

ating competitive and accountable politics at the local level and possibly limiting the extent to which central governing elites can coopt provincial leaders.

The government likewise has indicated its intention to construct a system of universal healthcare, although the preliminary information offered is more aspirational than practical. Currently, good Georgian medical care costs far more than the average Georgian can pay. Many of means seek second opinions and difficult treatments outside of the country. Not only will a healthcare reform need to construct adequate medical infrastructure throughout the country, both in terms of well-trained personnel and equipment, but the reform will need to address public health critical needs, such as the rise of reported HIV-AIDS infections and continued prevalence of hepatitis and tuberculosis.

### **Georgian Dream: Potential and Reality**

When assessing American politics, pundits have used the first one hundred days of a new administration to take its measure and assess the merits of policy concep-

tion and implementation. In Georgia, the first one hundred days have seen more elite competition than real policy plans to address the deep structural problems of the country. But Georgia is not the United States, which, even in the days of the Great Depression, had clear institutional structures with defined powers.

Few observers of Georgian politics thought that Bidzina Ivanishvili and the Georgian Dream-Democratic Georgia coalition would have an easy time adapting to governance following the October 2012 election. The institutional framework of mandated cohabitation amidst a substantive executive power changeover meant that gridlock was likely and disagreement inevitable. Political haggling has exacerbated this structural condition, illustrated by the mutual animosity of Saakashvili and Ivanishvili. The elite-level exchanges, while sure to make locals sigh about “politics as usual” and frustrate observers eager for action, deserve attention. They betray, in part, a distrust of political competition and a rejection of the legitimacy of a powerful opposition, two factors critical for democratic development.

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## **Georgia—Another Painful Step Forward**

By Tornike Sharashenidze, Tbilisi

### **Abstract**

The landmark parliamentary elections of October 1 2012 won praise as a great victory of Georgian democracy. Despite the fact that Georgia scores better in terms of democratic transition and reforms than its post-Soviet neighbors, it had not passed the test of transferring power from one government to its opposition. Contrary to what many skeptics predicted, the country achieved this milestone on October 1. However the subsequent developments make clear that democratic transition in Georgia is far from complete.

### **The Background**

The skeptics who questioned Georgia’s ability to carry out a peaceful, constitutional transfer of power pointed to the fact that the Saakashvili government made too many people unhappy and therefore feared leaving office. In this context, it would use all possible means to stay in power. The President proved these skeptics wrong by immediately admitting the defeat of his party (the United National Movement) in the elections. He also allowed Bidzina Ivanishvili’s victorious Georgian Dream coalition to form a new cabinet without any reservations.

But the skeptics turned out to be accurate about the masses of unhappy citizens that Saakashvili’s nine-year rule created. The Saakashvili era accomplished something other post-Soviet countries can still only dream about—eradicating corruption and introducing effective and transparent public services. But, despite these accomplishments, it failed to address such problems as poverty and mass unemployment; it violated private property rights; and abused power. Georgia’s streets became secure and free of crime, but the country’s prisons were overcrowded and prisoners (as revealed on the

eve of the elections) were often victims of torture and abuse.

Thus, for many Georgians, the elections of October 1 became a choice between order and liberty. The choice was especially stark for younger people who matured during the last decade and did not appreciate what Saakashvili had accomplished—they simply did not remember such things as corruption, killings, robberies, power shortages, etc. Therefore they wanted much more than just order and the absence of crime.

But their choice did not necessarily guarantee a better life. The election campaign was aggressive and sometimes simply hysterical; it abounded with bitter mutual accusations and slanders that further polarized society. It was clear that the winner would try to concentrate as much power as possible and to marginalize the loser—not only because the loser was a resentful rival, but also because the loser had been demonized in the public eye and would have to be crushed.

Therefore despite the fact that the former authorities admitted defeat, the two rival forces found it extremely difficult to cooperate and even to cohabit. Consequently, the Georgian Dream coalition started doing what had been expected of it—concentrating power and marginalizing the opposition. Since October 2013 the most frequently used terms in Georgia are: “the restoration of justice” (used by the winners), “political revenge” (used by the losers), and “cohabitation” (used by the Western mediators).

