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# Tens of Thousands Rally in Georgia After Contested Vote

By Irakli Metreveli for AFP and Romain Colas for AFP

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**Giorgi ARJEVANIDZE / AFP**

Tens of thousands of Georgians took to the streets Monday to protest against the ruling party's victory in parliamentary polls denounced as "stolen" by the pro-Western opposition, while Georgia's president alleged to AFP that the vote was rigged using "sophisticated" methods she linked to Russia.

The Caucasus country — rocked by mass anti-government protests earlier this year — has plunged into political uncertainty since Saturday's vote, with Brussels, Washington, France and Germany condemning "irregularities."

According to near-complete results announced by the electoral commission, the ruling Georgian Dream party won 53.92% of the vote, compared with the 37.78% garnered by a union of four pro-Western opposition alliances.

Georgian Dream has for months been accused by the opposition of steering Tbilisi away from its goal of joining the EU and back into Russia's orbit.

Waving Georgian and EU flags, tens of thousands of demonstrators gathered outside the main parliament building in central Tbilisi, AFP journalists saw.

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They sang Georgia's national anthem, "Freedom," before pro-Western President Salome Zurabishvili — at loggerheads with the ruling party — addressed the rally.

"Your votes were stolen, but we will not let anyone to steal our future," she told the cheering crowd, adding: "I swear to stand with you until the end on our path towards Europe, where we belong."

Opposition leader Giorgi Vashadze said opposition parties will not enter the new "illegitimate" parliament and voiced their joint demand for "fresh legislative elections" to be held by an "international election administration."

One of the demonstrators, university student Irine Chkuaseli, 19, said: "When I first heard Georgian Dream declared victorious, I felt totally hopeless. But that didn't last long, I quickly shifted to being fired up to fight for the truth."

"Most people feel the same way, and we will not stop until these fake [election] results get canceled."

Speaking to AFP, Zurabishvili claimed the use of "quite sophisticated" fraudulent schemes in the weekend's vote.

She had earlier declared the election results "illegitimate," alleging a "Russian special operation" to interfere with the election — a claim swiftly rejected by the Kremlin, whose spokesman Dmitry Peskov said, "there was no intervention."

"It's very difficult to accuse a government, and that's not my role, but the methodology is Russian," Zurabishvili told AFP, adding that it was "difficult to deal with" Russia, which she called "threatening."

A group of Georgia's leading election monitors told a news conference Monday that they had uncovered evidence of complex, large-scale fraud that altered the election outcome in favor of the ruling party.

They called for a swift investigation and demanded the annulment of at least 15% of all the votes cast in the elections, claiming to have documented evidence of election rigging at dozens of polling stations.

Defying the EU's concerns over the vote, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban — current holder of the bloc's rotating presidency and the Kremlin's closest EU associate — arrived Monday for a two-day visit to Tbilisi.

## 'Irregularities'

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze on Monday insisted EU membership remained a "main priority" for his party and said he expected a "reset" with Brussels.

The announced result gave Georgian Dream 89 seats in the 150-member parliament — enough to govern but short of the supermajority it had sought to pass a constitutional ban on all the main opposition parties.

The polls have prompted widespread international criticism.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken blasted "misuse of public resources, vote buying and voter intimidation," which he said "contributed to an uneven playing field."

An EU parliament mission said the vote was evidence of Tbilisi's "democratic backsliding," adding that it had seen instances of "ballot box stuffing" and the "physical assault" of observers.

Germany and France expressed "concerns" over electoral irregularities.

## Orban arrives

Orban, who has retained ties to Moscow despite the 2022 Ukraine invasion, tweeted a message of support for the Georgian government on his arrival in Tbilisi on Monday evening.

"Georgia is a conservative, Christian and pro-Europe state. Instead of useless lecturing, they need our support on their European path," Orban wrote on X.

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell has warned that Orban on this visit "does not represent" the bloc on foreign affairs.

Other EU figures condemned the vote — with some backing the call of the opposition.

"The President of Georgia has announced that the parliamentary elections were falsified. Europe must now stand with the Georgian people," Poland's foreign minister Radoslaw Sikorski said on X Sunday.

Georgia was rocked in May by huge demonstrations against a law on "foreign influence", that critics said mirrored Russian legislation used to silence Kremlin critics.

The United States imposed sanctions on Georgian officials following the protests, while Brussels put EU hopeful Tbilisi's accession process on halt.

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