

Saakashvili: A Georgian Political Headache

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Since his return to his homeland, the former Georgian President has sucked the air out of the national political arena, especially after he started a hunger strike immediately upon his arrest for his conviction in absentia of abuses of power. Events in the country since that moment reveal much of the current state of the Georgian politics: from hyper-personalization to hyper-polarization, and from democratic dynamics to authoritarian temptation.

Mikheil Saakashvili's return to his homeland at the end of September of this year, after eight years in exile, is not only a headache for the current Georgian government, but also one for his own party, the United National Movement (UNM), and the entirety of the opposition. Beyond that, his return raises questions about the hyper-personalization of politics in the young Georgian Republic, which is experiencing real democratic progress since two decades.

On October 1st, Georgian police arrested the former President Saakashvili, aged 54, just a few days after he returned by way of the Black Sea from exile in Ukraine. When his party lost the parliamentary elections in 2012, Saakashvili, the 3rd President of Georgia since the small country's independence in 1991, could no longer expect nomination for a third presidential term, and, as a result, he decided to flee as he feared, not without justification, imminent arrest. Indeed, his new worst enemy, the oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, had promised to have him prosecuted on criminal grounds that were partly real (for pardoning former Interior Ministry officials who were serving time for their role in a high-profile murder case and for organizing an attack on an opposition MP), but obviously politically motivated. During his eight years

outside the country and despite his activity as a Ukrainian politician, Mr. Saakashvili never left the Georgian politics, and remained for years the UNM's chairman.

On October 1st at dawn, Saakashvili began posting videos from the resort city of Batumi on social media. His videos proved that he had returned to Georgia, but with them, he ultimately intended to provoke the Ivanishvili government. He succeeded. The political fallout started almost immediately. Until late in the afternoon, Irakli Kobakhidze, the Chairman of the ruling party *Kartuli Otsneba* (Georgian Dream, GD), had denied that the former President was on Georgian territory. But just a couple hours later, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili announced that Mr. Saakashvili had been arrested in a flat in a suburb of Tbilisi. Since then, the main, if not only, topic discussed in the Georgian politics is the fate of Misha, the nickname of Mikheil.

Mr. Saakashvili immediately garnered headlines in the fight with the government by starting a hunger strike, asserting that he is a "political prisoner." On the one hand, Mr. Ivanishvili's party, which had sought to jail Saakashvili since 2012, tried to show that it would stick to its promise. The core of the GD political message to the Georgian people has been less about its program and deeds than about demonizing Saakashvili and the UNM. The party's platform has been so centered around Saakashvili that recently, a taxi driver in Tbilisi astutely remarked to us: "GD can't live without Saakashvili. GD has delivered so little in the nine years they've been in power that they have nothing else to say to the voters other than that Misha is a monster," he told us. After his arrest, the Ivanishvili government obstinately refused to transfer him to a public medical facility. All the while a growing number of groups, from Saakashvili's supporters to Western diplomats and politicians, increasingly requested his transfer because his health was deteriorating.

On the other hand, Saakashvili, who was visited by more than

150 persons in jail over the course of six weeks, must be quite happy with the show he created around his fate. Doctors publicly announced that his health was worsening due to the hunger strike (which was undoubtedly true: he collapsed on November 18th in his cell). Western politicians warned the Georgian government of consequences should something happen to him, and Georgian opposition MPs began their own hunger strikes. Elena Khoshtaria, the leader of the *Droa* political movement, explained to us that she committed to a hunger strike “less in support of Saakashvili than to alert observers to the non-democratic and dangerous path along which Ivanishvili’s policy is leading.” Finally, on November 19th, the Georgian Minister of Justice offered Mr. Saakashvili to be transferred to a military hospital, in Gori, and he accepted.

Mr. Saakashvili returned to Georgia knowing that he would be arrested, and that he was risking several years in prison. In this regard, his decision was brave. He aimed to defibrillate Georgian society and the electorate, an aim which we can observe in the timing of his return. The local elections that followed one day after his return were seen by most of the country’s opposition leaders and political observers as the last chance to prevent Ivanishvili from establishing an authoritarian regime. It seems that his gambit worked, at least in the short run. His return boosted by a few points both the pro and the anti “Misha” electorates. In almost all the twenty most important cities of Georgia, the ruling party was forced to accept a runoff.

But Mr. Saakashvili’s decision to return seems to have been as much as personally motivated as it was politically: he also sought to retain his position in the Georgian political landscape. Some local media, those from the opposition even, reported that over the course of his eight-year exile, he promised to return no less than seventeen times. Just before his actual return, the anticipated announcement of yet another promise to return had aroused mockeries. Moreover, Mr.

Saakashvili paid attention to and spoke of his own inspiration from the courageous return to Russia of Alexey Navalny, last January, and from the behavior of Nika Melia, his successor as UNM chairman, who refused release from his imprisonment from February to May of this year, despite the great insistence of Georgia's Western partners. Melia proved to be principled: he refused for weeks to leave prison because he considered himself a political prisoner and that "accepting release from prison was tantamount to acknowledgement that I was guilty", he told us after being released in May.

With his return, Saakashvili has monopolized the Georgian opposition's message, placing his personal fate at the very center of the Georgian politics. To that point, the runoff for the municipal elections, which occurred on October 31st, did not generate any opposition-organized rallies to protest the results, despite the ruling party's misuse of administrative resources and other malpractices, which were detailed in a statement by the EU ambassador and various European heads of mission to Georgia. Instead, a week later, the UNM organized a large rally in support of Mr. Saakashvili in front of the Rustavi prison where he was jailed at that moment. No other political party joined.

According to some of our sources, despite his seeming success, the former President was quite unhappy with his own party during his imprisonment. "He wants UNM to do more, to be more radical. He thinks that Melia is not doing everything he could to get him released from jail," says an activist from his party. "He is angry at everyone as I see it. He is even showing that he is annoyed by Elene Khoshtaria's hunger strike," says a former close collaborator of Mr. Saakashvili. The former President might also have overestimated the support he has in the country. The few surveys that have been conducted and the result of the last elections (2018 presidential, 2020 parliamentary, and 2021 local) tend to show that while Georgian voters are more and more fed up with GD,

that has not resulted in additional support of UNM and Mr. Saakashvili.

In total, with the genuine risks he has taken for the sake of the country and for his personal ambitions, Mr. Saakashvili has once again contributed to the personalization of the Georgian political landscape. He won in this respect. But what about Georgia? Ideally, the democratic dynamics that have animated the Caucasian republic for the last two-three decades would entail more genuine political debates on the content and more institutionalization of the governance. But while Georgian voters have shown at each election that they will use the polls to tell the government that they are unhappy with its politics and the poor results it has achieved, they seem not yet ready to go to the street en masse to defend their vote.

This complacency is partly due to the political atmosphere that Mr. Ivanishvili and GD have created in the country. But the complacency comes as well from the split within the opposition, which is not able today to unite around one program or one person. It is as if the opposition is waiting for a new strong leader, like in 2003 when Saakashvili managed to drag behind him most of the real political forces of the country. Saakashvili too seems to dream that he can do that again, and, accordingly, over the last decade, he has done no work to put others from the UNM's ranks in that position.

Opposition leaders and activists are divided on the issue. But most of them believe that the Georgian people still desire strong leaders; only strong leaders and personalized politics have the power to interest the Georgian people in politics. Opposition thinkers consider this argument more relevant now. This is because the question is now how to make political change possible in Georgia, when the Ivanishvili government has captured more and more state institutions and increasingly resorts to non-democratic methods to retain power.

