

# Commentary: Georgia Before the Presidential Elections: The General Overview

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The present paper aims to provide an overview of the pre-election political landscape in Georgia and illustrate recent developments and their interconnection with each other. The paper will describe and analyze three main trends observed in Georgia in recent months, including factors such as Mikheil Saakashvili, the return of Bidzina Ivanishvili to politics, and the protest rallies in Tbilisi. The paper will also evaluate the chances of various candidates in the upcoming presidential elections in the context of the current economic situation and the recent public opinion surveys. The article concludes that victory in the presidential elections is crucial for the ruling party, but the opposition also has the opportunity to consolidate.

Keywords: Georgia, Saakashvili, Ivanishvili, Demonstrations, Elections



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## ***Introduction***

The presidential elections in Georgia will be held in Autumn 2018 as the presidency of current president Giorgi Margvelashvili expires this year. According to the new edition of the Georgian constitution, the president of Georgia now has a symbolic role and he can no longer make any tangible decision on the government level. At the same time, after several relatively comfortable years, the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party has faced difficulties such as internal clashes and protest rallies. The opposition, however, despite its activities, still faces numerous obstacles. The economic performance of Georgia continues to be not very impressive. According to the National Statistics Office of Georgia, the annual real GDP growth in country is 5%.<sup>1</sup> The devaluation of the Georgian national currency, the Lari, has also tightened the economic situation in the country. With all these in mind, three main trends can be identified taking place in Georgia during the last several months that can be expected to affect the result of the upcoming elections. Namely, the activation of ex-president of the country Mikheil Saakashvili in the Georgian direction; the return of Bidzina Ivanishvili to active politics; and protest demonstrations in Tbilisi.

## ***Mikheil Saakashvili and the Opposition***

The current opposition spectrum of Georgia is represented by several sizable political parties. Since the general elections in 2012, the former ruling party the United National Movement (UNM) has been the largest opposition party and, according to the latest public opinion survey conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI), 17% of respondents were UNM supporters.<sup>2</sup> Next to the UNM comes European Georgia, a relatively new party which split from the UNM after the last general election in 2016 and took with it approximately one quarter of the UNM voters. Among the other opposition parties should be mentioned the Labor Party, led by the charismatic

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1 National Statistics Office of Georgia (2018). *Gross Domestic Product (GDP)*. Available at: [http://www.geostat.ge/index.php?action=page&p\\_id=119&lang=eng](http://www.geostat.ge/index.php?action=page&p_id=119&lang=eng) (accessed: 25 June 2018).

2 The International Republican Institute (IRI) (2018). *Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Georgia*, p.73. Available at: [http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2018-5-29\\_georgia\\_poll\\_presentation.pdf](http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2018-5-29_georgia_poll_presentation.pdf) (accessed 25 June 2018).

and eccentric Shalva Natelashvili, and the pro-Russian Alliance of Patriots. Along with these parties, the opposition media also plays an important role in Georgia's domestic policy. The most notable actor is TV channel Rustavi 2, which remains one of the most popular media resources in Georgia. The minor TV channels, such as Pirveli and Kavkasia, have also tended to be critical towards the current government over several years. Among opposition newspapers, the most influential is Kronika Plus, focused on the investigation of corruption cases inside Georgian government elites.

One remarkable event related to Georgian opposition is the activation of the ex-president, Mikheil Saakashvili. On 3rd April 2018 he declared his intention to return to Georgia in the near future. Saakashvili's deportation from Ukraine to Poland significantly constrained his political capacity in Kiev, but also induced his concentration towards the homeland. Saakashvili hopes that an opposition victory in the presidential elections will lead to the collapse of the ruling elite and, consequently, a change of government.<sup>3</sup> It is noteworthy that the-ex-president has added new attributes to his political rhetoric and message box. For instance, in order to attract thousands of Georgian citizens suffering from the inability to pay back bank credits, he began to openly criticize Georgia's largest commercial banks, which are—according to him—“sucking the blood from almost all Georgian families and whole country's economy.”<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, during his latest appearances on television, Saakashvili has often emphasized his role in building hundreds of temples all over the country and reinforcing the Georgian Orthodox Church.<sup>5</sup> This political message is presumably designed for religious Georgian citizens, whose numbers are high in the country.

