

Caucasus ELECTIONSWATCH

A weekly review of elections related processes in the Caucasus Region

28 August 2012

Commentary

“The elections must be fair and must be seen to be fair”,

- The London Times on the Georgian Parliamentary elections.

There are less than five weeks left before the much anticipated parliamentary elections in Georgia. The campaign has now started in earnest, the machine of the electoral process is in full swing, and politicians are taking to the streets of the towns and villages in a way not quite seen before. This could and should have been Georgia's best election ever. The Georgians have a clear choice between two major political forces – President Saakashvili's United National Movement and Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream Bloc. The two are offering different alternative visions for the country's future – even if on important issues of foreign affairs the two seem to agree on the most important elements, including Georgia's pro-western orientation and European ambitions.

The process has however been marred by the attempts of the Georgian government to box in its rival through a labyrinth of laws and regulations that have got little to do with the democratic process, but much to do with an electoral victory by stealth. This not to mention the fact that the main opposition person, Bidzina Ivanishvili, was stripped of his Georgian citizenship the moment he announced his political ambition. The international and local outcry that ensued resulted in ad hoc legislation being rushed through parliament to allow Ivanishvili to remain in the race – but still without his citizenship. The Georgian authorities may have not fully understood how petty and ill-conceived these steps were perceived by Georgia's friends overseas.

Many western governments and politicians have been patient and tolerant with Mr Saakashvili's government over the last nine years, sympathising with the challenges he inherited, and the difficulty of the neighbourhood his country is located in. But it is now felt that enough is enough. The London Times, in its editorial on 22 August, which we reprint in full on page 3, summed up the mood clearly when it stated that the October elections must not only be fair, but must also be seen to be fair.

Despite the positive aspects of the campaign so far – including its competitive and largely peaceful nature – serious concerns related to the conduct of the authorities have been flagged up by many international institutions that are monitoring the process. We reprint in full on page 4 statements that have been made over the last few days by the co-rapporteurs on Georgia of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and by the Delegation of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Both statements raise important and fundamental issues. It is not enough for the Georgian government to dismiss these as allegations resulting from propaganda of lobbyist groups when the facts speak for themselves.

The Georgian people must be allowed to listen to their politicians outlining their vision for the future of the country. They must then be allowed to express their views in a free and secret ballot. Their views must then be respected by winner and loser. It is not for outsiders to decide the outcome of the elections but if the process is flawed it is the responsibility of the international community to speak loudly and clearly. ■

This commentary was prepared by the CEW Editorial team.

Caucasus Elections Watch is a specialised weekly publication focusing on elections related processes in the Caucasus, with news and analysis compiled by experts with long experience of the region.

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Published by

LINKS Analysis,
7-10 Adam House,
Adam Street,
London WC2N 6AA

T +44 2075209308
F + 44 2075209309
E analysis@links-dar.org
W www.links-dar.org

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Regional Partner

International Centre on Conflict and Negotiation (ICCN)

Machabeli str. No 5;
P.O. Box 38 Tbilisi 0179
Georgia

T: (995 32) 923 920
F: (995 32) 939 178
W www.iccn.ge

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Tbilisi

The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) on 22 August opened an election observation mission for the parliamentary elections to be held in Georgia on 1 October.

The mission's deployment follows an invitation from the Georgian Foreign Ministry.

The mission is led by Nikolai Vulchanov and consists of 15 international experts based in Tbilisi and 28 long-term observers to be deployed throughout the country. In addition, ODIHR will request 350 short-term observers to monitor election-day proceedings and the counting process.

Observers will assess these elections for compliance with principles for democratic electoral processes, including the commitments agreed to by all the OSCE participating States, as well as with national legislation. Observers will monitor campaign activities, media coverage, the legislative framework and its implementation, the work of the election administration and relevant government bodies, and the resolution of election disputes.

As part of the observation process, the mission will meet with relevant authorities, candidates, political parties, the judiciary, civil society and the media.

Short-term observers arriving for election day will be deployed in teams of two throughout the country to monitor the opening of polling stations, voting, the counting of ballots and the tabulation of results.

For election-day observation, the ODIHR election observation mission will also join efforts with a delegation from the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and other parliamentary delegations.

A statement of preliminary findings and conclusions will be issued on the day after the elections.

