

Saakashvili and The Georgian Opposition. The State of Play

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On 31 January, news reports started circulating that Mikheil Saakashvili's health had rapidly deteriorated, and the former Georgian president had been taken to an intensive care unit. The news was debunked by the end of the day, but it overshadowed reports that the Saakashvili-founded United National Movement (UNM) had a new leader, elected by the party's members in an online vote on 28-29 January. This further proves that Saakashvili – who retired from active Georgian politics a decade ago and has been in prison for more than a year – nevertheless remains one of the central figures on the country's political scene, and remains a point of reference for both the opposition and the authorities. Meanwhile the state of his health and the conditions under which he is serving his sentence are attracting widespread interest around the world. If he dies, this would lead to mass protests in Georgia whose outcome would be difficult to predict. Such a situation would make it very difficult, if not impossible, for the country to be granted EU candidate status.

The UNM remains the most important political force in the Georgian opposition, but according to polls it can currently only count on at most 15% of the vote. Its new chairman, Levan Khabeishvili, has stated that Saakashvili's release is his main goal. However, he also announced the strengthening of party structures, devoting more attention to this than to the party's electoral offer. These reforms are expected to help the party win the next elections, which are scheduled for autumn next year. At the same time, it cannot be ruled out that a split will occur in the UNM: Khabeishvili's first moves were criticised by politicians close to the party's former leader. In such a situation, the emergence of a 'third force' is likely, and demand for it is growing. For more than a decade, the political scene has been shaped by the duopoly of the UNM and the ruling Georgian Dream (GD), with the latter dominating the state's institutions and calling Tbilisi's pro-Western course into question: the EU and the US have long drawn attention to Georgia's gradual drift away from democratic standards.

Shadow boxing

Mikheil Saakashvili retired from active Georgian politics in autumn 2013, and shortly before the formal end of his second presidential term he left the country. In the following years he was mainly based in Ukraine; among other things, he led the administration of the Odesa region, and since May 2020, the National Reform Council by appointment of President Volodymyr Zelensky. At the turn of October 2021, on the eve of local elections in Georgia, he returned there across illegally, was detained, taken into custody and later imprisoned (see '[Georgia: elections in the shadow of Saakashvili's return](#)'). This was the consequence of two final judgements which had previously been brought against him, sentencing him to several years' imprisonment: two further cases were then brought against him, in addition to the

charge of illegally crossing the state border. Saakashvili's trials were politically motivated, while the sentences (which were relatively steep) were probably intended to deter him from returning.

While in exile and later in prison, the former president became – and still is – a point of reference for both Georgia's opposition (he formally led the UNM until spring 2019) and its government. The state propaganda demonised him, holding him responsible for Tbilisi's deteriorating relations with the West, including the growing criticism of Georgia by the EU and the US. After the Russian aggression against Ukraine, Saakashvili's ties with that country became one of the reasons for Tbilisi's ambivalent attitude toward Kyiv (see *'Having your cake and eating it. Georgia, the war in Ukraine and integration with the West'*). Georgian citizens from Saakashvili's team are still active in Ukraine, and the Georgian Legion – an armed formation of up to about a thousand fighters led by Mamuka Mamulashvili, whose sister Nona is a parliamentary deputy in Georgia for the UNM – is also fighting there. It is reasonable to assume that Ukraine's success in the war with Russia would radically strengthen the Georgian opposition and catalyse the growth of pro-Ukrainian sympathies among the public there. Georgia's president Salome Zurbishvili (who was also the foreign minister during the first period of Saakashvili's rule) won the election thanks to the support of GD, and has consistently rejected calls to pardon the politician. This lends credence to the thesis that one important reason for the repression against Saakashvili is the personal, but also 'political' dislike that GD's founder, the billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, is said to have for him. He too is now no longer formally in office, but in fact he still has a decisive voice in key Georgian political issues, including political appointments.