Another important idea declared by Saakashvili is an initiative for the unification of the opposition against Bidzina Ivanishvili. Under his concept, unification means standing as the common opposition candidate for the presidential elections. The political history of Georgia shows that the approach

3 Ekho Kavkaza (2018). *Saakashvili Speshit na Pomosh Gruzii*. Available at: <https://www.ek-hokavkaza.com/a/29142743.html> (accessed 25 June 2018).

4 Tabula (2018). *Saakashvili: Bankebi Antikartul da Antierovnul Politikas Atareben*. Available at: <http://www.tabula.ge/ge/verbatim/131686-saakashvili-bankebi-antiqartul-antierovnul-politikas-atareben> (accessed 25 June 2018).

5 Tabula (2018). *Saakashvili: Sad aris aba Dangreuli Eklesia?* Available at: <http://www.tabula.ge/ge/story/73850-mixeil-saakashvili-sad-aris-aba-dangreuli-eklesia> (accessed 25 June 2018).

‘everybody minus one’ worked efficiently against the president Zviad Gamsakhurdia in 1992, Eduard Shevardnadze in 2003, and Mikheil Saakashvili’s administration in 2012. Therefore, Saakashvili hopes to implement it against the current government. Nevertheless, Saakashvili’s former political allies from the EG declined his offer regarding the common candidate. Only several minor parties agreed to form a coalition with Saakashvili and his UNM party.

Aside from the parties, another factor should be mentioned, that of the current president of Georgia, Giorgi Margvelashvili, who spoiled his relations with his former companions in the Georgian Dream. Margvelashvili did not exclude the possibility of his candidacy in the presidential elections as the common opposition candidate.<sup>6</sup> In the case of his candidacy, Margvelashvili has a realistic chance to attract not only “traditional” oppositional votes, but also neutral voters. The existing administrative resources in the president’s administration could also be helpful during the election campaign.

The consolidation of all pro-Western parties for the upcoming elections is highly unlikely. Although, according to IRI surveys, Georgian Dream with 27% remains at the top of the political

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chart, the three largest parties combined have slightly more than GD, at 29%. The survey indicates that the likelihood of a second round in the presidential elections is very high.<sup>7</sup> Assuming that Margvelashvili stands as a candidate, the chances for the opposition could be higher.

Nevertheless, the Georgian opposition has several limitations. Firstly, although the UNM remains the main opposition party, and has even managed to increase its political activities all over Georgia, the resentment of the former governing party is still high in Georgian society, and is even an issue among the remaining opposition parties. Although the rating of the GD party has declined dramatically, the opposition has not managed to intercept so-called “frustrated voters.” Secondly, the financial declarations of the political parties suggest that UNM has

6 Sputnik (2018). *Saprezidento Archevnebi: Tamashi Romelshits Kvela Mogebulia Khalkhis Garda*. Available at: <https://sputnik-georgia.com/reviews/20180216/239326985/saprezidento-archevnebi.html> (accessed 25 June 2018).

7 The International Republican Institute (IRI) (2018). *Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Georgia*, p.73. Available at: [http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2018-5-29\\_georgia\\_poll\\_presentation.pdf](http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2018-5-29_georgia_poll_presentation.pdf) (accessed 25 June 2018).

suffered from the financial crises due to the failure to organize an efficient fundraising campaign.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Saakashvili's bargaining across the Georgian border, as was done in Ukraine, is highly complicated. Unlike Ukraine, there are ongoing trials of Saakashvili and in case of his return, he will be arrested according to the verdict reached in absentia. Also, the absence of Georgian citizenship could also be a bureaucratic barrier for the ex-president.

