



BULLETIN

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Georgian Dream in Crisis: Free Democrats Leave the Coalition

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In protest of the controversial arrests of Ministry of Defence officials, the pro-Western Free Democrats party of Irakli Alasania has left the coalition. Alarming statements about the threat to the country's integration with NATO are detrimental to the image of the government in Tbilisi. The affair did not end the process of rapprochement between Georgia and the EU and NATO, but the Western partners should coordinate forms of further cooperation with Georgia depending on a plausible explanation of the circumstances behind the scenes of the current conflict. This is important for Georgian democracy as well as for the credibility of the government in Tbilisi, as a NATO ally and partner for the EU.

Corrupt Officials or Backroom Intrigue in the Coalition? The corruption scandal in the Georgian Ministry of Defence began on 28 October, with the arrest of several high-ranking officials accused of organising a fraudulent tender for IT services. On 4 November the defense minister, Irakli Alasania, stated that the prosecution allegations against his ministry were purely political, and their goal was “an attack on the Euro-Atlantic choice of Georgia.” Soon after, he was dismissed by Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, and it was not long before the foreign minister, Maya Panjikidze, resigned. She was replaced by the previous deputy minister, Tamar Beruchashvili. Moreover, the minister for integration with the EU and NATO, Alexi Petriashvili, also left office and stated that “the dictatorship is coming.” Garibashvili described allegations about Georgia’s withdrawal from the Euro-Atlantic course as irresponsible and absurd. The prime minister called Alasania a “traitor” whose departure from the coalition could only be positive. He also called Panjikidze’s and Petriashvili’s solidarity “anti-state sabotage.” As a result of the conflict, MPs from Alasania’s party, the Free Democrats, left the Georgian Dream coalition.

As long as another coalition party, the Republicans, remain in government, it will maintain the majority in the parliament. The Republican Party took a conciliatory position towards both sides of the conflict. After the resignation of three ministers, a member of the party, the speaker of the parliament, Davit Usupashvili stressed appreciation for Alasania, Panjikidze and Petriashvili for their contribution to making Georgia's foreign policy. Usupashvili noted, however, that their departure does not change the priorities in this area.

A Government Controlled Remotely by Ivanishvili. Two years of rule by the Georgian Dream coalition led to democratisation and greater political pluralism in Georgia, which does not mean, however, full transparency of the political system. Garibashvili, after the constitutional changes of last year, has more power than the president, but is still not an experienced politician. Lacking his own political capital, he bases his authority on the reputation of Bidzina Ivanishvili, the creator of the Georgian Dream coalition. Ivanishvili himself, who resigned from the office of prime minister a year ago, is criticised for informally controlling Garibashvili’s government. President Giorgi Margvelashvili (himself from the Georgian Dream party) has also joined this criticism, and stated that Georgia cannot be ruled from behind the scenes, but through strong state institutions.

The coalition crisis also prompted Ivanishvili to make a public statement. The former prime minister rebuked Garibashvili for hasty decisions and too harsh words about the former minister of defence. He also criticised Alasania for “irresponsible” allegations and attempting to “politicise” the investigation into the tender. Ivanishvili added said that the public lacks a thorough analysis of the political situation, and he had therefore decided to create a new analytical institution and TV programme, in which he will personally comment on political developments in Georgia.

The Georgian political crisis sparked concern in Western countries. Alasania's party has been perceived as the guarantor of the government's Euro-Atlantic orientation. The party's exit from the coalition prompted reaction from, among others, the United States. On 6 November, State Department spokesman Jen Psaki described the crisis in the coalition as an internal problem of Georgia, which, however, can be a challenge for the process of Georgia's integration with NATO. Psaki compared the current allegations against officials of the Ministry of Defence to arrests and processes of government officials of the United National Movement, the party of former president Mikheil Saakashvili.

