

ISSUE BRIEF

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Six Months of Georgian Dreams: The State of Play and Ways Forward

Georgia experienced its first ever democratic transfer of power on October 1 when the ruling United National Movement (UNM) conceded its defeat to the opposition Georgian Dream coalition (GD). Building on this democratic success will not be easy and will require navigating an awkward cohabitation between Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili's new government and President Mikheil Saakashvili, each of whom have significant executive functions despite competing party agendas and the fact the two leaders personally dislike each other.

Georgia stands at a key strategic moment. It now has an opportunity to address the substantive issues and challenges the country faces, including in its relations with Russia. This brief looks at the new government and its members; discusses cohabitation and its functioning over the first six months of the GD government; reviews the regional situation, including the opportunity for improved ties with Russia; and explores what this means for US interests in the region.

Georgian Dream Coalition

GD is an amalgamation of six ideologically-diverse opposition parties led by Ivanishvili, who heads the coalition's lead party, Georgian Dream–Democratic Georgia (GDDG).

Irakli Alasania's Our Georgia Free Democrats (OGFD) and the Republican Party, led by brothers David and Levan Berdzenishvili and the husband-and-wife team of Davit Usupashvili and Tina Khidasheli, are two prominent, liberal parties in the coalition with a strong, pro-Western foreign policy orientation. Other members include the nationalist

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Conservative Party, led by Zviad Dzidziguri, a loyalist of former President Zviad Gamsakhurdia; the National Forum (NF), which includes former high-ranking Shevardnadze-era bureaucrats; and the Industrialists. These parties are united in their dislike of Saakashvili and the UNM and have limited political prospects individually. Discussion and debate in the coalition due to differing policy perspectives could prove popular after the UNM's strict loyalty to a single message. However, it may also reflect erratic leadership, inexperience, and chaotic government reactions to events.

The Republicans are longtime supporters of the parliamentary system and would like to amend the constitution to make the presidency a more symbolic

Georgian Dream Coalition Parties	Founded	Leadership
Georgian Dream – Democratic Georgia	April 2012	Party leader: Bidzina Ivanishvili Chairperson: Manana Kobakhidze
Republican Party	1978	Chairperson: David Usupashvili
Our Georgia - Free Democrats	2009	Chairperson: Irakli Alasania
National Forum	2006	Party Leader: Kakha Shartava
Conservative Party	2001	Chairperson: Zviad Dzidziguri
Industrialists	1999	Party Leader: Gogi Topadze Chairperson: Zurab Tkemaladze

position elected by parliament, a proposal that has traction with some GDDG members.¹ Alasania and other coalition members have argued for a “strong presidential system with strong parliamentary oversight,” which seems to indicate a penchant for the status quo. According to 2010 amendments to the constitution scheduled to come into effect after the presidential elections in October 2013, the president will have reduced powers but still retain important government functions and be directly elected.

The coalition is actively discussing whom it should put forth as a candidate for president. This has already provided fodder for news headlines. Ivanishvili stated in October 2012 and repeated in a February 2013 press conference that he will recommend Vakhtang Khmaladze, a constitutional law expert and low profile figure in the Republican Party, for the job. Alasania’s presidential ambitions got him demoted from his post as deputy prime minister. Ivanishvili said it was Alasania’s “small mistake” to discuss his ambitions with his party before taking it to the GD coalition. This seems to indicate that deviating from the coalition line will not be tolerated, Ivanishvili expects obedience from coalition members, and on this issue at least, diversity of viewpoints is just a byproduct of the new government getting its sea legs.

Whatever the members’ differences may be, the GD platform highlights the expansion of public services and economic modernization and development. It emphasizes the need to solve the country’s socio-economic problems and reform healthcare, agriculture, and the pension program. It declares adherence to the goals of European

¹ Civil.ge, “Debate on Presidential Election System Looms,” <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=25665>

Union and NATO integration and attaches importance to the geopolitical realities around Georgia, especially Russia.

Cabinet

Ivanishvili’s lieutenants include close allies and associates, ranking members of the Georgian Dream Coalition, former UNM and Shevardnadze affiliates, and previously non-political figures. Appointments of pre-Rose Revolution figures seems to indicate an interest in continuity—a contrast with Saakashvili, who broke with the past and drew young, new leaders into his ruling circle. Ivanishvili’s cabinet is still developing into a coherent entity, and its members are still assessing their relations with one another.

