

The new government in Georgia

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On 4 July, the Georgian Parliament, dominated by the president's United National Movement party, passed a vote of confidence in the new cabinet under the former head of the Interior Ministry, Vano Merabishvili. Most of the ministers have retained their positions; changes were only made in a few departments, including the key posts of defence and the interior. The new government's programme provides for massive social spending (about US\$12 billion over the next four years) to fight unemployment, increase pensions, and spend on agriculture, health care and education. Merabishvili himself – the *de facto* creator of the new Ministry of the Interior after the 'Rose Revolution' of 2003, and its uninterrupted head since then – is a close associate of Mikhail Saakashvili, and the second most influential figure in the government camp. The new prime minister has a reputation as an excellent organiser, and the Interior Ministry is clearly the Georgian state's most efficient and most powerful institution. At the same time, however, he is not a popular politician; he has been criticised repeatedly for the forceful and at times violent actions of the ministry's subordinate structures, including the breakup of opposition rallies in 2007 and 2011, and the forcible takeover of the opposition television station Imedi in 2007.

Commentary

- The change of government and its ambitious social programme should be viewed in the context of the planned parliamentary elections in October, the first elections to the central government since the war of 2008; in the common perception, these will be a key test of the country's stability, as well as of the leadership's commitment to democratic standards. Merabishvili's appointment as prime minister is intended to ensure that the state apparatus runs smoothly during a period of electoral trial which will be sensitive and, because of the likelihood of mass post-election protests, potentially turbulent. At the same time the new government's obviously 'pre-election' and rather unrealistic social programme (the predicted expenditures are estimated at around US\$12 billion, while Georgia's annual budget is now running at just over US\$4 billion) is meant to distract voters from the opposition; under the oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili it has been employing populist social rhetoric, and finding fertile ground among the people, due to years of government neglect of social issues.

- Merabishvili's appointment as Prime Minister, a position which has hitherto been held almost exclusively by technocrats with little participation in the decision-making process, may also provide a clue regarding the succession as President of Georgia to Saakashvili,

whose second and final term ends next year. When a constitutional amendment was introduced in late 2010 limiting the president's prerogatives in favour of the prime minister, there was speculation that Saakashvili could take that post after 2013. This scenario now seems unlikely, because the move was strongly criticised by Georgia's Western partners, and would threaten a major crisis in Tbilisi's relations with the EU and the US. Merabishvili's appointment as Prime Minister could mean that he will maintain his position after the election (as a victory for the ruling camp seems very likely), and after the constitutional amendments come into force in 2013, he will become the head of the executive branch of government. From Saakashvili's perspective, and his position on the Georgian political scene after he leaves the post of president, such a scenario appears relatively secure. The new prime minister is a politician with a strong, independent position in the structures of power; and according to popular opinion he holds sensitive information about many of the Georgian elite. At the same time however Merabishvili has remained loyal to Saakashvili and has not pursued any independent political ambitions; furthermore, his lack of charisma and low public popularity will make him dependent upon his political base – the United National Movement party, in which Saakashvili will retain significant influence even after leaving the presidency .