ODIHR will issue a final report about two months after the end of the electoral process. ■

Yerevan

Activists of the opposition Armenian National Congress (ANC) held a protest action near the building of Prosecutor General's Office of Armenia. They demanded the release of political prisoners.

The protesters distributed leaflets to the passers-by stating that on 9 August 2011 their young activists were illegally detained later jailed on the basis of fabricated false charges of the Prosecutor General". The ANC Parliamentary Faction also took part in the protest action.

ANC activists Sargis Gevorgyan, David Kiramijyan, Artak Karapetyan were sentenced to 3 years in jail for hooliganism and use of force, while Tigran Arakelyan has been imprisoned for 6 years, for applying violence against a public officer.

The ANC and some other opposition parties and civil society groups believe that the court's verdict was politically motivated. ■

Samtredia

Georgian President Saakashvili told thousands of supporters at an outdoor campaign rally here on Thursday 24 August that the October 1 parliamentary elections would be "decisive" for Georgia as the future of the country would be at stake, not the fate of political parties.

He also said that those who want to take Georgia back into past and those people, who in the past were "sequestering budget on monthly basis", "seizing pensions" and those who "filled the country with criminality" were now trying to regain power.

"October 1 [parliamentary election] is their last chance and we should do everything in order not to let them use this chance and in order to get rid of them once and for all in order to make no place for them in Georgia," Saakashvili said.

At the rally he formally named a respected doctor Merab Janelidze as ruling United National Movement party's majoritarian MP candidate for Samtredia single-mandate constituency, where his rival from Bidzina Ivanishvili-led Georgian Dream coalition is a retired footballer Kakhi Kaladze, who was the captain of the Georgian national team and who won the Champions League on two occasions with AC Milan.

At the rally Saakashvili used Kaladze's two own goals in World Cup qualifying match against Italy in 2009 to attack him and said: "A large brigade of own goal scorers have stormed Georgia and they will never win."

"For those who say 'what difference it makes who started the [August, 2008] war? It does not matter for me who started the war – Russia or Georgia', it probably also does not matter against whom you will score a goal – against your own team or against a rival," Saakashvili said.

Kaladze apologized once again for own goals when he made appearance at an inaugural assembly of Ivanishvili's public movement in December, 2011 and said: "It would be good if those people, who have been 'scoring goals' against own country for their entire life, will also apologize."

Earlier this month Kaladze praised his rival from UNM for a majoritarian MP seat in Samtredia, Merab Janelidze, as "very honest and dignified man."

"I personally do not know him, but I've heard nothing but positive about him; I promise locals here that after my victory this man, if he agrees, will become chief doctor of Samtredia, because our country and our municipality needs such professionals," Kaladze told Info-9 news agency on August 5. ■

source: civil.ge


THE **TIMES**

The London Times on the Georgian Elections.

The influential London Times newspaper on 22 August published an editorial on the forthcoming Parliamentary Elections in Georgia. We reprint here the editorial in full.

Back in the bad old days, or so it is said, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, when apprised of the malefactions of a South American dictator, replied: "He may be a sonofabitch, but he's our sonofabitch." This sentiment was self-defeating enough then, discouraging as it did the development of democracy in regions that have never forgiven the West for its double-speaking. Now it is nearly impossible. It has become more and more difficult for democratic countries to give their wholehearted support to nations and leaders who deny liberty and constrain democracy.

President Mikheil Saakashvili has not yet forfeited the goodwill of the West. He played a leading role in the peaceful "Rose Revolution" of 2003, was elected President of his small country in January 2004 and was re-elected in 2013. During that time he moved to root out the endemic corruption that disfigured his country, to liberalise its economy and to align Georgia with the Western democracies. As a result, while its Caucasian neighbours are regarded as nightmares to do business with, Georgia has come to be regarded as a good place to invest.

Georgia's big problem, however, is its situation in a troubled and contested region and its proximity to and relationship with Russia. In 2008 Russia intervened on the side of a breakaway region of Georgia, South Ossetia, and its military power resulted in an inevitable Georgian defeat. What has become known as the Five Day War strained relationships between the West and Russia, and was regarded with understandable nervousness by Russia's other small neighbours - who have also been subject from time to time to Moscow's methods of dealing with those on its borders.

