

Georgian opposition movements planned mass protests for April 9, mostly in Tbilisi but also around the country. These protests could spell trouble for President Mikhail Saakashvili. The Western-leaning president has faced protests before, but this time the opposition is more consolidated than in the past. Furthermore, some members of the government were expected to join in the protests, and Russia has stepped up its efforts to oust Saakashvili.

Analysis

This is not the first set of rallies against Saakashvili, who has had a rocky presidency since taking power in the pro-Western "Rose Revolution" of 2003. Anti-government protests have been held constantly over the past six years. But the upcoming rally is different: This is the first time all 17 opposition parties have consolidated enough to organize a mass movement in the country. Furthermore, many members of the government are joining the cause, and foreign powers - namely Russia - are known to be encouraging plans to oust Saakashvili.

The planned protests had been scheduled to coincide with the 20th anniversary of the Soviet crackdown on independence demonstrators in Tbilisi. The opposition movement claims that more than 100,000 people will take to the streets -an ambitious number, as the protests of the past six years have not drawn more than 15,000 people. But this time around, the Georgian people's discontent is greatly intensified because of the blame placed on Saakashvili after the Russo-Georgian war in August 2008. Most Georgians believe Saakashvili pushed the country into a war, knowing the repercussions, and into a serious financial crisis in which unemployment has reached nearly 9 percent.

Georgia's opposition has always been fractured and so has only managed to pull together sporadic rallies rather than a real movement. But the growing discontent in Georgia is allowing the opposition groups to finally overcome their differences and agree that Saakashvili should be removed. Even Saakashvili loyalists like former Parliament Speaker Nino Burjanadze and former Georgian Ambassador to the United Nations Irakli Alasania have joined the opposition's cause, targeting Saakashvili personally. The problem now is that opposition members still do not agree on how to remove the president; some are calling for referendums on new elections, and some want to install a replacement government to make sure Saakashvili does not have a chance to return to power. But all 17 parties agreed to start with large-scale demonstrations in the streets and go from there.

If the movement does inspire such a large turnout, it would be equivalent to the number of protesters that hit the streets at the height of the Rose Revolution, which toppled the previous government and brought Saakashvili into power in the first place.

Saakashvili and the remainder of his supporters are prepared, however, with the military on

standby outside of Tbilisi in order to counter a large movement. During a demonstration in 2007, Saakashvili deployed the military and successfully - though violently - crushed the protests. But that demonstration consisted of 15,000 protesters; it is unclear if Saakashvili and the military could withstand numbers seven times that.

There is also concern that protests are planned in the Georgian secessionist region of Adjara, which rose up against and rejected Saakashvili's government in 2004 after the Rose Revolution. This region was suppressed by Saakashvili once and has held a grudge ever since, looking for the perfect time to rise up again. Tbilisi especially wants to keep Adjara under its control because it is home to the large port of Batumi, and many of Georgia's transport routes to Turkey run through it. If Adjara rises up, there are rumors in the region that its neighboring secessionist region, Samtskhe-Javakheti, will join in to help destabilize Saakashvili and the government.

Georgia already officially lost its two northern secessionist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to Russian occupation during the August 2008 war and is highly concerned with its southern regions trying to break away.

These southern regions, like the northern ones, have strong support from Russia; thus, Moscow is square in the middle of tomorrow's activities. Russia has long backed all of Georgia's secessionist regions, but has had difficulty penetrating the Georgian opposition groups in order to organize them against Saakashvili. Though none of the 17 opposition groups are pro-Russian, STRATFOR sources in Georgia say Russian money has been flowing into the groups in order to nudge them along in organizing the impending protests.

Russia has a vested interest in breaking the Georgian government. Russia and the West have been locked in a struggle over the small Caucasus state. That struggle led to the August 2008 Russo-Georgian war, after which Moscow felt secure in its control over Georgia. Since Russian President Dmitri Medvedev and U.S. President Barack Obama met April 1 and disagreed over a slew of issues, including U.S. ballistic missile defense installations in Poland and NATO expansion to Ukraine and Georgia, Russia is not as secure and is seeking to consolidate its power in Georgia. This means first breaking the still vehemently pro-Western Saakashvili. This does not

mean Russia thinks it can get a pro-Russian leader in power in Georgia; it just wants one who is not so outspoken against Moscow and so determined to invite Western influence.

The April 9 protests were the point at which all sides will try to gain - and maintain - momentum. The 2003 Rose Revolution took months to build up to, but the upcoming protests are the starting point for both the opposition and Russia - and opposition movements in Georgia have not seen this much support and organization since the 2003 revolution. April 9 will reveal whether or not things are about to get shaken up, if not completely transformed, in Georgia.

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