Cohabitation

So far cohabitation is not working. Dysfunctional government, public bickering or worse, and policymaking that seems more motivated by politics and settling political scores than addressing the country’s problems have dominated the scene during the first one hundred post-election days. While the new government is figuring out what policies to propose, the political atmosphere is divisive, tense, and uncooperative. Arrests, resignations, and intimidation have done nothing to calm the situation. US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Melia put it more diplomatically, “There is room to [develop] more common ground...between the two major political forces.”

Georgian politics has long been dominated by a winner-take-all approach to ruling and this has not changed much recently. The political scene is dominated by arrests, hostile demonstrations, allegations of media take-overs, and ongoing power struggles in local town councils. Based

Notable Cabinet Members



Irakli Alasania (left), Georgia's ambassador to the United Nations from 2006 to 2008, is defense minister. Alasania's sister-in-law and former Georgian Dream spokesperson, **Maia Panjikidze** (right), has been appointed minister of foreign affairs. She was ambassador to the Netherlands from 2007 to 2010 when she was dismissed, allegedly because of her ties to Alasania.



One of the most celebrated cabinet choices was **Tea Tsulukiani** (left) as justice minister. She obtained a graduate degree at the elite French university for civil servants, the École nationale d'administration, and has since been working as a lawyer at the European Court of Human Rights. In 2010, Tsulukiani became deputy of Alasania's OGD party. Other OGD members who served in Saakashvili's government are **Alexi Petriashvili**, state minister for Euro-Atlantic integration, and **Kote Surguladze**, state minister for diaspora issues.

Four cabinet selections are notable for their personal and professional ties to Ivanishvili. Interior Minister **Irakli Gharibashvili** (right) worked for eight years as president of the charitable wing of Ivanishvili's Cartu Group. Political novice and former Milan soccer star **Kakha Kaladze** serves as deputy prime minister and energy minister. Both are rumored to be close Ivanishvili allies. Minister of Labor, Health, and Social Affairs **Davit Sergienko** was head doctor at the hospital Ivanishvili built in his hometown of Chorvila in west-central Georgia. A former member of the board of directors of Ivanishvili's Cartu Bank, **Giorgi Kvirikashvili**, serves as minister of economy and sustainable development.



Former public defender **Sozar Subari** (left) runs the probation and penitentiary system as minister of corrections and public assistance. Subari left his position as ombudsman in 2009 and cofounded the now defunct Georgian Party with former defense minister Irakli Okruashvili. Minister of Finance **Nodar Khaduri** was a professor of economy at Tbilisi State University and a deputy minister of finance in the early Saakashvili days (2003-04). **Paata Zakareishvili**, a critic of the UNM government's policy toward Abkhazia and South

Ossetia, heads the State Ministry of Reintegration. **Giorgi Margvelashvili** is the new education minister and first deputy prime minister. Having worked for the past twelve years in higher education at the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs, he lacks a political background.

on last October's vote, the January 2013 Freedom in the World report upgraded Georgia to an "electoral democracy" but raised concerns about politically motivated prosecutions of thirty former government officials.

According to the UNM, the authorities arrested the head of Rustavi 2 television station as a way to put pressure on Georgia's independent media. Saakashvili alleges that the government pressured the country's public broadcasting director to resign and is forcibly replacing members of the board. UNM MPs were molested in three separate incidents in Kutaisi, Zugdidi, and Tbilisi where police failed to control crowds during hostile demonstrations. Opposition MPs protested by walking out twice in late 2012.

Municipal councils, never powerful politically, have been targets of protests since October. Georgian local government is structured such that each of the sixty-seven municipalities directly elects local councils (sakrebulo); those councils then elect local executives (gamebeli). More than a third of the country's gamebeli and sakrebulo chairs, all members of the UNM, have resigned since October, allegedly amidst local activist pressure, including physical and verbal assaults, threats on family members, and storming of municipality buildings.

In a recent press conference, Ivanishvili responded to these allegations, saying that they "trouble me a lot," but added that his initial plan was to "not interfere [in local government] and let the old gamebeli continue their work. However, I was shortly persuaded to take a different

course of action, because otherwise the situation would have gotten worse.”² He said he planned to introduce a local government reform bill in the upcoming months.