So there is much for a democratic President of Georgia to worry about, quite apart from the exigencies of running a small and boisterous country. And one of those things is knowing when to depart. Next year, 2013, Mr Saakashvili will come to the end of his second and final term as President. Over the past couple of years the fear has arisen that his constitutional changes, aimed at decreasing the powers of the presidency while increasing those of the prime minister, are a preparation for him to "do a Putin" and simply swap jobs when the time comes.

In addition, credible claims were made at the time of the last parliamentary elections that the Government abused the state-run media and official positions to give advantage to the ruling party. Now the opposition are complaining, in advance of parliamentary elections on October 1, that the President and his party are attempting to undermine their capacity to contest those elections by sequestering their funds. Rumbles out of Russia suggest some satisfaction that their enemy might now be tarred with their very own brush.

The Georgian opposition is an odd affair, led by a billionaire oligarch, Bidzina Ivanishvili, who made his fortune in Russia and whose personal wealth is said to be equal to half of Georgia's annual economic output. That is a lot of clout.

But both Georgia's reputation and its support in the West depend crucially upon its adherence to the rules and practices of democracy. For Mr Saakashvili and his successors to enjoy full-hearted backing they must offer something better than a painful slide back into authoritarianism and political corruption. The October elections must be fair and they must be seen to be fair. ■

VULCHANOV: Don't expect us to tell you if the election is "free and fair" or "legitimate".

The much awaited OSCE/ODIHR Elections Observation Mission has finally arrived in Georgia. The mission is headed by Nikolai Vulchanov of Bulgaria, who has over fifteen years of experience in election observation and who led OSCE/ODIHR observation missions for Georgia's 1999 parliamentary and 2000 presidential elections.

ODIHR has requested from the OSCE participating countries to send 350 short-term observers to monitor election day proceedings and the vote counting process.

"If this request is met by the participating states on the election day there will be probably around 400 [observers] from ODIHR alone," Vulchanov said on August 22 in Tbilisi, adding that in election day observation ODIHR mission will join efforts with delegations from parliamentary assemblies of OSCE, NATO, Council of Europe and European Parliament.

ODIHR's long-term observation mission will prepare two interim reports on pre-election situation – the first one planned to be released in late part of first half of September and the second one a week before the October 1 elections.

"Interim reports are drafted in a way to compile findings, but not to provide assessment of the findings. We are not providing assessments in interim reports, because we do not want to interfere in the process in any way," Vulchanov said. "However, findings, which will be reported in the interim reports, provide quite a good indication of how the process is unfolding; so careful reading of the interim reports merits."

The mission will release preliminary findings and conclusions day after the elections and final report will be available about two months after the final election results are summarized.

"We are not here to determine whether the election is legitimate or not," Vulchanov said. "We are here to establish based on body of facts, collected by our observers, whether the election complied with the legislation and the international commitments of Georgia, but that's where we stop."

He also said that it was not the policy of ODIHR to give assessments like "free and fair" to elections, because this wording "is not enough to describe an election properly." ■

source: CEW with civil.ge

International Community concerned over unfair playing field in Georgian Campaign

This week both the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA) have expressed concern regarding what they view as an unfair playing field for political parties in Georgia.

Particularly the two international bodies displayed dismay over the actions of the State Audit Service, the body charged with monitoring election spending in Georgia.

Following the events of the last week, PACE co-rapporteurs for the Georgian parliamentary elections, Michael Aastrup Jensen of Denmark and Boriss Cilevics of Latvia, called the fines imposed by the SAS on the Georgian Dream opposition coalition "excessive and disproportionate" noting that the fines "effectively undermine normal political activity by an opposition party."

The fines, which total GEL 2.38 million (about USD 1.5 million), were handed out to all six member-parties of the Georgian Dream opposition coalition for accepting what the SAS has called illegal non-monetary donations from companies affiliated with the opposition's leader, Bidzina Ivanishvili.

The opposition maintains the allegations are false and the fines issued by the SAS are illegal and have refused to pay the authorities. The SAS, to recuperate the funds, has seized the bank accounts of Georgian Dream member-parties. According to Nodar Khaduri of Democratic Georgia, a member-party of the opposition coalition, authorities have begun an enforcement procedure to collect the fine, already diverting over GEL 120,000 (about USD 60,000) from party bank accounts, making it impossible, he said, for the party to carry out campaign activities.