Threats for Georgia's Integration with the EU and NATO. The exit of Alasania's Free Democrats from the Georgian Dream coalition was a major blow, which, however, did not lead to an immediate change of priorities in foreign policies. Such a shift is not possible because of the strongly pro-Western profile of the Republicans (without whom the coalition cease to exist), and public support for integration with the EU and NATO. The CV of the newly appointed minister of foreign affairs, Tamar Beruchashvili, does not indicate a change in foreign policy. She is an experienced diplomat who, during Saakashvili's presidency, served as minister for European and Euro-Atlantic integration in 2004.

Any deepening of the crisis and break-up of the coalition may also mean a risk for the continuation of the European and Euro-Atlantic policies of Georgia. Early elections could see Eurosceptic parties such as the grouping of Nino Burjanadze (Democratic Choice—United Georgia) and the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia of Davit Tarkhan-Mouravi entering parliament, and even the formation of a Georgian Dream coalition involving them. On the other hand, the current crisis may also strengthen pro-Western Free Democrats and the United National Movement. Regardless of the outcome of the changes in Georgians' political preferences, the fall of Georgian Dream's popularity should be expected. This will be due not only to the crisis in the coalition, but also because of the voters' disappointment caused by the lack of improvement of the economic situation and living standards.

Above all, the political crisis in Georgia reveals the weakness of the Georgian state institutions, which is the biggest threat for integration with the EU and NATO. One of the biggest problems is the politicisation of the prosecutor's office. The problem of this institution is not only its external dependency on the executive, but the political ambitions of some prosecutors and the lack of transparency of procedures. Alasania, ambitious, assessed positively in Georgia, and popular in the West, was certainly seen by Garibashvili (and his mentor Ivanishvili) as a political rival. Thus one cannot reject the version of events presented by the Liberal Democrats. It is not impossible to assume that the issue of corruption has actually been fabricated in order to strike at Alasania. On the other hand, it cannot be excluded that corruption really happened. Despite the effective elimination of corruption during Saakashvili's presidency, corrupt practices among the ruling elite have continued. Cases of this kind of corruption can therefore occur also among the officials of the current administration.

Recommendations for the EU and NATO. The statements of the prime minister, the speaker of parliament and other officials remaining in the government, about the continuation of the policy of integration with the European Union and NATO, should be taken seriously. At the same time, the EU should not ignore the disturbing signals from politicians who have left the Georgian Dream. The EU, NATO and the members of both organisations, should put pressure on the government in Tbilisi to make public all the details concerning the corruption case in the Ministry of Defence, and Alasania's accusations. In the absence of such actions, there should be a strong reaction from the Western partners. The authorities in Tbilisi should receive a clear message from both the EU and NATO that Georgia's further integration will not be possible without undertaking more decisive reforms, building strong state institutions, and eliminating the impact of informal groups on the decisions of state authorities. A similar message should be given to the Georgian delegation on 17 November, at the first meeting of the EU–Georgia Association Council in Brussels.

Regarding the political weight of the allegations, which were made by deposed ministers, it is necessary to ensure supervision of representatives of the parliamentary opposition and civil society during the course of the investigation and possible trial. The first step should be to declassify information on the tender in the Ministry of Defence. The renowned watchdogs and NGOs such as Transparency International and the Georgian Young Lawyers Association should play a key role in monitoring the case.

Participation of the opposition MPs in the inquiry considering the tender and allegations about illegal actions to halt Georgia's integration with NATO could be ensured through the creation of a special parliamentary commission. Poland could support the operation of such an institution in the Georgian parliament, by the transfer of Polish experiences parliamentary committees.

The EU, NATO and their members should conduct a dialogue with the opposition parties in Georgia that support European and Euro-Atlantic integration. A useful format of contacts between the parties from EU Member States and Georgia are European parties (for example, the Free Democrats and Republicans are members of the ALDE group). The European Union and NATO should also actively promote non-governmental institutions and the media dealing with issues of integration and related reforms.