Prisoner amnesty is another source of contention between the government and opposition. A parliamentary committee working group for human rights was established to investigate a GD government resolution that sought to pardon 190 prisoners. Two influential human rights watchdog organizations, the Georgian Young Lawyers’ Association (GYLA) and Article 42 of the Constitution, pulled out of the group, arguing they were not given enough time to scrutinize all the cases thoroughly. After the resolution made its way through parliament, Saakashvili vetoed it, arguing that the amnesty list contained known Russian spies. He was overruled by ninety-one MPs, and 190 prisoners were released in mid-January.

The rhetoric between the two camps remains hostile, and the debate has not moved much beyond facile statements and name calling. Saakashvili has said that “more and more people in Georgia realize that our country is in danger” and that the new government suffers from “selective justice,” is “menacing,” and has “de facto given up” Georgia’s NATO aspirations. Ivanishvili called Saakashvili “a liar” and said he does not “take UNM initiatives seriously.”

The picture is not all bleak. Negotiations between two respected leaders, Parliamentary Speaker Davit Usupashvili and Minority Leader Davit Bakradze, were reportedly near an agreement on planned constitutional reform which included a statement on foreign policy orientation, increasing the required numbers for passing constitutional reform from a two-thirds majority to a three-quarters majority, and removing the provision that allows the president to form a government without parliamentary approval. Although a final agreement on all pieces was not reached, the prison amnesty for former government officials being a sticking point, the two sides did manage to pass a parliamentary resolution that reiterated the country’s commitment to a pro-Western policy course. Discussions and the resulting resolution, which passed parliament unanimously, showed bipartisan cooperation is possible.

2 100 dgiani mushaobis angarishi,” Official Ivanishvili YouTube channel, <http://youtu.be/qp5SqHsPDCM>

The government is short of the one hundred parliamentary seats needed to make constitutional amendments. However, ongoing defections from the UNM, allegedly amidst heavy pressure, may get the new government closer. A recent parliamentary vote shows ninety-four MPs voting with the new government, up from the elected eighty-five.

Domestic Policy Priorities

The UNM government implemented a series of critical modernizing reforms that largely eliminated petty corruption, reduced organized crime, expanded public services, upgraded the country’s roads and infrastructure, and improved the business climate. Less attention was paid to social welfare programs and unemployment, leaving a considerable sphere for GD to focus its attention. Indeed promise of economic reform won the GD coalition a substantial share of its vote, and the population has high hopes for decisive action to increase employment and restructure agriculture and healthcare. Some of this optimism seems to arise from the prime minister’s success in business. In contrast to the former government, the GD coalition has elevated the importance of domestic policy, and some foreign policy decisions seem to be based on this reprioritization.

Poverty is still a real problem in rural Georgia, which is characterized by subsistence agriculture. Agriculture employs over half of the population but only accounts for eight percent of Georgia’s economic output. Ivanishvili has created investment funds to revive the farm sector.³ The state’s rural development fund (GRDF) is promising to give low-interest loans to farmers and the government is looking into providing one-time vouchers for farm equipment. The popular UNM former prime minister Vano Merabishvili argues that Ivanishvili has not yet adequately specified to what extent the state budget and the prime minister’s personal fortune will be divvied up to finance social programs.

Ivanishvili is reaching out to investors and companies at such venues as the World Economic Forum to improve the

3 Nemtsova, Anna, “Georgia’s Bold Peacemaker, Prime Minister Ivanishvili,” *The Daily Beast*, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/01/26/georgia-s-bold-peacemaker-prime-minister-ivanishvili.html>

business climate and to try to keep markets afloat post-election. "We'll provide help with 75 percent of investments to anybody who has a plan to come and develop our economy by investing 25 percent," Ivanishvili told *The Daily Beast*.⁴ The new government is also wooing India's Tata Group to invest in a hydroelectric power plant. One hopes that popular expectations of Ivanishvili will not turn sour while the new government undertakes the difficult and slow-moving changes to improve Georgia's economic situation.