Reacting to international pressure the Georgian authorities announced that they were suspending the process of collecting the fine and said that the accounts had never been frozen. According to the statement issued by the government on 22 August, the National Bureau of Enforcement has indeed begun to collect the fine, so far GEL 122,000, however it has done so without freezing any bank accounts.

"These false allegations," concludes the government, "are the latest in a series of attempts by the Georgian Dream to discredit Georgian institutions in advance of the October elections. The Government of Georgia calls on all parties to refrain from [...] campaign slander and to focus on electoral objectives rather than trying to [pre-emptively] discredit the outcome of the elections." ■

Source:CEW with Georgian media

Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

The co-rapporteurs for Georgia of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), Michael Aastrup Jensen (Denmark, ALDE) and Boriss Cilevics (Latvia, SOC) today expressed their concern about the reports that the Georgian authorities have seized the bank accounts of the Georgian Dream opposition coalition, thereby undermining its participation in the election campaign for the parliamentary elections that will take place on 1 October 2012.

**Parliamentary Assembly
Assemblée parlementaire**



**COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE**

A statement published on the website of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe states:

"The excessive and disproportionate fines levied by the State Audit Service effectively undermine normal political activity by an opposition party.

This is of concern, especially in the context of recurrent allegations of bias of the State Audit Service and reports by credible organisations, such as the Georgian Young Lawyers Association, that question the fairness of the court decisions in this respect.

The rationale for campaign funding legislation is to ensure a level playing field between all electoral contestants, and not to drive one party or the other out of the electoral race. The upcoming elections, and their democratic conduct, are crucial for Georgia's democratic development. We therefore call upon the Georgian authorities to demonstrate maximum restraint and to ensure that all parties, including the Georgian Dream Coalition, can participate fully in the electoral campaign" they added.

The two co-rapporteurs will visit Georgia on 11 and 12 September 2012 as part of the pre-electoral mission of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. ■

source: CEW with www.coe.int

OSCE Parliamentary Assembly



The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly has raised concerns about the forthcoming parliamentary elections in

Georgia. A delegation of senior officials from the Assembly today concluded a three-day visit to Georgia aimed at assessing the country's pre-election climate. Tonino Picula (Croatia), appointed by the OSCE Chair-in-Office to lead the short-term OSCE observer mission, led a delegation, which included OSCE PA President Riccardo Migliori (Italy), Secretary General Spencer Oliver and Director of Presidential Administration Roberto Montella.

The delegation met with a wide range of stakeholders in the upcoming election, including ruling authorities, opposition parties, election administrators, representatives of the media and civil society, as well as members of the international community in Tbilisi.

Picula released the following statement today upon the conclusion of the visit:

"The upcoming Parliamentary elections are of great importance for the future of democracy in Georgia," Picula said. "We appreciate having this time to speak with people at all levels in Georgian society this week and welcome obvious pre-election efforts that aimed to ensure accuracy of the voters' list, provide transparency in campaign finance, and expand media accessibility throughout the country.

"There are several issues that concern us and that we will continue to watch closely. We have seen a growing political polarization in the country. We are particularly concerned by the practice of certain law enforcement institutions in Georgia. In our view, the State Audit Office is using broad discretionary authority to investigate the legality of individual or party spending and making questionable decisions and imposing harsh penalties without clear or transparent guidelines. The fines levied are disproportionate and apparently being applied in a selective manner mainly targeting one political subject.

"A fair and independent judiciary system is also fundamental to ensure the conduct of free and fair elections. After this visit, we have concerns as to the possibility of receiving proper legal remedy from the court system. The success of these elections depends also on a responsible opposition, which has the legal right to promote its goals while respecting the rules of the campaign. All parties should respect and accept the election results."

President Migliori added, "In the final weeks of this campaign I hope the Georgian authorities commit to a credible election and help create a level playing field for all parties that includes access to media and the protection of journalists whose work is essential for voters to make a free and informed choice on election day." ■

Source: CEW with www.oscepa.org

Georgian Political Forces Compromise on Code of Conduct

After a month of negotiations and public appeals, the Georgian Dream opposition coalition has decided to adhere to the code of conduct developed by the "This Affects You Too" campaign.