### Justice vs. Revenge

The restoration of justice is something that Georgia cannot and should not avoid. Many people suffered under the former authorities. Under Saakashvili one could lose one’s job, business, freedom and sometimes even life under suspicious circumstances. What is even worse, such cases were not always investigated in a proper way, breeding further discontent among the public. Meanwhile, as petty crime and corruption was eradicated, suspicions grew that the ruling elite benefited considerably from dishonest deals. In fact there are grounds for launching investigations. Justice has to be restored and the authorities have to make exemplary cases demonstrating that no official, no matter how powerful, stands above the law. No one should escape responsibility for crimes committed to ensure that no one will dare to commit the same crimes in the future. The ruling coalition definitely has the moral advantage, which is legitimized not only by the masses of discontent citizens, but also by the fact that many senior officials from the former government (most importantly and symbolically the former Minister of Justice) fled the country immediately after the elections.

But the ruling coalition faces certain threats in this endeavor. As we know, the one who fights a dragon can easily become a dragon himself. The restoration of justice can breed new injustices if it is not done in a proper way. So far the new authorities demonstrate more commitment to legal procedures than their predecessors used to, but at the same time they give the impression of being overzealous and sometimes clumsy too. The clumsiness is visible not only in executive actions, but also in public statements. The new Georgian Foreign Minister declared that Saakashvili-era officials are “criminals and guilty,” which stirred bitter criticism in the Western press.<sup>1</sup> Too many former officials and even current parliamentarians from the opposition are being questioned and prosecuted, which allows Saakashvili’s team to question Ivanishvili’s true motives. Why is it so that only the United National Movement members and supporters are under investigation (including the likes of the current Tbilisi Mayor)? Does Ivanishvili aspire to restore justice or to crush the opposition? The most observant would say that Ivanishvili could aspire to achieve both of these goals.

At the same time, Ivanishvili cannot avoid one simple fact: those unhappy with the former regime demand revenge and their outcry cannot be easily ignored. Actually the masses of these discontented people have proved to be an effective tool for achieving political goals too. For example, the local government bodies are still controlled by the United National Movement, and since many citizens are unhappy about this fact, they tacitly are allowed by the central authorities to block the local offices and put the local officials under heavy pressure. This public pressure has resulted in the removal of United National Movement leaders in several municipalities. These events may look and sound outrageous since the elected officials should be allowed to serve their terms and no one has the right to interfere with that. But, on the other hand, the United National Movement no doubt would do the same if it faced opposition in local bodies—it would oust the opposition and maybe would do it much faster and even in more brutal ways. So when the United National Movement tries to rebuke the current authorities for non-democratic methods the answer is always the same: “you have no moral rights to question our actions, you did worse things.”

Hopefully, those who use this argument will realize sooner rather than later that ends do not justify means and that harassing former and sitting officials eventually may harm the country’s interests and undermine the process of democratic transition. The Georgian Dream

1 [http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/11/30/georgian\\_foreign\\_minister\\_saakashvili\\_officials\\_are\\_criminals\\_and\\_guilty](http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/11/30/georgian_foreign_minister_saakashvili_officials_are_criminals_and_guilty)

Coalition may have won as a result of wide-spread discontent and so it has to “restore justice.” But how far should it go?

On February 8 the discontent masses clashed with opposition parliamentarians on the street and not a few people suffered injuries. The public saw the scenes of mass violence that evoked dreadful memories from the civil war. The developments in Georgia already bear dangerous signs of ochlocracy—the angry mobs enforce the law.

