



Islamists storm India-backed yoga event in Maldives

Ivory Coast 'turns page' on refugee crisis: UNHCR

Page 6

Page 7



TBILISI, Georgia: People rally in support of the Georgia's membership to the European Union, days after the European Commission recommended deferring the country's candidacy, in Tbilisi. — AFP

120,000 march in Georgia 'for Europe'

'Every Georgian must assume personal responsibility so that our European hope comes true'

TBILISI, Georgia: At least 120,000 Georgians took to the streets Monday in support of the country's EU membership bid, after the European Commission recommended deferring Tbilisi's candidacy. Waving Georgian, Ukrainian, and EU flags, demonstrators flooded on Monday evening the main thoroughfare of the Georgian capital Tbilisi.

In what was the biggest demonstration in decades, at least 120,000 people took part in the "March for Europe" in Tbilisi, according to an AFP estimate based on video footage shot from drones. Many held placards that read "We are Europe" as the EU anthem, the Ode to Joy, was performed at the demonstration.

The rally was initiated by the Black Sea nation's leading pro-democracy groups and supported by all of the opposition parties to "demonstrate the commitment of the Georgian people to its European choice and Western values". "Europe is a historical choice and an aspiration of Georgians, for which all generations have given sacrifices," the rally organisers said on Facebook. One of the organisers, rights activist Shota Digmelashvili, read out a manifesto announcing another rally on Friday and the launch of a "new popular movement" that will include opposition parties but will be dominated by civil activists.

"We will formulate our demands to the government

and if it fails to meet them, the force of a non-violent resistance will sweep off all those who derails Georgia from its European path," he said. "Popular wrath will be directed against (the ruling party founder) oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili" who is widely believed to be calling the shots in Georgia despite having no official political role.



Biggest demonstration in decades

'European perspective'

One of the demonstrators, 47-year-old writer Malkhaz Kharbedia, said "every Georgian must assume personal responsibility so that our European hope comes true." "We've taken to the streets today as time has come to only rely on ourselves, not anyone else, the time for our personal responsibility, effort, unshaken will, perseverance," he told AFP.

Another demonstrator, biologist Lili Nemsadze, 68, said: "Denying Georgia the status of an EU (membership) candidate will mean we are left in Russia's sphere of influence." Russian President Vladimir "Putin will interpret this as a green light to invade Georgia again."

Georgia's bid for membership of both the EU and NATO—enshrined in the country's constitution—has long angered the Kremlin and tensions culminated in Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008. On Friday, the European Commission recommended that the European Council grant candidate status to Kyiv and Chisinau, but said it will "come back (by the end of 2022) and assess how Georgia meets the number of conditions before granting its candidate status".

The Commission also recommended granting Georgia "the European perspective," something its chief Ursula von der Leyen called a "huge step forward" on Georgia's path toward membership. "The door is wide open," she said, adding: "The sooner you deliver, the sooner there will be progress." On Monday the EU chief specified that Georgia needs to implement more reforms before it can join the bloc.

'De-oligarchisation'

Georgia's ruling Georgian Dream party has said it "regretted" that the country was not recommended as

a candidate together with Ukraine and Moldova. Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili on Friday, hailed "the historic decision to grant Georgia European perspective" and pledged to work with Brussels to "implement all the requirements and get a candidate's status."

The Georgian Dream government has faced mounting international criticism over perceived backsliding on democracy, seriously damaging Tbilisi's relations with Brussels. The European Commission said the conditions, which Tbilisi has to fulfil to be put on a formal membership path, include ending political polarisation, progress on media freedom, judiciary and electoral reforms as well as "de-oligarchisation."

Earlier this month, the European Parliament passed a non-binding resolution, calling on the EU to impose personal sanctions against Georgia's richest man Ivanishvili, for his "destructive role" in Georgia's politics and economy. Ivanishvili insists he has retired from politics. Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova have signed association agreements with the EU designed to bring them closer together economically and politically. The agreements also include free trade deals between the countries and the EU as well as visa-free travel for its nationals for a short stay in the Schengen area. But they give no guarantee of eventual membership. — AFP

Macron holds talks on deadlock, rejects PM resignation

PARIS: French President Emmanuel Macron on Tuesday was holding talks with the opposition on ending the deadlock sparked by his failure to secure a majority in parliamentary elections, after rejecting an offer by the prime minister to resign. Macron was to host far-right leader Marine Le Pen and other political party chiefs for rare talks at the Elysee as he seeks solutions to an unprecedented situation that risks plunging his second term into crisis two months after it began.



PARIS, France: France's President Emmanuel Macron (R) walks next to France's right-wing Les Republicains (LR) party President Christian Jacob after a meeting as part of his talks with the opposition seeking to end the deadlock. — AFP

The spectre of political paralysis and the breakthrough performance by the far-right under Le Pen has also raised questions over Macron's leadership in Europe as he seeks to keep a prime role in dealing with the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The Elysee said French Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne, blamed by some analysts for heading a lacklustre campaign, had offered her resignation to Macron but the head of state turned it down. Macron believes the government needs to "stay on task and act" and the president will now seek "constructive solutions" to the political deadlock in talks with opposition parties, said a presidential official, who asked not to be named.

Macron started Tuesday's flurry of discussions by talking with Christian Jacob, the head of the traditional right-wing the Republicans (LR), a party on the decline in recent months but which now may be courted by the president to give him a majority.