The 17-point declaration was developed by a coalition of civil society groups in Georgia with regard to the upcoming October elections.

It was modified on 18 August in

order to reach a compromise between the ruling United National Movement (UNM) and the Georgian Dream.

While the Georgian Dream supported the initial proposal presented by the civil society group, it had issues with a clause the UNM insisted be included in the code of conduct. The UNM made it clear that in order to have a comprehensive code of conduct for political parties in Georgia for the parliamentary elections, political parties and movements must accept and not appeal the results of the elections as announced by the Central Election Commission (CEC) in Georgia if deemed fair and free by respected national and international elections observers.

The opposition was unwilling to accept so strong a statement, especially in light of the results of previous elections being vetted by both the CEC and international observer organisations even though clear violations occurred.

However, a compromise seems to have been reached and one final clause was added to the original draft, which has been accepted by the opposition. The final point of the code of conduct commits signatories to recognise lawful electoral procedures which are also deemed to be legitimate by reputable observer organisations. Importantly, the right to appeal the results remains untouched – the main reason for the reluctance of the Georgian Dream to sign the code.

According to Maya Panjikidze, spokesperson for the Georgian Dream, the latest draft of the code presented by "This Affects You Too," were acceptable for the opposition resulting in the opposition signing the Code.

It appears the pressure placed on the opposition by both local and international organisations and missions and the willingness of the campaigners to come to a compromise yielded positive results. Although the code of conduct is non-binding for signatories it is an additional moral weight placed upon the shoulders of those seeking office in October and will hopefully serve as a compass for appropriate acts and behaviour in the run up to the elections which will take place on the first of October." ■

Georgians support having more women in politics, but social barriers remain entrenched according to study

The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) released a report last week on the Perception of Women in Georgian Politics. The data presented in the report, titled "Focus Group Findings on Perceptions of Women in Georgian Politics: An Assessment of Perceptions of Women as Political Candidates and Elected Officials" was carried out by the Institute of Social Studies and Analysis (ISSA), a research organisation based in Tbilisi.

ISSA conducted eight focus groups of 7-10 participants across the country in Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Batumi and Marneuli to tease out attitudes in Georgian society towards women in politics.

The study found that, in general, Georgians are open to women participating in politics, however, several informal barriers to greater participation by women in the public arena are present. Particularly, the study found that a majority of focus group participants, both men and women, believe that the priority of Georgian women's lives should be there families.

One male participant from Tbilisi noted that, "Personally, I think that family should be a priority for a Georgian woman ... and then other things. It is difficult to combine family with politics..."

A female participant from Marneuli indicated that women should be able to pursue a political career, but would need the support of their family.

"A woman who is married and spends all day in the Parliament, who will do her duties in the family, her husband? So it depends on the family, it should support a woman and share her obligations."

This "traditional mentality," as it is referred to in the study, is a hindrance to women getting more involved in political life.

IFES also found that while participants generally agreed that they would vote for a female candidate if they felt her qualifications were equal to those of a male counterpart, focus group participants pointed to the fact that it was often difficult to picture women in political roles since there are so few political female role models in Georgia. Nino Burjanadze was often viewed negatively by participants, while Salome Zurbishvili and Magda Anikashvili were said to have made positive achievements in Georgian politics.

"Even though they say that Burjanadze is a male type of a politician," said one female participant from Batumi, "I do not agree with that. I like all female features in her but I do not like her much as a politician."

According to the report, every group referred to Queen Tamar, a 12th-century ruler of Georgia known as "King Tamar", as an example of a positive female leader in the country who was, and still is, "highly respected".

The focus group demonstrated a general distrust and distaste for politicians in Georgia. Participants believe that female politicians are

concerned with the same issues as their male counterparts. However, two female politicians were raised by the groups as having worked on issues that concern women: Guguli Maghradze and Elene Tevdoradze.

Other barriers to female participation in Georgian politics is the notion that politics is a man's game. Many of the participants referred to the "dirty game" of politics during the focus groups and emphasised the fact that many women might not possess the same qualities required of a politician to be successful. Participants described their ideal candidates as being "intelligent, charismatic, reliable, keep[s] promises, not aggressive, diplomatic, a good communicator, patriotic, humble, democratic, trustworthy, honest, not corrupt, well-respected, well-balanced and a good family man or woman."

