

The political crisis in Georgia: which way next?

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On 4 November, the Prime Minister of Georgia Irakli Garibashvili sacked the defence minister Irakli Alasania. The foreign minister Maya Panjikidze and the minister for integration with the EU and NATO Aleksi Petriashvili also left their posts. Alasania's party, the Free Democrats (FD), have left the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) coalition. The sequence of events that led to the minister's resignation began on 28 October with the arrest of several high-ranking Defence Ministry officials on suspicion of corruption. Alasania declared his confidence in his colleagues, calling the arrests political and a blow to Georgia's Euro-Atlantic ambitions, and – after his resignation – called for the consolidation of all the pro-Western forces in the country. The country's President Giorgi Margvelashvili expressed his indirect support for the former minister.

Alasania and the other outgoing ministers were responsible for maintaining the foreign policy of Georgian integration into the EU and NATO after the change of government in 2012, and their departure calls Tbilisi's future political course into question. Premier Garibashvili, as well as the billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, who maintains crucial influence on political life, are not so far known to be decided supporters of integration with the West. The exit of the Free Democrats' ten MPs from the coalition deprives GD of a secure majority in parliament (the coalition currently holds 73 out of 150 seats). This may lead to a deep reshuffle on the Georgian political scene, including overdue parliamentary elections. In this situation, geopolitical orientation is becoming the primary criterion for the division of the political scene.

The foreign policy of Georgian Dream

When GD, led by the Russian oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, came to power, it was not certain what Tbilisi's future policy would be like. The 'new opening' in relations with Russia has added to the concern that Georgia's policy could be reoriented, or at least, that the pro-Western enthusiasm seen in Tbilisi since the 'Rose Revolution' in 2003 might cool.

These concerns have not so far been justified over the two years of the GD-led coalition's rule. Georgia has finalised the processes initiated by the previous government in relations with the EU (the Association Agreement was signed and ratified, and progress has been made on visa dialogue). It has also continued its efforts to maintain close relations with the USA and NATO.

The ministers who are leaving the government were the promoters and guarantors of this policy. The fact that this group had been fully in charge of defence and foreign policy,

regardless of its weak political base (ten seats in parliament), made the GD-led government reliable to Western partners. Prime Ministers Ivanishvili and Garibashvili (who had been the former's aide for many years) were focused on domestic affairs, including the controversial campaign of legal retaliation against the representatives of the former government elite, which due to its perceived political character have posed a serious problem in Georgian-Western relations.

In the persons of Alasania, Panjikidze and Petriashvili the West has lost its crucial partners in Tbilisi. This boosts uncertainty in regard to Georgia's future foreign policy, especially given the increasingly difficult geopolitical situation linked to the Russian aggression towards Ukraine, Armenia's *de facto* loss of sovereignty, Moscow's pressure on Azerbaijan and the possible incorporation of Abkhazia. It seems unlikely that Georgia's policy could be totally reoriented towards Russia. However, it appears there is a real risk that Tbilisi's determination to become integrated with the West will lessen, and that it will begin to drift toward a 'multi-vector' policy.

The crumbling foundations of the pro-Western orientation

Irakli Alasania is a popular, independent and ambitious politician (albeit not really electorally successful as yet). Therefore, the immediate reason behind his sacking was not necessarily any intention by Bidzina Ivanishvili and Prime Minister Garibashvili to change the country's geopolitical orientation, but rather a desire to neutralise a potential rival.

Whatever the reasons, Alasania's departure from the government fits within the process of a gradual weakening of the socio-political foundations of Georgia's pro-Western policy. This is an effect of the increasingly aggressive policy Russia has adopted towards former Soviet republics, the ever greater disillusionment of the public due to the lack of tangible benefits of the pro-Western policy (for example, support for Georgia's accession to the Eurasian Union rose from 11% in autumn 2013 to 20% in summer 2014), the weakening political position of the pro-Western forces, and the growing influence of pro-Russian circles (conservative, nationalist, etc.).

The lack of transparency in the decision-making process poses an additional problem. Since Bidzina Ivanishvili stepped down as Prime Minister last November and was replaced by Irakli Garibashvili, the real decision-making centre has lain outside the formalised state administration and political structures. In all likelihood, the oligarch has the final word on the key issues. This makes the Georgian government's policy unpredictable, especially given the fact that Ivanishvili's views and political agenda, and above all his attitude towards the West and Russia, have been consistently difficult to figure out.

Alasania's dismissal is likely to end the stage of political co-operation between Ivanishvili and the pro-Western section of the Georgian Dream coalition (until recently it had mainly been held together by their shared dislike of Mikheil Saakashvili), and could lead to a new divide being formed in Georgian politics. This may result in the consolidation of all the pro-Western forces, including some of Mikheil Saakashvili's former collaborators, Alasania's camp and probably also President Margvelashvili's camp, and the Republican Party, which is also a member of the GD coalition (although this consolidation will be hampered by old personal and political animosities). However, intensified activity by the *de facto* anti-Western circles, and even their possible alliance with Ivanishvili and his colleagues, seems a much

more likely scenario. Consequently, even though Georgia has thus far been West-oriented in political and civilisational terms, it appears that its future direction is not yet preordained.