

Police brutality and expressions of solidarity.

Notes from the demonstrations in Tblisi, Georgia

Thursday 12 December 2024, by [CSUPPORT Virág Emma](#), [MIHÁLY Robo](#), [VASIL Michal](#) (Date first published: 10 December 2024).

The victory of the ruling Georgian Dream party in the October 26, 2024 elections is described by activists, the pro-Western opposition and President Salome Zourabichvili as manipulated by interference from Moscow. Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze announced two days later that EU accession talks would be halted until 2028, leading to an escalation of protests and violent clashes in the streets across the country. Nearly 400 protesters have been arrested and hundreds more injured since late November. Although Prime Minister Kobakhidze corrected his position on the suspension of accession negotiations a few days later, he refuses any discussion with the opposition, which he accuses of an attempt at a foreign-funded coup d'état.

We arrive in Tbilisi in the early evening of December 6. Our hotel is located near the main boulevard named after the Georgian poet Shota Rustaveli. It has been the epicenter of demonstrations in the country for more than a week. "Holidaymakers or revolutionaries?", jokes the elderly man at the reception of the hotel, where we are probably the only guests. "Do you understand Russian?" he continues with interest when he hears Slovak. While he is writing down our passport data, on his screen we see a broadcast of President Zourabichvili's press conference, in which she calls on Prime Minister Kobakhidze to resign immediately because of his responsibility for police brutality committed against protesters.

Rustaveli Boulevard is lined with piles of rubbish and stalls with magnets for tourists, temporarily supplemented with a new assortment in the form of horns, balaclavas and European and Georgian flags. From the parliament building, which is guarded by cordons of riot police, there is a sporadic metallic sound of bangs on a metal gate, and chants: "No to the Russian government, we want Europe!"

Maidan from Wish

At this moment, there is relative peace on the square, far from the dramatic images that have gone around the world in recent days. Crowds of people spend their time talking, and occasionally beams of green lasers flash through the square, as masked groups of activists try to blind the rioters lined up on the sides of the parliament building. There is no stage or speakers. "We have no leaders, we are here for ourselves and all together," people repeat to us in response to questions about the usual course of demonstrations.



"It's a kind of Maidan from Wish," a journalist of an opinion-forming Slovak daily tells us jokingly; we meet him in the crowd by chance when we overhear the Slovak language. He also traveled here with the assumption that a revolution was brewing in the country. However, he exaggeratedly compares the dynamics of the protests to Slovakia's anti-corruption Gorilla demonstrations in 2011-12, where, according to him, a few provocateurs and manifestations of violence appeared, which led to the gradual decline of the protests. He expects a similar development here. Our conversation is interrupted by explosions of fireworks, which are aimed at the parliament building in regular salvos.

Applause and chanting can be heard from the crowd of demonstrators. "We are fighting for freedom!" repeats an elderly woman, in her sixties, in Georgian, handing out free balaclavas to those present. The demonstration is spread along the entire length of the long Rustaveli boulevard and is made up of diverse groups of people from teenagers to pensioners. Every 50 meters, people gather in a circle around small fires, in which they burn paper cups and food wrappers.



"We are tired, we have been in the streets for ten days in a row, beaten, in the cold, do you understand how exhausting it is?" says 42-year-old Nino, who came all the way from Kutaisi to protest. According to her, the number of people at the protests is increasingly limited by fear of the possible consequences. "They beat us like cattle here," 46-year-old Irakli joins the conversation, showing us the swelling of his hand caused by the blows of police batons. The main motivation for their participation in the demonstrations is the demand for new elections under the supervision of observers, and their disagreement with Russia's influence in the country. The same request is repeated by other people we interview in one of the side streets, blocked by a cordon of police. "We are here again to maintain the law and prevent Maidanization," the commander of the police unit responds after repeated questions.



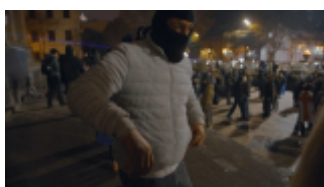
We pass by the exit of the metro station on Freedom Square, where the first sign of conflict takes place. A crowd of cameramen and protesters gather around two men whom the police are trying to detain, demanding their release. The police do not answer any questions from the journalists and send them away.

This is one of the police strategies that the Ministry of the Interior refers to as "routine checks and inspections". Police forces randomly check people coming out of the metro for protective equipment

such as face coverings, gas masks, helmets or fireworks. The two men arrested on Freedom Square were charged the same day with petty hooliganism and disobeying a police instruction.

A fine of one month's salary

During one of the police raids in the metro on the night of December 1-2, an independent journalist Giorgi Khagelishvili from the news portal Mautskebeli was also detained. We have an arranged meeting in one of the many local businesses providing free coffee, respirators and medical supplies to demonstrators. At first, Giorgi looks at us with distrust and considers every word. He also refuses our request for an interview on camera, but in the end he agrees to an informal conversation over coffee and a cigarette. On the day in question, he was recording the course of the demonstrations, when he was detained during the protesters' retreat before the police intervention (this event was also captured on video). Charges were brought against him for disobeying the police: "I repeated that I was a journalist and I did not put up any resistance. I spent 48 hours in my cell and was fined approximately 750 euros. They didn't care that I had a journalist's ID card. Maybe sometimes it's even worse if you sow one of those today." According to Giorgi, the police have a successful strategy to intimidate the media and discourage people from participating in the protests. If people refuse, or do not have the money to pay the fine, they face jail time. "These 2000 Georgian lari (750 EUR) is the average monthly earnings in this country."



