

Pro-Western Georgia Declares State of Emergency

Police Suppress Demonstrations, Private Media

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TBILISI, Georgia, Nov. 7 -- The pro-Western government of [Georgia](#), a former Soviet republic, declared a state of emergency Wednesday night after police violently dispersed throngs of protesters and shut down private TV stations. The president accused opposition leaders of acting in concert with Russian intelligence agents.

The crackdown began Wednesday morning when police in black masks and riot gear used tear gas, batons, rubber bullets and water cannons against demonstrators who had occupied the street in front of the Parliament building. It was the first real violence since large anti-government demonstrations began six days ago.

Opposition figures denied [President Mikheil Saakashvili](#)'s claims that they were acting for [Russia](#), which has been trying to re-exert influence in countries that were part of the [Soviet Union](#). The opposition has accused the president of using Soviet-style techniques to crush legitimate dissent.

The events mark the most serious challenge to Saakashvili since he swept to power in the 2003 street uprising known as the Rose Revolution. He was later elected to office with overwhelming voter support.

On a platform of reform, his government forged close ties with the United States and [Europe](#), contributed troops to the coalition in [Iraq](#) and lobbied for membership in the [NATO](#) alliance and the [European Union](#). [President Bush](#) has called Georgia a "beacon of democracy" in the region.

Addressing the country on television Wednesday, the American-educated Saakashvili said: "We cannot let our country become the stage for dirty geopolitical escapades by other countries," an allusion to Russia. "Our democracy needs the firm hand of the authorities."

Georgia's relations with Russia have sunk to all-time lows in the past year. Russia has cut transportation links, deported Georgians and banned certain imports; Georgia has deported Russian officials and accused Russian warplanes of flying over its territory and dropping a missile on its soil. Relations are tense in part because Georgia has two zones that have effectively seceded from central government authority and enjoy Russian support. Saakashvili has been campaigning to bring them back under government control.

The Georgian government announced Wednesday that it would expel three more Russians. A Russian Foreign Ministry statement called the president's remarks "a

politically irresponsible provocation" and said "an adequate response" would come from Russia.

Opponents say Saakashvili's government has become increasingly authoritarian in ways that echo Soviet days, allowing judicial abuse and political intimidation. They note that former defense minister [Irakli Okruashvili](#), after accusing the president of corruption and a murder conspiracy, then went on television to recant his claims. Now abroad, he has reiterated his accusations.

On Wednesday, police and protesters engaged in extended battles in the streets; officers attacked some passersby who appeared to have no connection to the protest. The government later announced that 508 people had been hospitalized, of whom 412 were released. The injured include 24 policemen.

Tina Khidasheli, an opposition leader, said in an interview that she had been beaten and hit with a tear gas canister when police moved in. She blamed the violence in part on the United States' "unconditional support" for Georgia's ruling party, adding that she thought her country's leadership would have respected the rule of law more if U.S. officials had insisted it be upheld.

"For four years they did not question anything Saakashvili was doing," she said. "Beacon of democracy? The shining of democracy was in the streets today."

Georgian political scientist Giorgi Margvelashvili said that while Georgia has been a democracy up until now, he worries it will become "a police state where people will be put into prison as a matter of policy."

In Washington, [State Department](#) spokesman [Sean McCormack](#) called on the two sides to settle their differences peacefully. He declined to comment on claims of Russian interference. U.S. officials in the past have praised reform efforts but said that Georgia has a long way to go to achieve true democracy and tolerance of dissent.

Giga Bokeria, a spokesman for the ruling party, said police were sent in Wednesday after demonstrators began building a tent, which he said was illegal. By his account, the crowd, which had closed off traffic on the main avenue since Friday, had dwindled to 100 people, at which point it was no longer large enough to justify being in the street.

"They were allowed to stay on the sidewalk, but unfortunately the radical leaders of the opposition called for a mass movement to mobilize," Bokeria said. According to him, police first peacefully dispersed the protesters, who then hit and pushed back at police, provoking the violence.

In his television address, Saakashvili said Georgian police had done what police would do in any democratic country, including [Switzerland](#) and the United States, but conceded that the events of the day would not help Georgia's image abroad.

The government released video and audio recordings Wednesday showing opposition figures meeting with Russians. Khidasheli said in the interview that this is normal activity, that she regularly confers with Russian diplomats as well as envoys from the United States and other countries.

About 9 p.m., Imedi, a television station known for its opposition to the government, went off the air in the middle of a live broadcast. Before the screen went black, the anchor said police had entered the premises and had told employees to lie on the floor. He called on foreign governments to respond.

Imedi has been owned jointly by billionaire opposition supporter Badri Patarkatsishvili and [Rupert Murdoch's News Corp.](#) Last week, the station announced that News Corp. was increasing its shares to a majority stake.

Bokeria said he had not heard that Imedi had been shut down, but he accused the station of calling for the government's overthrow and said that "it wouldn't surprise me if there would be a legal action" against it.

Kakha Vardidze, 32, took cover in a food market a few blocks from Parliament after the street violence began. Pressing an ice pack to his head, he said he was walking home when one policeman directed him into a side street and another one hit him on the head.

A 58-year-old woman who said she was afraid to give her name pressed a scarf over her nose and mouth, and her eyes filled with tears. "Our president's dogs," she said as she watched riot police run by.