Ivanishvili himself could not fail to see this danger and soon after the dramatic clash, he initiated a dialogue between the two rival forces on the most pressing issues—such as presidential powers and the irreversibility of Georgia’s pro-Western course.<sup>2</sup> The presidential powers have become the subject of scrutiny in recent months. According to the current constitution, Saakashvili can fire the cabinet and dissolve the parliament. In practical terms, taking such a step hardly makes any sense because even if Saakashvili did so, he would have to conduct new parliamentary elections, which definitely would be won by the Georgian Dream, and probably by an even bigger margin. Besides, Saakashvili’s presidential term expires in October and so he can hardly threaten Ivanishvili’s position.

In effect, the United National Movement has lost and so far it is in free fall. However the ruling coalition is desperately trying to deprive Saakashvili of his remaining privileges. For this purpose, the coalition has tried to forge a constitutional majority by a variety of means. Most prominently, some parliamentarians have left the United National Movement faction, no doubt having been lured by the ruling coalition. Saakashvili’s teammates claim these defections were the result of either bribes or blackmail—something that could not make Georgia’s Western partners happy. Most probably the ruling coalition realized the dangerous consequences of those defections and it became the main reason for starting the dialogue. However the two sides still have not achieved compromise. Cohabitation—the term recently introduced to the Georgian political dictionary—so far has remained only a term, which hardly has anything to do with reality.

### The Commonplace Realities

No matter how far the ruling coalition goes and what happens to the United National Movement, sooner or later average Georgians will ask themselves the perennial electoral question: “What about the economy?” The answer may not be very encouraging. The Georgian economy has staggered for the last year. Over the previ-

ous decade it has been driven mainly by Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), foreign assistance and the tourism industry. FDI fell in 2012<sup>3</sup> ostensibly because of the election campaign and political instability. It still remains to be seen if FDI will rise in 2013. Most probably it will take some time given the still tense political situation. At the same time, the United National Movement blames the new authorities for neglecting Georgian tourism, a problem that can have disastrous consequences for the country. Indeed Saakashvili’s team itself has done a lot to rebuild and modernize Georgia’s sea and mountain resorts. But so far the new government has concentrated on the “restoration of justice” and the projects initiated by the United National Movement have been abandoned.

Is the Georgian Dream capable of solving the country’s economic problems? This may prove to be a much more important issue than restoring justice or reducing presidential powers.

For the last two decades Georgia has remained poor and even Saakashvili’s bold and quite successful reforms failed to achieve tangible results. The Georgian Dream made too many promises during the election campaign and the public has extremely high expectations. There were many people unhappy about Saakashvili’s regime but maybe there were even more people expecting the self-made billionaire Ivanishvili, famous for his charity activities, to fill the state’s coffers with gold and turn Georgia into a paradise,—dreams and expectations that hardly could be fulfilled.

Ivanishvili understands better than anyone in Georgia how to make a fortune and that providing charity is much easier than building the economy. He also must realize that not many Georgians can understand the economy as he does and that most Georgians expect miracles from his rule. Time can run out soon for him. People cannot be fed by circuses for long, bread has to be provided too and as soon as possible. Ostensibly Ivanishvili believes that bread, in the short-term, can be provided by renewing trade with Russia (Moscow imposed a trade embargo on Georgia in 2006, in the heyday of Saakashvili’s rule). This must be one of the reasons he is attempting to reconcile with Russia. The United National Movement is already ringing alarm bells by pointing to the country’s difficult economic situation.<sup>4</sup> So far the new authorities have managed to calm the situation, but if they fail to stimulate the economy and create new jobs, disillusioned citizens may start looking for an alternative political force.

3 <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=25534&search>

4 <http://www.georgianews.ge/business/22046-on-brink-of-economic-crisis.html>

2 <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=25743&search=>

Given current reality, the United National Movement cannot be such an alternative. Unless the former ruling party manages to reinvent itself, it has very poor chances for returning to power, no matter how badly the Georgian Dream performs. But the events of 2012 have proven that with all of its shortcomings, Georgia is developing as a democracy and no political force or pol-

itician is indispensable (even a charismatic reformer like Saakashvili). If there is a need for a new political force, it will appear. Georgian politics is becoming more competitive—one of the encouraging consequences of 2012. Georgian democracy has advanced for the last decade slowly but irreversibly and the trend looks to continue, irreversibly and maybe even faster.