### ***Return of Bidzina Ivanishvili and the Confrontation Inside GD***

Another remarkable event in Georgia is the official return of Bidzina Ivanishvili to Georgian politics. In May he attended the congress of the GD party and was nominated as the chairman of its political board.<sup>9</sup> Since the general elections of 2016 Ivanishvili had rarely appeared in public. The question is, what caused Ivanishvili's return to active politics? Ivanishvili himself enumerated three main causes of his return. These were the harsh social and economic conditions, the destructive actions of the political opponents, and the confrontations inside the ruling party.<sup>10</sup> Among the explanations of Ivanishvili's return could be the growing criticism from international organizations regarding the problem of an informal governance, which is considered by Freedom House as one of the "key impediments to Georgia's democratic functioning."<sup>11</sup> Although Ivanishvili did not hold any official position, for several years he exerted his influence on the decision-making process inside the government, which consists mostly of his associates. The second reason could be clashes inside the GD party, which have become public. It is believed that conflict emerged between the "old" and "new" members of the GD party.<sup>12</sup> The confrontation became more obvious during

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8 Transparency (2018). *Donations to Georgian Political Parties*. Available at: <http://www.transparency.ge/politicaldonations/en> (accessed 25 June 2018).

9 Pirveli (2018). *Otsnebis Politsabcho Tkhutmet Katsamde Shemtsirdeba*. Available at: <http://pirveliradio.ge/?newsid=103763> (accessed 25 June 2018).

10 Pirveli Arkhi (2018). *Bidzina Ivanishvilis Gamosvla "Kartuli Otsnebis" Krilobaze. Sruli Teksti*. Available at: <https://1tv.ge/news/bidzina-ivanishvilis-gamosvla-kartuli-ocneba-demokratiuli-saqartvelos-yrilobaze-srulis-teqsti/> (accessed 25 June 2018).

11 Freedom House (2018). *Georgia: Country Profile*. Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2018/georgia> (accessed 25 June 2018).

12 Rustavi 2 (2018). *Dapirispireba Kartul Otsnebashi*. Available at: <http://rustavi2.ge/ka/news/101853> (accessed 25 June 2018).

the resignation of the Prime Minister, Giorgi Kvirikashvili. For instance, the journalist Gocha Mirtskhulava, who claims that he has listened to a recording of the GD congress, says that there was the toughest of conversations between Bidzina Ivanishvili and Giorgi Kvirikashvili.<sup>13</sup> The investigative journalist Eliso Kiladze, however, notes the increasing role of the State Security Service (SUS) in the intra-government clashes.<sup>14</sup> In such a case, only a strongman such as Ivanishvili is capable of solving the internal disputes by his appearance in politics. The third reason might be the government's failure to solve the harsh economic conditions in the country, which has led to growing dissatisfaction among a large section of the population. For instance, according to IRI public opinion surveys, unemployment and the economy are the main problems that Georgia currently faces. Consequently, the support rate of GD has dropped to 27%, which might be an alarming signal for the ruling elite.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, Mikheil Saakashvili believes that Ivanishvili is preparing for the presidential candidacy. However, it must be taken into account that Ivanishvili is a citizen of both Georgia and France, and Georgian legislation does not allow the president to possess dual citizenship.

Despite the decreased public support for the GD party, Bidzina Ivanishvili remains the most influential political figure in Georgia. The recent developments show that the GD party is not a monolithic structure. The party consists of individuals with different political platforms and backgrounds. The two key factors that can consolidate the party are loyalty to Bidzina Ivanishvili and resentment towards Mikheil Saakashvili and his team. For example, Giorgi Kvirikashvili resigned and was replaced by Mamuka Bakhtadze, the former Minister of Finance and the general director of Georgian Railways. It is likely this will strengthen the position of the Minister of Interior Affairs, Giorgi Gakharia, in the governmental elite. Also, the name of the presidential

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13 Iberia (2018). *Ivanishvili Eubneba Kvirikashvils, Shen Khom Githkra Gakhariam rom Ar unda Gakhvide Aktiazeeo*. Available at: <http://www.iberiatv.ge/ka/gadacemebi/politikuri-algoritmii/article/14472--ivanishvili-eubneba-kvirikashvils-shen-khom-githkra-gakhariam-rom-ar-unda-gakhvide-aqciazeo-gocha-mirskhulava> (accessed 25 June 2018).