As a result of this more traditional view of women, female politicians in Georgia are often thought to possess qualities that would make them more honest than their male counterparts. According to IFES, women are thought to be "more diplomatic, better at ensuring consensus [a quality, felt by Georgians, that is lacking today], less aggressive in imposing their will on fellow officials or citizens, more reliable by keeping promises and less corrupt."

Some participants felt that Georgian society must stop thinking of women as the primary caregiver, the one responsible for the household and the weaker sex. One male participant from Batumi expressed, "Unless we change our mentality and the way of thinking, it will be impossible to encourage women's involvement. We should assess women's abilities in the right way and should not consider that the only job for women is to look after the family."

Interestingly, though participants agreed that women were under-represented in politics and there were too few female politicians, many participants disagreed with the concept of gender quotas in the parliament. Those who disagreed with the notion of gender quotas, were often male according to the study, claiming that having a quota "artificially imposes" voting for a gender on the electorate.

Women were more likely to support the idea of a gender quota in parliament than men. One female participant from Kutaisi, even went so far to say that "If I learn that there has to be 75 women in the parliament, I might have a desire. This will be a great incentive."

Currently, only 6% of elected officials in Georgia are female.

The IFES study, which was funded by USAID, recommends the Georgian authorities promote increased female participation in politics by focusing on the positive characteristics of female politicians perceived by Georgian society. Doing so, concludes IFES, "could form the basis of efforts to educate Georgians on the changes women could bring to political affairs in the country – a way to improve the political status quo." ■

Report prepared by Karina Gould for CEW.

Ivanishvili announces he is running for PM, challenges the President to a debate.

Bidzina Ivanishvili, leader of the opposition Georgian Dream coalition has announced that he will present himself as a candidate for Prime Minister of Georgia. The announcement, which came on Tuesday 20 August, was accompanied by a challenge to incumbent President Mikheil Saakashvili to a political debate ahead of the October parliamentary elections.

The President, however, has declined the invitation stating this is a parliamentary election and he is not running for parliament. The United National Movement (UNM), which is the current governing party, has offered Ivanishvili debate Vano Merabishvili, the UNM prime ministerial candidate and incumbent prime minister as well as the current speaker of parliament, Davit Bakradze, who is first on the party list for the UNM.

The leader of the opposition, however, has refused this alternative claiming that as the leader of a political coalition he is in a different position than the prime ministerial candidate or the speaker of parliament, and as such should debate with the leader of the ruling party, in this case President Saakashvili.

"If Saakashvili won't come," stated Ivanishvili, "I won't sit in debates with [Speaker of Parliament Davit] Bakradze and [Prime Minister Vano] Merabishvili, no matter what number they will write on their foreheads, despite being familiar with Merabishvili, society won't accept it, we are not of the same weight."

Georgia is currently transitioning from a presidential-style system to a parliamentary political system. According to Georgia's constitution, the position of President as it is will remain in place until the 2013 elections, when more powers will be transferred to the hands of the Prime Minister. Until then the President will have to present the cabinet (either the same or modified) for approval by parliament. Following the presidential elections which will take place in late 2013, the Prime Minister will gain more power and the position of President will lose some authority in Georgia. According to Ivanishvili, the Prime Minister following the 2013 elections will be the true head of government. Saakashvili will have completed two terms in 2013 and will not be allowed to run for a third term in office.

There is speculation in Georgia that Merabishvili is holding the place of Prime Minister until Saakashvili steps down next year, potentially presenting himself as the UNM prime ministerial candidate.

In July, Maestro TV asked Merabishvili if his intentions were to stay on as Prime Minister following the 2013 presidential elections, to which he responded, "The Georgian President has instructed me to develop a four-year plan. This plan is in place and we have already started its implementation."

He smoothed his response by adding, "of course the Georgian people will have the final say; the Georgian people have to decide whether they want to proceed with this action plan or not."

"I hope and I am sure that the Georgian people will make a decision, which they have to make, and will support the plan developed by us," concluded Merabishvili.

Ivanishvili declared that he would gladly debate with the Prime Minister if he could be sure that Merabishvili would be the prime ministerial candidate of the UNM following the 2013 presidential elections, "otherwise," he said, "it won't be even interesting for the public to listen [to] our debates."