When it comes to public media, Giorgi just smiles resignedly and shakes his head. He worked in television for eight years: "There is a difference between public and state media. In Georgia, there are currently only state media and private or independent outfits, which are often labeled by the government as biased and paid from abroad. I think you are heading towards this in Slovakia as well."

I feel like in Belarus here.

Nikoloz, sitting at a nearby table, spontaneously joins the conversation: "Are you from Slovakia?" he smiles. According to him, the Hungarian and Slovak Prime Ministers Viktor Orbán and Robert Fico have the status of celebrities in Georgia. At least, state television devotes disproportionate space to them. Nikoloz is also in his thirties and identifies as a Marxist. We ask him if Georgia any prominent left-wing critic of government policy, like the recently deceased Hungarian philosopher Gaspár Miklós Tamás, who often referred to Fico and Orbán as nationalist clowns. He replies that the left-wing perspective in Georgia is practically non-existent and almost exclusively centered around the university and a few cafes, and without real power to influence public discourse.



Nikolaz is also skeptical about the possible outcome of the current revolt: "Apart from the general demand for early elections and a move away from Russia's influence, there is practically no coherent

mobilization call today that would be able to appeal to the passive part of the population or those who at the moment sympathize with the government. It is surprisingly easy for the ruling party to label all of us as foreign agents or henchmen of the opposition, which is relatively fragmented. However, most people here are not fighting for some imaginary idea of the West. They don't make these demos a stage for specific opposition parties. This is one of the reasons why they do not go to the streets and generally opposition political parties are not invited there. What we are currently fighting for is autonomy and the possibility to make free decisions. We protest for our friends who were arrested for no reason, who were guilty only of having a respirator and a helmet in their backpacks during a search in the subway. Do you understand how ridiculous that is? I could never imagine that here in Tblisi I would feel as if I was in Belarus."



Giorgi looks worried, turns the screen of his smartphone to us and shows us an event that happened a little while ago. The footage shows a group of masked men approaching a reporter and cameraman from behind, only to then beat them unconscious with fists and kicks to the head. "So please take a taxi back to your hotel," he adds dejectedly.

Gradually, our conversation is noticed by more and more young people who have come out to smoke on the terrace. Some of them fled to Georgia from Russia, Ukraine or Armenia. Everyone is united by uncertainty. If they were detained during the current protests, they would face deportation in addition to a fine.

Solidarity in the streets

On Rustaveli Street, we have a meeting with Ana and Natela, activists of an international NGO (whom we will not name for security reasons). This organization is also labeled as a foreign agent. "As documentary filmmakers, you don't have a journalist's license? That can be a problem nowadays," they tell us anxiously right after the meeting. We answer that in this situation having journalist ID cards would not help us much anyway. We walk together along the boulevard, where Ana and Natela have the task of monitoring the situation. From time to time, Ana stops by a group of people, with whom she exchanges a few words and hands them a package of respirators. It seems that each of these groups of 3-5 people has the task of de-escalating the situation or helping the injured if necessary.



"My biggest fear is walking on side streets. We have set up an online group where you can call at least one person via video call, and stay connected until you get home. If something happens to me, there will always be a person on the other end of the line who will know where I was last seen, will be able to track me down through a locator app and mobilize help," Natela explains.

However, we are also witnessing many other expressions of solidarity. At the moment when someone

is arrested, ten to twenty people run to the scene and try to pull him away from the police, despite the risk of their own arrest.



Meanwhile, a water cannon arrives on Rustaveli Street and forces the demonstrators to leave the government district. It is early in the morning and several people are sitting in a café where they have come to warm up for a while. While some watch live streams of bloggers from the spontaneously created march, others turn on an application for monitoring the movement of police cars. All the lights in the café suddenly go out. A waitress hands out shots of local Chacha brandy at the expense of the establishment, with the excuse that the door must remain locked for at least an hour. This is one of the establishments that is known for offering free coffee and tea to demonstrators, which is why it is potentially at risk of being raided. Twenty people are quietly sipping their drink and watching a burning container through the window, while a car with blue-red beacons passes every thirty seconds.

There is a concentrated sense of fear of police brutality, which is overpowered by a much more powerful weapon. The gaze of twenty people, locked in a café, and within them the flame of mutual solidarity.



Demonstrations in Georgia continue as we write and may intensify even more in the coming days. After the constitutional amendment, the country will hold its first indirect presidential election, scheduled for December 14. The most likely winner is the candidate of Georgian Dream, Mikheil Kavelashvili. This is expected to lead to a further escalation of the protests, which will almost certainly lead to further repressive measures and police violence.

This text is made from the minutes of the documentary crew from the Slovak Academy of Performing Arts (VŠMS) which visited Tbilisi in order to understand the current situation directly from the center of events. Some of the names mentioned in this article have been changed upon request and in the interest of the protection of respondents.

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P.S.

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