



By: TA | AP Brief

Police used force to push back protesters trying to storm presidential palace in Georgia



Police in Georgia used water cannons and pepper spray on Saturday to push back protesters who tried to storm the presidential palace, as the South Caucasus country held a municipal election boycotted by the main opposition blocs amid a sweeping crackdown on dissent.

Tens of thousands rallied in the capital, Tbilisi, to protest repressive policies by the governing party, Georgian Dream, which they see as trying to pull Georgia away from its democratic aspirations and into Russia's orbit.

They carried Georgian flags and placards supporting membership in the European Union, a cherished **goal** for many that has been enshrined in the country's constitution.

Georgian Dream halted talks about joining the bloc last year, triggering waves of protests that have been met with mass arrests and police violence. The move came after the longtime ruling party declared victory in an election the opposition **said** was rigged.

The rallies, big and small, have continued despite a multipronged crackdown by the government through laws that **target** demonstrators, rights groups, nongovernmental organizations and independent media.

Critics say some have been **modeled** on legislation passed in Russia, where President Vladimir Putin has harshly stifled dissent.

"We fight for our rights, for independence," protester Sophio Asatiani told The Associated Press on Saturday. She said that she didn't want to see a return to the Soviet era, when Georgia was ruled from Moscow.

The rally's organizers, including veteran opera singer Paata Burchuladze, called on protesters to "take power back into the hands of the people," channelling widespread frustration with a government that has jailed key opposition figures, attempted to shut down critical media and used mass arrest and steep fines against largely peaceful demonstrators.

Some then tried to force entry into the presidential palace in central Tbilisi, smashing the gate before being driven away by riot police.

A peaceful revolution

The opposition had promised a "peaceful revolution" before Saturday's municipal election, boycotted by most parties critical of Georgian Dream. Preliminary data from the Central Election Commission pointed to less than 30% turnout in the first half of the day.

Giorgi Rukhadze, a political analyst in Tbilisi who was one of the protesters marching on Saturday, dismissed the vote as a "mock election."

"The only way to put (Georgian Dream) out of power peacefully is non-obedience, noncompliance," he said, arguing that people should join any forms of peaceful protests available to them.

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Georgian police on Saturday said the ongoing rally violated Georgian laws that regulate public assemblies and protest. It didn't provide specifics.

Shortly after polls closed on Saturday evening, Georgia's Central Election Commission said that the vote had passed with no major disturbances. It added results would be announced within hours.

More than 50 international and local groups were registered to observe the municipal vote.

But none of the major international watchdogs that monitored the previous local vote in 2021 — including delegations from the European Parliament, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and major U.S. nonprofits — were present this time.

Key Georgian nongovernmental organizations also chose not to deploy missions, citing Georgian Dream's recent repressive laws and a broader deterioration in the political and legal environment.