Regional Pieces: Russia and Immediate Neighbors

Ivanishvili has made improving the bilateral relationship between Tbilisi and Moscow a top priority. Ivanishvili has declared that the "restoration of friendship with Russia, our biggest neighbor, is necessary for our peace and economy." Tempering the previous government's rhetoric, he has said Georgia should "definitely" compete in the 2014 Sochi Olympics. He appointed former Georgian ambassador to Moscow Zurab Abashidze to the new post of special representative for relations with Russia, and formal and informal discussions with Moscow have taken place.

Ivanishvili and Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev spoke briefly at the World Economic Forum in Davos. The Chairman of the Duma's International Affairs Committee, Alexei Pushkov, and his Georgian counterpart, Tedo Japaridze, had a conversation while attending a Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe meeting in January. Pushkov characterized the discussion as "positive," noted that Japaridze brought up Georgia's interest in visa-free travel to Russia, and said they would meet again to talk further. Last March, Tbilisi lifted visa rules for Russian citizens, but the favor has not been returned.⁵

Officials are also meeting to discuss resuming sales of Georgian wine and mineral water to Russia. Gennady Onishchenko, head of the Russian Federal Service for the Oversight of Consumer Protection and Welfare, has said he hopes to see these imports resume in March 2013. Georgian food products have not been allowed into Russia

since 2006 when the Federal Consumer Protection Service deemed them poor quality.⁶ Last year the Swiss brokered a Tbilisi-Moscow agreement that enabled Georgia to acquiesce to Russia's World Trade Organization (WTO) accession in exchange for a trade normalization agreement.

While relations with Russia are proceeding slowly forward, the Azerbaijan-Georgia relationship has hit a few bumps that have made observers question Ivanishvili's thought processes. Before a December 2012 visit to Baku, Ivanishvili spoke disparagingly about the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway that will connect Azerbaijan to Turkey via Georgia and creates a trade bypass to Central Asia around Russia. "To put it mildly, construction of the Kars-Akhalkalaki railway triggers questions," Ivanishvili told Rezonansi. "I may have to ask questions about it when I visit Azerbaijan and to explain very mildly to our friendly country that at a certain point it might not be useful for us and needs to be regulated."

While in Baku, Ivanishvili retracted his statements, saying they were hasty and politically flawed, his concerns had been addressed, and the railway project would proceed apace. This raised questions about why the prime minister had spoken earlier in negative ways. Some say he misspoke, while others see it as a calculated move to create anxiety in Baku about Georgian policy and thereby gain leverage. Ivanishvili's intentions may never be known, and it remains unclear if he gained anything from Baku.

In January, Ivanishvili reiterated his interest in reopening the railway that links Russia to Armenia via the breakaway province of Abkhazia, a statement he also made while campaigning. In November, the Abkhazians said they were not interested. Following Ivanishvili's January announcement, the region's leader, Alexander Ankvab, said he was willing to "discuss it if approached," prompting rumors that the Abkhaz government was encouraged to support the project by Moscow, according to Jamestown Foundation's Vasili Rukhadze.⁷ Official contact between Tbilisi and Sokhumi is not a possibility.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ von Twickel, Nikolaus, "Georgia-Russia Relations Warming," *The Moscow Times*, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/georgia-russia-relations-warming/474542.html>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Rukhadze, Vasil, "Russia May Gain in South Caucasus, as Georgian Government Wavers on Regional Railway Projects," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=40399&cHash=9080735d327b41697f69ae89a5a16434

United States–Georgia

Meetings as part of the US-Georgia Strategic Partnership Commission continued following the election on defense and security, cultural exchange, and economic topics, indicating that both countries intended to keep their relations on the same trajectory. Foreign Minister Panjikidze visited the United States in December, such US officials as then-Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Philip Gordon and his deputy Eric Rubin, and Deputy Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Thomas Melia have visited Georgia, as well. Rubin highlighted the importance of Georgia's contribution to international security and thanked its leadership for the country's role in the NATO peacekeeping operations in Afghanistan. However, new relationships always go through a period of testing while the two sides get to know each other. The new government has heard a lot of stern warnings from Washington. Melia said that the United States has been urging officials to pay "strict attention to due process as they pursue investigations and prosecutions of possible wrongdoing that may have happened in the past."⁸ This statement comes after five US senators said in a letter to Ivanishvili that they were "deeply troubled" about the possibility that recent legal proceedings against officials from the previous administration "are politically motivated and designed to settle political scores." Ivanishvili's hoped-for visit to Washington, initially intended to take place at the end of November, was postponed. Ivanishvili claimed that the delay stemmed from "technical issues" and his busy schedule, but the decision was more likely Washington's.⁹

