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Russian-Georgian tensions escalate amid Iran war crisis

Since June 20, tens of thousands of people have protested in Georgia's capital Tbilisi against Russia and for closer ties with the US. In response to the protests, the Russian government has banned air travel to Georgia, a popular destination for Russian tourists.



Political map of the Caucasus region

The protests began on June 20, the same day that US President Donald Trump called off military strikes against Iran at the last minute. Between five and ten thousand people

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gathered near the Georgian parliament building to protest the invitation of Sergei Gavrillov, the speaker of the Russian Duma (parliament), and a number of other Russian deputies by members of the ruling Georgian Dream party. Gavrillov addressed the Georgian parliament as part of an Inter-Parliamentary Assembly of Orthodoxy in Russian, and reportedly sat in the chair of the president of the parliament.

Protesters denounced the invitation of the Russian deputies as a sign of “Russian occupation,” and waved American and Georgian flags. They reportedly burned portraits of Russian President Vladimir Putin and a Russian flag and some protesters tried to storm the parliament building. There were violent clashes with police, who cracked down on the protests, using rubber bullets. Several people were wounded and about 300 people were arrested. The protests were the biggest since 2012, when a severe government crisis rocked the country.

The protests are ongoing. One of the main demands is the resignation of Interior Minister Giorgi Gakharia, who is considered a close ally of Bidzina Ivanishvili, the country’s richest man. Both are seen by the pro-US opposition as the main lobbyists for a rapprochement with Russia.

The protests are supported by the main opposition parties—the United National Movement (UNM) and the European Georgia Party (an off-shoot of the UNM). The UNM played the central role in the US-backed “color revolution” in 2003 that brought to power Mikhail Saakashvili. In 2008, Saakashvili, backed by the US, launched a five-day war against Russia. The two countries have not maintained diplomatic ties since. Saakashvili, who is now living and politically active in Ukraine, has encouraged the protests from afar.

The Kremlin responded to the protests by banning Russian air travel to and from Georgia. The 1.5 million tourists who come to Georgia every year from Russia are an important source of income for the country, which depends for almost 8 percent of its gross domestic product on tourism.

This week, the Kremlin announced that it was considering a ban on Georgian wine. The Russian trading standards body, Rospotrebnadzor, has already introduced tighter checks on wine imports from Georgia. A complete ban on wine imports was in place between 2006 and 2013. Since the ban was lifted, Russia has become the most important export market for Georgian wine and agricultural products.

The Polish foreign ministry, which works closely with US imperialism in the military build-up against both Russia and Iran, has openly endorsed the protests. The Lithuanian

and British ambassadors to Georgia have likewise expressed their support for the protests, denouncing the Russian ban on air travel and calling upon people to go to Georgia, in a social media campaign using the hashtag #SpendSummerinGeorgia.

Numerous American bourgeois news outlets and think tank publications, including *Foreign Policy*, *Time* magazine and the *New York Times*, have covered the protests with overt sympathy for the pro-US opposition.

Under pressure from both the protesters and foreign governments, the ruling Georgian Dream party has announced reforms to the electoral system, long demanded by the pro-US opposition, and announced early parliamentary elections for 2020.

Behind the ferocious conflicts within the Georgian ruling class over its relationship to Russia stands the escalating war crisis in Iran. A US war against Iran threatens to blow up not only the Middle East, but also the adjacent South Caucasus, with the potential of spilling over into the North Caucasus, which forms part of the Russian Federation. Experts have long warned that a war against Iran could reignite the latent military conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region and lead to another open war between Georgia and Russia.

The Caucasus is of major geostrategic significance because of both its vast energy reserves and its geopolitical location as a bridgehead between the Middle East and Europe. The restoration of capitalism and the break-up of the region into small nation-states, all ruled by virulently nationalist bourgeoisies that are dependent on imperialism, has transformed the South Caucasus into a military and political powder keg. For the past three decades, US imperialism and the European Union have consistently worked to manipulate and intervene in power struggles within the countries' ruling classes to bring the region under its direct control, including through the 2003 "Rose Revolution" in Georgia.

Of the three states in the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan and Georgia have developed the closest military ties with US imperialism. Azerbaijan, in particular, has become a close military ally of Israel and the US in the build-up against Iran, which is home to some 20 million Azeris in the north. Armenia, which houses Russia's only remaining military base in the South Caucasus and has traditionally maintained the closest ties to the Kremlin, saw mass protests last year that brought to power the Western-backed Nikol Pashinyan. He has since vowed to develop closer ties with the West while taking a belligerent stance on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Azerbaijan.

Under these conditions, there is little question that Washington views the current Georgian government, which has attempted to develop closer relations with Russia, as a threat to its interests, placing a question mark over Georgia's complete subservience in a potential war against both Iran and Russia.

Georgian President Salome Zourabishvili was elected late last year on the platform of developing a more pragmatic relationship with Russia. A French citizen and descendant of the Georgian aristocracy, she reportedly holds monarchist views and studied at New York's Columbia University under the late Zbigniew Brzezinski, one of US imperialism's foremost geostrategists. She supported the 2003 US-backed "Rose Revolution" and was foreign minister under Saakashvili from 2003 to 2004.

However, while Zourabishvili is in favor of Georgia joining both the EU and NATO, she has recently objected to a permanent US military base in the country, saying it would be "perceived as a provocation." Her statement prompted a massive backlash, not only from the opposition parties but also from the ruling Georgian Dream party, which was quick to distance itself from her. The vice-speaker of the parliament from the Georgian Dream party insisted that "any military cooperation with the United States is a priority for our country," adding, "This country is our main partner and ally."

Speaking on behalf of Saakashvili's United National Movement parliamentary faction, Roman Gotsiridze said, "The foreign ministry must immediately confirm that the statement that we allegedly do not want a US military base is a government position, or refute it," adding, "If she [Zourabishvili] continues like this, she will end up impeached."

The stepped-up pressure on the Georgian government by the Western-backed opposition to take a more belligerent stance toward Russia is in line with the preparations for an imminent war against Iran. The US has systematically tried to draw Georgia into its war preparations and has worked to undermine the relatively close economic relations between Georgia and Iran.

In 2012, still under Saakashvili, the US reportedly spent \$5 billion on 20 hospitals and several airports in Georgia that could be used for US troops in case of war against Iran. Under pressure from Washington, Georgia unilaterally suspended its free visa regime with Iran in 2013. The country also froze some 150 bank accounts of Iranian companies and individuals and suspended direct flights between Tbilisi and Iran.

After the conclusion of the Iran nuclear deal, a free visa regime with Iran was reinstated in 2016. According to media reports, up to 300,000 Iranians travel to Georgia every year

under the visa regime, not only for holidays, but also to flee the devastating economic and social impact of the US economic warfare against Iran. Many also try to become residents of Georgia so as to move further to other EU countries. In recent months, the Georgian government has toughened its stance on Iranian immigrants to the country. Out of over 6,000 immigrants who were deported in the first half of this year, roughly half were from Iran.

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