

Georgia 'hungry' for a political alternative

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Europe would be wise to watch closely as Georgian political contender comes under attack, argues James Wilson



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In June, mass protests took place across Georgia, culminating in police violence against peaceful marchers.

Soon afterwards, Mamuka Khazaradze, the founder of TBC, Georgia's leading financial institution, announced a new political movement. Until this year, Khazaradze had no political ambitions.

But police brutality had been a "red line" for Khazaradze, who believed that a new Georgian political organisation was needed to build a Western-style democracy and mend the widening political rifts in the country.

International concerns are growing that Khazaradze himself is now becoming a political target.

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One commentator has drawn parallels with Russia and suggested that Bidzina Ivanishvili, the chairman of the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party, is “doing a Khodorkovsky”, a reference to President Putin’s imprisonment of the then powerful businessman and Putin critic, Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

Khazaradze was content working as a banker and developer – and as an entrepreneur, championing the development of Anaklia, a deep-water port.

Now, he says, a move into politics is essential: “Events in our country are taking on alarming forms, and we are facing deliberate attempts to sow discord and divisiveness in our society.”

“June 20 was a red line ... If you are a citizen of this country, if your heart beats for it, you can’t just stand and watch all this from a distance.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, shortly after his political announcement, prosecutors brought fraud charges against him.

Concerns that the case is politically motivated have been fuelled by the fact that an 11-year old transaction had to be exhumed to try and make a case against Khazaradze.

It is possible that the reason Khazaradze’s foray into politics is causing so much alarm within the ruling establishment is that the new ‘En Marche’ style political movement he intends to launch has a serious chance of gaining popular appeal.

It is viewed as a potentially serious rival to the main political parties, GD and the United National Movement (NDM).

Until now, GD leader Bidzina Ivanishvili, Georgia’s richest man, has had the financial clout needed to feel secure in a country where money talks in politics.

The entry into politics of a leading business figure such as Khazaradze seems to have caused unease inside GD.

“June 20 was a red line ... If you are a citizen of this country, if your heart beats for it, you can’t just stand and watch all this from a distance” **Mamuka Khazaradze**

There is a sense in Georgia that the time is right for an ‘En Marche’ type movement, with voters hungry for an alternative.

In April, a survey showed just 21 percent of Georgians support GD and 15 percent support UNM,

moreover 37 percent of Georgians said they felt no connection to any political party, leaving quite a gap for a newcomer to capitalise on.

Khazaradze's backing of the Anaklia port project is another likely reason his political move is being resisted.

He has been a key player in the moves to develop Anaklia, which, if it happens will be a transformational transit hub between Asia and Europe.

That prospect is likely to irritate Georgia's Russian neighbours who will see it as a threat to their influence.

It seems Khazaradze's involvement in the port project has made Ivanishvili feel threatened.

The politically motivated attack on Khazaradze has been noted by the international investor community.

The Chairman of Georgia's International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) has made clear what he feels is behind the charges: "The aim of the Prosecutor General in seizing Mr. Khazaradze's accounts in Georgia and [attempting to do the same] in the UK, is to cripple them financially so they would fail to complete the construction of the Port of Anaklia, but more importantly to stop them from creating their public movement that could seriously jeopardise Mr. Ivanishvili's unlawful control over the state institutions."

Europe has watched closely as Georgia struggles with its direction.

There have been many twists and turns since the early promise of the Rose Revolution, as Georgia moves from its Soviet past to a much anticipated and long-awaited democratic future.

Located at the crossroads of east and west, Georgia holds a vital position and can play an important role in world trade.

Prosecution of political opposition figures does not go unnoticed by the international community.

The UK, France and the US have all voiced concerns about this case.

State actions that imperil political freedoms and undermine international investment cannot be compatible with a democratic Georgia. It is up to Georgia to decide what kind of country it wants to be.

About the author

James Wilson is the Director of the International Foundation for Better Governance
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