

The Georgian Government's Goldilocks Problem

Lincoln A. Mitchell

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Since the Rose Revolution, one of the obstacles to further democratic development in Georgia has been the dominance of political life in that country by one political force, President Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM). The UNM arose shortly after the Rose Revolution from a merger between the National Movement, led by Saakashvili, and the United Democrats, led by the late Georgian Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania and then Chair of Parliament, and currently opposition politician, Nino Burjanadze. Since that time, the UNM has won every election in Georgia and controls every elected legislature and executive position in the country.

The UNM has generally drawn its power from several sources. First, they are a reasonably popular political party. Many Georgians have either been pleased about the reforms the Georgian government under the UNM's stewardship have enacted, support the UNM on various issues or believe that the UNM is best able to move Georgia forward in a good direction. This is one of the reasons that the UNM has been the most popular party in Georgia in virtually every poll taken since the Rose Revolution.

This is, however, only one explanation of the UNM's success in Georgia. Since coming to power the UNM has, according to most international watchdog organizations, limited media freedoms while civil society has been weakened, although this has begun to change in recent years. Moreover, while elections have not been characterized by widespread fraud and chaos on Election Day, the UNM has abused administrative resources and used threats and intimidation to limit the influence of some opposition parties. In this environment, the popularity and electoral victories of the UNM should be viewed somewhat differently—at least as much of as a residue of undemocratic elements of the system, than evidence of genuine and democratic support.

Another significant reason for the ongoing popularity and dominance of the UNM has been the Georgian opposition itself. Much of the opposition, not surprisingly that part which is usually highlighted by the government and government run media, is given to political histrionics, unreasonable demands, murky relationships with Moscow and often bafflingly poor political judgment. The more serious parts of the Georgian opposition, notably Irakli Alasania's Free Democrats, have generally had limited access to resources and media. Much of the media remains heavily influenced by the Georgian government, while support for a serious and legitimate opposition party by wealthy individuals or businesses can create problems for those individuals and businesses in Georgia's crony capitalist economy.

The Georgian government has very cleverly exploited this situation, frequently complaining to both foreign and domestic audiences that Georgia lacks a serious and powerful opposition. The government has, of course, complained about the opposition being too weak while simultaneously working to ensure that this remains the case. Thus, the Georgian government has been able to deflect criticisms of one party dominance by arguing the self-fulfilling prophecy that

due to the UNM's popularity nobody was able to pose a plausible challenge. This explanation has been useful and accurate for several years.

About three months ago, however, that suddenly changed, causing tremendous concern in Tbilisi. The Georgian government after years of arguing that the opposition was too weak and too poor, almost overnight had to argue that that opposition was now too strong, and more pertinently, too rich. The reason for this was the announcement by Georgian billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, in September, that he was going to become involved in politics and that he would work closely with, and help fund, the Free Democrats and the Republicans, two Georgian opposition parties who fall on the more rational, mature and moderate end of the Georgian opposition political spectrum. Almost overnight, the Georgian government had to contend with an opposition that can use resources and afford the same kind of expensive modern campaign and infrastructure that in recent Georgian elections has only been within the provenance of the UNM.

The Georgian government has responded to Ivanishvili's entrance into politics not by welcoming a worthy opponent who could help funnel resources to ensure that different political views were heard, but by seeking to weaken Ivanishvili and limit his ability to influence politics. The ways the government has sought to do this include stripping Ivanishvili of his citizenship, and passing a new party finance law that would not only limit the billionaire's ability to give money to political parties, but may also require the Free Democrats and Republicans to give back money they have already received.

Obviously, Ivanishvili tilts the scales in Georgia in a way that is more extreme than wealthy candidates like Michael Bloomberg or Mitt Romney in the U.S., but the Georgian government's efforts to push him out of politics entirely demonstrates that the canard about the opposition being too weak was meant to explain away the government's lack of interest in democracy rather than as a true lamentation of the relative state of Georgia's political forces. It is not yet clear the extent to which the government will succeed in limiting Ivanishvili's role, but it is reasonably clear that the Georgian government will likely continue to describe oppositions as too weak or too strong and, unlike Goldilocks, never find the one that is just right for them.