothing happening in that community."

The U.S. State Department said in 2022 that the Hutch drug trafficking gang was locked in a turf war with the Kinehan crime group, also based in Dublin, that resulted in 18 murders in the aftermath of a 2016 killing at a Dublin hotel. Gerard Hutch was identified as head of the Hutch family by an Irish court last year when he was acquitted of involvement in the 2016 murder.

The Hutch gang was named by the State Department when it offered a \$5 million reward for help in arresting leaders of the Kinehan gang.