Socialist Party leader Olivier Faure and Communist

Party boss Fabien Roussel—members of the NUPES left-wing alliance—will also meet Macron. And in a rare encounter, Macron will at 17:30 Paris time (1530 GMT) host Le Pen, his rival in presidential elections and leader of the far-right National Rally (RN).

'No question of pact'

The options available to Macron range from seeking to form a new coalition alliance, passing legislation based on ad hoc agreements, or even calling new elections. One option would be an alliance with the Republicans, which has 61 MPs.

But Jacob after the talks appeared to close the door on such a solution. "I told the president there was no question of entering into what could be seen as betrayal of our voters." "We will stay in opposition... there is no question of thinking about some kind of pact," he said, while vowing the party would not block the work of institutions.

Macron had hoped to mark his second term with an ambitious programme of tax cuts, welfare reform and raising the retirement age. All that is now in question. "What can he (Macron) do now?" said the headline in the Le Parisien daily. "Macron in an impasse, NUPES already divided," added Le Figaro. While Macron's Ensemble (Together) coalition remains the largest party after Sunday's National Assembly elections, it fell dozens of seats short of keeping the absolute majority it has enjoyed for the last five years.

Macron's Together alliance won 245 seats, well short of the 289 needed for an overall majority, in a low-turnout vote that resulted in an abstention rate of 53.77 percent. The election saw NUPES become the main opposition force along with its allies on 137 seats, according to interior ministry figures. But it appears unlikely the coalition of Socialists, Communists, Greens and the hard-left France Unbowed will be able to retain common cause in the legislature.

'Listen to voters'

Jean-Luc Melenchon, the France Unbowed chief who orchestrated the NUPES alliance, proposed Monday to make NUPES a permanent left-wing bloc but the offer was immediately rejected by the three other NUPES parties.

In a snub to the president, Melenchon is believed to be sending deputies to Elysee talks with Macron on Wednesday rather than going himself. Meanwhile the far-right under Le Pen posted the best legislative performance in its history, becoming the strongest single opposition party with 89 seats, up from eight in the outgoing chamber.

Le Pen said changing the prime minister "would not change much", urging Macron to "listen to what the French voters said". Even if Borne will stay in her post for now, a cabinet shake-up is on the horizon.—AFP

Russia warns Lithuania, presses offensive in Ukraine's Donbas

KYIV: Moscow warned Lithuania of "serious" consequences on Tuesday over its restriction of rail traffic to Russia's Kaliningrad exclave, as Kremlin forces made gains in Ukraine's strategic Donbas region. Kremlin troops were causing "catastrophic destruction" in Lysychansk, an industrial city at the forefront of clashes in the eastern Donbas, the region's governor said. Ukraine confirmed Russia had taken frontline village Toshkivka. Governor Sergiy Gaiday said "every town and village" in Ukrainian hands in Lugansk region was "under almost non-stop fire". Since being repelled from Kyiv and other parts of Ukraine following its invasion in February, Moscow is focusing its offensive on the strategic Donbas region.

In the eastern town of Sloviansk, which could become a flash point as Russian troops advance from the north, local people were preparing to withstand attack and the authorities said the community would defend itself. "We believe they'll beat the Russian scum," resident Valentina, 63, said of local Ukrainian forces. The stakes are high. The town was seized by Russia-backed separatists in 2014 and then retaken by Ukrainian forces after a lengthy siege.

'Serious' consequences

Russia's war of words with EU member Lithuania escalated on Tuesday, vowing "serious" consequences over Vilnius' restrictions on rail traffic to the exclave of Kaliningrad. Lithuania says it is simply adhering to EU-wide sanctions on Moscow but Russia countered, accusing Brussels of "escalation". Moscow summoned the EU's ambassador to Russia. Its foreign ministry said Lithuania's actions "violate

the relevant legal and political obligations of the European Union". On the ground, the police chief of the Kyiv region said victims of the Russian attempt to seize the capital city continued to be found. So far, the bodies of 1,333 civilians have been discovered and 300 people still missing.

On the maritime front, Russia's navy is blockading ports, which Ukraine says is preventing millions of tonnes of grain from being shipped to world markets, contributing to soaring food prices. Prior to the war, Ukraine was a major exporter of wheat, corn and sunflower oil. With European officials due to gather this week at a summit expected to approve Ukraine's candidacy to join the EU, Brussels foreign policy chief Josep Borrell called the Russians' port blockade "a real war crime". He said it was happening "while in the rest of the world people are suffering hunger".

Moscow denies responsibility for the disruption to deliveries and, following Borrell's comments, blamed the West's "destructive" position for surging grain prices. Growing concerns about a food crisis are "the fault of Western regimes, which act as provokers and destroyers", said foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said Kyiv was engaged in "complex negotiations" to unblock grain exports, although he cautioned that there was no progress as yet. In an address to the African Union, he said the continent was a "hostage" of the conflict, and rising food prices had "already brought (the war) to the homes of millions of African families". The EU has pledged an additional 600 million euros (\$635 million) to help vulnerable nations weather the food security crisis.—AFP



BUCHA, Ukraine: Servicemen fire a salvo in tribute to Ukrainian servicemen Vladislav Andreev killed in Donetsk region, during his funeral ceremony at Bucha's cemetery. — AFP