Since he has been in solitary confinement, Saakashvili went on hunger strikes twice, and has spent most of his time in the hospital. There are many indications that the politician's health really is deteriorating, although it is difficult to say whether his life is in immediate danger. It is reasonable to believe that if this were the case, the authorities would agree to suspend his sentence and release him to go abroad for medical treatment, something his defence has been demanding for weeks. All told, his death in prison would spark mass protests and demonstrations, regardless of the controversy he stirs up among his sizable negative electorate (according to a September 2022 survey by the International Republican Institute, 33% of respondents held a positive opinion of him, and 58% a negative one). Saakashvili has announced that he will not return to Georgian politics. In his statements, which he publishes through his lawyers, he refers to himself as 'Putin's prisoner': according to this narrative, his arrival in Georgia, detention and imprisonment were all part of a plot planned by the Kremlin. This thesis is impossible to prove, but it highlights an important problem – the 'totalitarianism' of Georgian Dream's rule, which in practice has 'walled off' the state from democratic accountability. On the one hand, formal democratic procedures are respected, but on the other, GD has full control of the state apparatus; there are justifiable accusations that it controls the judicial system, has informal control of the economy (including deepening ties with Russia) and domination of the media. These matters are under constant criticism from the opposition, Georgian civil society and the West.

In search of a 'third force'

After Saakashvili formally stepped down as chairman of the UNM, which was related both to the difficulties of leading the party from exile and the burden which the former president

constituted for it, it was first led by Grigol Vashadze and then by Nika Melia. The party lost power in October 2012, and since then GD has won parliamentary and local elections three times, and politicians supported by the party have twice won presidential elections. Nevertheless, it remains the most important opposition force, regardless of its factionalism and splits, including the formation of the European Georgia party in early 2017 as one of its offshoots. According to the International Republican Institute's research cited above, 12% of respondents were willing to vote for the UNM as their first-choice party, and 3% as their second choice; the respective figures for GD were 25% and 3% (the third-ranked party received a total of 7% and the fourth-ranked party 5%). At the same time, up to 33% of respondents said they would not vote for the UNM under any circumstances (in the case of the GD the figure was 30%). These results do not augur a victory for the UNM in the elections. The longer Georgian Dream remains in power, the more the number of its 'clients' who owe it their jobs and careers grows, and that in turn makes further victories for the party possible.

The new chairman of the UNM, the 35-year-old parliamentarian and relatively low-ranking activist Levan Khabeishvili, has announced that his priority will first and foremost be 'grassroots work' and the structural strengthening of the party. To this end, its youth wing is to be reformed (the setting up of a political school has been announced) and the women's wing strengthened. A greater role in the party is to be played by local branches, a political council, an advisory body and expatriate activists. Khabeishvili has devoted more space to these issues than to the party's political programme, which so far seems unchanged: liberal reforms in the country and a course toward the West and European integration. All this is intended to lead to electoral success in 2024. However, Khabeishvili has said that the release of Saakashvili is his most important goal, and he has announced the establishment of a working group to bring this about. In one of his first statements after being elected, the new chairman declared that he was ready to dismiss UNM parliamentarians and local government officials, and (in what should be considered a PR provocation) to transfer ownership of the party's headquarters to Bidzina Ivanishvili. This declaration surprised prominent party activists from the former leader's entourage, who only learned about it from the media. This circumstance – along with Nika Melia's suggestions that Vano Merabishvili, a former prime minister and one of Saakashvili's closest associates, was behind Khabeishvili's success – points to internal friction within the party, which could lead to a split.

It is possible that any formation that emerges as a result of a possible split in the UNM could position itself as a 'third force' to break up the GD/UNM duopoly. So far, attempts to create such a formation have been unsuccessful, but polls indicate that there is growing demand for it. In the above-mentioned International Republican Institute survey, 72% of respondents expect new formations to emerge at the next elections, while only 22% are satisfied with the current political scene (in June 2021 the results were 61% and 31% respectively). On the other hand, when asked whether at least one party 'fully represents your interests', 24% of respondents answered 'yes', and 42% said 'no' (in June 2021 the figures were 30% and 31% respectively). Undoubtedly, however, the process of organising a new political force would take a long time, and would be limited by the systemic dominance wielded by GD.

Summary

In a broader context, the 'Saakashvili affair' is a litmus test of the intentions of the government in Tbilisi, and of the relationship between the ruling camp and the opposition in Georgia itself. Regardless of what the ruling group says – and, on the other hand, the emotional and sometimes eccentric statements made by the former president and the charges brought against him – the fact that he is currently being held in prison (and at risk of serious illness or death) is objective confirmation of Tbilisi's drift toward Moscow. If he dies in prison, that will trigger protests whose scale and consequences are difficult to predict. Saakashvili's case is another item on the list of Western accusations that Tbilisi has deviated from democratic principles and is building up a new authoritarianism in Georgia.