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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Georgian Opposition Calls Election Results Protests as President Accuses Russia

By Irakli Metreveli for AFP

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Georgian President Salome Zurabishvili gives a speech during a pro-Europe rally ahead of the parliamentary elections, which are seen as a crucial test for the country's democracy and its bid for EU membership, in Tbilisi on Oct. 20. **Vano Shlamov / AFP**

The Georgian opposition on Sunday called for protests and the European Union demanded an investigation into "irregularities" after a disputed legislative vote that showed a win for the ruling party accused of moving towards Russia's orbit.

Pro-Western President Salome Zurabishvili accused Moscow of being behind the election fraud, calling it a "Russian special operation."

Amid angry opposition claims over the result, Zurabishvili called for a rally on Monday. Jailed former president Mikheil Saakashvili also called for mass protests.

The European Union had warned that Saturday's vote, seen as a crucial test of democracy in the Caucasus country, could determine Tbilisi's chances of joining the bloc.

EU Council President Charles Michel wrote on X that Georgian authorities should "swiftly, transparently and independently investigate and adjudicate electoral irregularities and allegations thereof.

"These alleged irregularities must be seriously clarified and addressed," he said.

After meeting with opposition leaders in Tbilisi, Zurabishvili said there had been a "total falsification of the election."

"We are witnesses and victims of a Russian special operation, a modern form of hybrid war against the Georgian people," she said.

Embed:

> As the last independent institution, I cannot recognize these elections - it would legitimize Russia's takeover of Georgia. Our ancestors endured too much for us to surrender our European future. pic.twitter.com/BqJ5bEleFl
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> — Salome Zourabichvili (@Zourabichvili_S) October 27, 2024

International observers said Saturday's election was "marred by an uneven playing field, pressure and tension."

An EU parliament mission also expressed concern about "democratic backsliding," saying it had seen instances of "ballot box stuffing" and the "physical assault" of observers.

'Fighting for freedom'

Saakashvili, who spearheaded the bloodless Rose Revolution in 2003, said on Facebook that opposition lawmakers should renounce their parliamentary seats.

"Now is the time for mass protests. We must show the world that we are fighting for freedom and that we are a people who will not tolerate injustice," he said.

Official tallies from more than 99% of precincts showed the ruling Georgian Dream party winning 54% of the vote, with the main pro-Western opposition coalition on 37.5%.

The result gives Georgian Dream 91 seats in the 150-member parliament — enough to govern but short of the supermajority it had sought to pass a constitutional ban on all main opposition parties.

"Our victory is impressive," Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze said in a statement, accusing the opposition of "undermining the country's constitutional order" by questioning his party's

victory.

The government said that Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, an ally of the ruling party and current holder of the EU's rotating presidency, would visit Georgia on Monday and Tuesday.

Orban rushed to congratulate Georgian Dream for an "overwhelming victory" on Saturday after one exit poll showed the government in the lead and before preliminary results had been published.

Another exit poll by U.S. pollster Edison Research had projected an opposition victory by an 11% margin.

EU hopes 'dimmed'

Opposition parties lined up to denounce the vote.

"This is an attempt to steal Georgia's future," said Tina Bokuchava, leader of Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM).

Nika Gvaramia, leader of the liberal Akhali party, called the way the vote was held "a constitutional coup" by the government.

Analyst Gela Vasadze of the Georgian Strategic Analysis Center said the country was plunging "into political instability for an indefinite period" and that its EU hopes had "dimmed."

He said, however, that the opposition lacked "charismatic leaders who could channel popular anger into a protest wave capable of bringing about political change."

'Global war party'

Georgia was gripped by mass demonstrations this year against what the opposition saw as government attempts to curtail democratic freedoms and steer the country of four million off its pro-Western course and towards Russia.

In power since 2012, Georgian Dream initially pursued a liberal pro-Western policy agenda.

But it has reversed course over the last two years.

Its campaign centered on a conspiracy theory about a "global war party" that controls Western institutions and is seeking to drag Georgia into the Russia-Ukraine war.

In a country scarred by Russia's 2008 invasion, the party has offered voters bogeyman stories about an imminent threat of war, which only Georgian Dream could prevent.

Georgian Dream's controversial "foreign influence" law which targeted civil society sparked weeks of street protests and was criticized as a Kremlin-style measure to silence dissent.

The move prompted Brussels to freeze Georgia's EU accession process, while Washington imposed sanctions on dozens of Georgian officials.

In a campaign against sexual minorities, the ruling party has adopted measures that ban LGBTQ+ "propaganda," nullify same-sex marriages conducted abroad, and outlaw gender reassignment.

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