Ivanishvili offered to debate with the Prime Minister so long as at least six other ruling party and government figures were also participating in the debate against him.

The leader of the opposition also declared that he and his coalition will not debate with representatives of the other opposition parties, including those from the Christian-Democratic Movement, New Rights and the Labour Party, going so far as to call these parties part of a "false opposition."

"If they want to meet me [in TV debates]," said Ivanishvili, "I will agree, but with one condition – they should admit that they represent the authorities and in that case we will sit down with them for debates. But we will not sit down with the false opposition."

For the opposition, "there are two clear powers in Georgia – the government and the Georgian Dream coalition. I am the leader of this coalition, accordingly [I am] candidate for prime minister or for the post of the country's first person."

Both Vano Merabishvili and Davit Bakradze have stated they are ready and willing to debate with Ivanishvili. In fact, according to UNM spokesperson Chiora Taktakishvili, Merabishvili has challenged the leader of the opposition to a debate on the Georgian Public Broadcaster.

The format, however, has yet to be agreed upon and no date has been set for a political debate between prime ministerial candidates or party leaders

Novruzov declared that the only reason the opposition parties are holding meetings is to "attract attention [that] they are taking this step together."

"Overall, [the opposition's] goal is to [get noticed this] summer," he concluded.

Commenting on the fact that the opposition has held many meetings, Novruzov mentioned that not every party attends.

Yusif Bagirzade, Chairman of the National Independence Party, however, noted that it was not necessarily the objective that all parties attend every meeting but rather to "create a centre of opposition forces."

"We want to ensure that no opposition party [is] left out of this centre," said Bagirzade.

It should be noted that during the last presidential election, Aliyev won with 88.7% of the vote. Of particular import is that none of the major political opponents participated in that election. Moreover, the 2010 parliamentary elections were also shrouded in controversy as many prominent opposition parties failed to win a single seat. ■

Sources: Compiled by Karina Gould with reports from dfwatch.net and civil.ge.

Political heavyweights lined up to contest majoritarian seats in Georgian Polls

The hardly fought election campaign in Georgia is fully under way, characterised by a competitive environment, even though the main opposition bloc remains under what many consider to be, unnecessary pressure.

A feature of this campaign that had been largely missing in previous Georgian elections with a few exceptions is the competitive nature in the part of the elections reserved for majoritarian candidates, namely those contesting for the single member constituency seats that make up nearly half of the 150 person parliament. The two main political forces, Saakashvili's United National Movement and Bidzina Ivanishvili's opposition "Georgian Dream" bloc have both assigned some of their top people to contest the so-called majoritarian seats as their importance in this election has now become evident.

The opposition is also afraid that voters may be confused by the personalities involved. Leader of opposition Georgian Dream coalition, Bidzina Ivanishvili, campaigning in Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti regions on August 26-27, called on supporters not to differentiate between supporting Georgian Dream in party-list and majoritarian contests when casting ballot in the October 1 parliamentary elections.

"You have to realize it very well that a majoritarian MP candidate supporting [ruling party United] National Movement can't be your friend; such a candidate can only be a friend to the National Movement... You can not perceive such a candidate separately [without UNM]," he told supporters at a campaign meeting in Lentekhi on August 26. ■



The United National Movement will be represented in the single seat election in Batumi by Giorgi Baramidze, who resigned from his position as State Minister for European integration in order to contest the election. President Mikheil Saakashvili personally introduced Baramidze to the voters of Adjara, describing him as a long time friend who had helped introduce him to Georgian politics. Baramidze had previously run as a majoritarian candidate in the Tbilisi constituency of Didube and the decision to field Baramidze in Batumi is not clear.



The Georgian Dream coalition has fielded the leader of one of the Parties forming part of the bloc, Irakli Alasania to contest the constituency of Zugdidi. Alasania held various positions in Saakashvili's government, including that of Ambassador to the United Nations, before resigning to join the opposition. He has extensive family connections in Abkhazia and amongst the Georgian community displaced by the war in Abkhazia. Introducing him as the majoritarian candidate for the western Georgian town of Zugdidi the leader of the Georgian Dream coalition praised Alasania's patriotism and skills and said that he was sure that he will win the seat.



President Saakashvili on the campaign trail