14 News.ge (2018). *Gogashvili Dakavebulia Otsnebis Maghalchinosnebe Kompromatebis Shegrovebit*. Available at: <https://news.ge/gogashvili-dakavebulia-ocnebis-magalchinosnebe-kompromatebis-gavrcelebit/> (accessed 25 June 2018).

15 The International Republican Institute (IRI) (2018). *Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Georgia*, p.73. Available at: [http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2018-5-29\\_georgia\\_poll\\_presentation.pdf](http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2018-5-29_georgia_poll_presentation.pdf) (accessed 25 June 2018).

candidate from GD is unclear. Georgian media claims, that the candidate will be Maia Tskitishvili, the Minister of Regional Development.<sup>16</sup> GD will most likely nominate a candidate who has not been discredited.

### *The Protest Demonstrations in Tbilisi*

In May 2018 two anti-government rallies took place in the capital, Tbilisi. Remarkably, the ruling party was faced with such protest demonstrations for the first time since its victory in the general election of 2012. The first mass demonstration was caused by the brutal anti-drug raids in several Tbilisi nightclubs on May 12. Thousands of protestors demanded the resignation of the Minister of Interior Affairs, Giorgi Gakharia. Eventually, the government managed to calm the protest by the establishment a dialogue with the organizers of a protest and Giorgi Gakharia's apology over the nightclub raids in front of the crowd.<sup>17</sup> The second wave of the demonstration had a more radical character. A court verdict on the murder of two schoolboys led to mass demonstrations in Tbilisi. Among the demands of the protestors were the resignation of the government and a new investigation of the murder.<sup>18</sup> Prime Minister Kvirikashvili, who attempted to address the demonstrators at the meeting location, received bottles and other objects thrown by the protestors. The demonstrations paused after several days.

Although the two demonstrations resulted from different events, both of them share commonalities. Firstly, both meetings were self-organized and spontaneous. The role of social media in the mobilization of demonstrators was extremely high. Secondly, neither of the demonstrations was organized by oppositional parties. Conversely, the leaders of both protests were trying to distance themselves from any political entity, especially the UNM party.

Although the Georgian government has managed to withstand the protests, they have significantly damaged government's reputation. Additionally, the recent protests in neighboring

16 Rustavi 2 (2018). *Saprezidento Archevnebi*. Available at: <http://rustavi2.ge/ka/news/106849> (accessed 25 June 2018).

17 OC-Media (2018). Interior Minister Apologises over Tbilisi Nightclub Raids as Far-Right Groups Plan Daily Protests. Available at: <http://oc-media.org/interior-minister-apologises-over-tbilisi-nightclub-raids-as-far-right-groups-plan-daily-protests/> (accessed 25 June 2018).

18 Radio Liberty (2018). Georgian Protest Leader Says 'System Must be Destroyed' as Demonstrations Continue <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-tbilisi-protests-continue-leader-calls-on-political-parties/29267739.html> (accessed 25 June 2018).

Armenia could have provided an alarming signal to the Georgian authorities.

### ***Final Remarks***

All three above-mentioned events are interconnected and each will have its influence on the presidential elections. Despite the limited functions of the president, the upcoming elections are expected to be accompanied by vibrant and turbulent processes.

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Despite the severe decline of public support for the GD party, there is still no alternative. However, the latest public opinion surveys indicate that the upcoming election will present more difficulties for the ruling party compared to last local elections. Potentially, the unification of pro-Western opposition parties combined with the candidacy of President Giorgi Margvelashvili makes a second round highly realistic. Political life in Georgia, it is apparent, will be activated the in autumn, after the relatively passive summer season. Victory in the presidential elections is crucial for the GD party, as it will allow the ruling party to maintain its comfort zone until the general elections in 2020. The role of Bidzina Ivanishvili will most likely be increased. Interference from external actors is expected to be minimal. Indeed, the upcoming presidential elections in Georgia will be an important event that could create a sizable shift in the country's political landscape.