Secretary of State John Kerry mentioned Georgia in his first public speech, noting the importance of using US aid to support democratic institutions and that change often occurs at a slow pace. However, the United States has also proposed cutting assistance to the Caucasus by about 24 percent, though Georgia would remain the area's largest recipient and see the smallest decrease of any. According to *Eurasianet*, most of the reduction would affect programs

under the rubric of "economic growth." Remaining aid would be used to prepare the country's armed forces for NATO interoperability and to retrain weapons scientists for work on counterproliferation.

The United States can do much to support the new government, especially in the economic sphere, by assisting with capacity upgrades for Georgia's struggling agricultural and small business sectors. The United States can also continue to support Georgia's Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement negotiations with the European Union. Rubin recommitted to the US-Georgia Free Trade Agreement in late 2012 saying, "We hope to continue the enhanced economic relationship our two presidents agreed on in January, when they announced the launch of a high-level dialogue to strengthen trade ties, including the possibility of a free trade agreement." The United States should encourage the new government to prioritize the rule of law and a predictable business and regulatory environment as the best means to encourage foreign investment.¹⁰

US Ambassador to Georgia Richard Norland has worked closely with the new government and has pledged to help Georgia achieve stability and economic development. This close engagement has led some to joke that when Ivanishvili wakes up in the morning, Norland is already in the kitchen making coffee. Despite the jokes, Norland is respected for his role and engagement. He has also cautioned the opposition in verbal remarks, saying, "The opposition has a role to play in terms of responsible criticism, and I think there is some concern now the opposition's criticism is becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy and the net effect is that Georgia's image internationally is suffering. I think it's very important for both sides to make this cohabitation process successful."¹¹

With a host of challenges ahead, the United States can and should leverage its strategic partnership with Georgia to help advance the country's Euro-Atlantic aspirations, to

8 Civil.ge, "U.S. Official: Govt Pays 'Heightened Attention' to Due Process," <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=25540>

9 Menabde, Giorgi, "Is Ivanishvili's Visit to the US Postponed or Canceled?" *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=40173&cHash=3363d8c5ca7de1d9ea101aa283fbde5f

10 Rubin, Eric, "US-Georgia Relations After the Georgian Parliamentary Elections," US Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2012/199745.htm>

11 Georgian News TV, "Opposition has a role to play in terms of responsible criticism," <http://www.georgianews.ge/politics/22098-opposition-has-a-role-to-play-in-terms-of-responsible-criticism-richard-norland.html>

consolidate democratic institutions and practices, especially rule of law reforms, to continue defense cooperation, and to support an inclusive economic development strategy.

Conclusion

Georgia is at a sensitive and strategic point in its development. Following the landmark October elections, the government has an opportunity to build on the country's first peaceful and constitutional transfer of power. With a strong opposition in parliament and an ambitious new government, there is hope that the democratic process will continue to move forward. However, arrests, local power grabs, and difficult rhetoric between the sides indicate nothing will be easy. Georgia has seen this pattern before, when a government elected to save the country from the corruption and repression of its predecessor itself became seen as corrupt, oppressive, or non-responsive. As Charles Fairbanks, senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, and Alexi Gugushvili, researcher at the European University Institute, observed, "The act of liberation from a self-defeating preoccupation with punishment will require a rethinking of recent Georgian history. Saakashvili never acknowledged Shevardnadze's contribution to his own accomplishments.... Saakashvili and the National Movement [need] a place in Georgian history."¹²

The GD Coalition promises to continue previous governments' work on Euro-Atlantic integration, relations with the West, and judicial reform. It seems to want to try a new path in areas such as economic and social policy and ties with Russia. It is attempting to walk the difficult but ultimately productive path of improving relations between Tbilisi and Moscow, while continuing its close relations with the European Union and United States. If it succeeds, it will go far to being a light in the region and a powerful stabilizing force.

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¹² Fairbanks, Charles H. Jr. and Gugushvili, Alexi, "A New Chance for Georgian Democracy," *Journal of Democracy*, <http://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/Fairbanks-24-1.pdf>

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