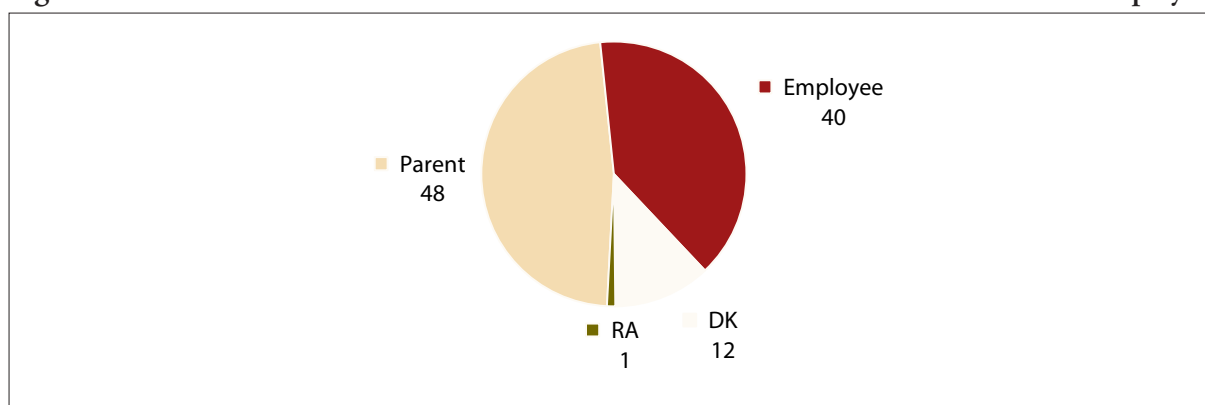
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## OPINION POLL

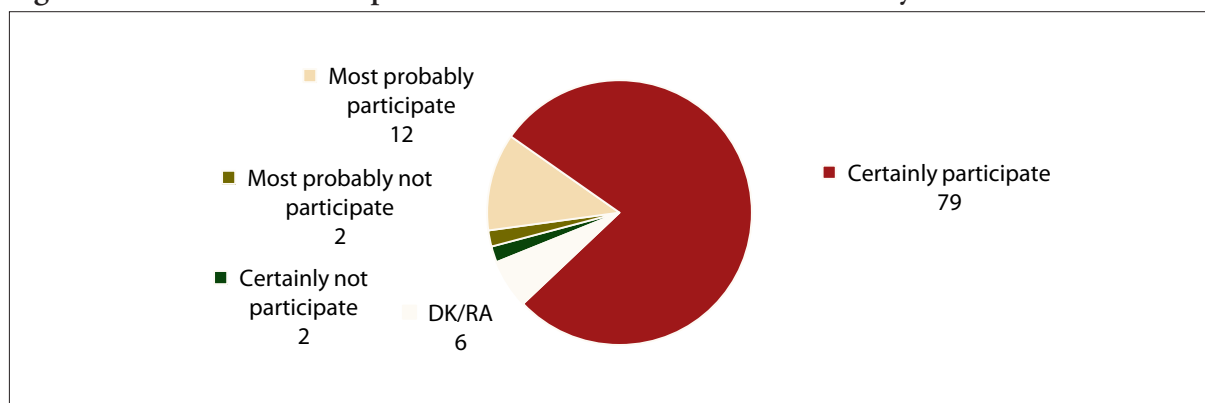
### Attitudes Towards Government and Democracy After the Elections

Figure 1: Government Should Be Like A Parent Vs. Government Should Be Like An Employee



Source: Caucasus Barometer 2012, representative opinion poll conducted between October 26 and November 29, 2012

Figure 2: Would You Participate In Presidential Elections Next Sunday?



Source: Caucasus Barometer 2012, representative opinion poll conducted between October 26 and November 29, 2012