

# **GEORGIAN POLITICS AND THE LACK OF FREEDOM: FROM ONE COSMETIC CHANGE TO THE NEXT**

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## **BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Georgia, which suffered from historical internal conflicts, was captured by Russia between 1801 and 1864 which did not improve the domestic situation. It became a part of the Russian Empire, ruled by the Russian administration with its troops permanently deployed.

This period was followed by the annexation of Georgia by the Russian Empire, which led to several revolts (in 1841, 1857 and later). The revolts were suppressed by the Russian Army and the image of Russians as occupiers and oppressors became deeply rooted into the Georgian psyche, which led to the development of nationalism in Georgia.

During the Russian Civil War, Georgia obtained its independence in 1918. However, it was short-lived: already by 1921 the Bolsheviks had re-conquered Georgia. The country became a part of the Soviet Union under the full control of Moscow.

The Soviet period of Georgian history contains the same characteristics as the histories of other former Soviet republics, i.e. democracy and human liberties were suppressed, dissidents were harassed by the security agencies, imprisoned or killed, and the regime ruled with an iron fist. Historically, this means that Georgia never enjoyed democracy.

The last page of Soviet rule in Georgia was a tragedy which occurred on April 9,

1989, when the Soviet troops dispersed a peaceful demonstration of Georgians killing 20 persons, mainly girls and old women, and wounding and poisoning about 4,000 with gas.

## **MODERN PERIOD**

On December 26, 1991, the Soviet Union fell apart and Georgia became an independent state. The first president of Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, declared “Georgia for Georgians” as a major facet of his internal policy. He began to consolidate power and centralize Georgian rule, including the autonomous territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

In response to the abolition of their autonomous status on July 23, 1992, the Abkhazian government effectively declared independence. The Georgian government dispatched 3,000 troops to the region, ostensibly to restore order, but heavy fighting between Georgian forces and Abkhazian separatists broke out in and around Sukhumi. The Abkhazian authorities rejected the government's explanation, claiming that it was merely a pretext for an invasion. After about a week's fighting and many casualties on both sides, Georgian government forces managed to take control of most of Abkhazia and closed down the regional parliament.

The Abkhazians' military defeat was met with a hostile response by the self-styled Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus, an umbrella group uniting a number of pro-Russian movements in the North Caucasus, Russia (Cossacks, Ossetians and others). Hundreds of volunteer paramilitaries from Russia joined forces with the Abkhazian separatists to fight the Georgian government forces. In September 1992, the Abkhazians and Russian paramilitaries mounted a major offensive after breaking a cease-fire, which drove the

Georgian forces out of large swathes of the republic. The result of the Georgian-Abkhazian war was a sharp increase in Georgian nationalism.

In 1992, President Gamsakhurdia was replaced by the old Soviet functionary, and former head of the Georgian KGB, Eduard Shevardnadze. President Shevardnadze's government accused Russia of giving covert military support to the rebels with the aim of “detaching its native territory from Georgia and the Georgia-Russian frontier land” thus inflaming more nationalism in the country. The year ended with the rebels in control of much of Abkhazia west of Sukhumi. Significant ethnic cleansing occurred on both sides, with Abkhazians displaced from Georgian-held territory and vice-versa; some 3,000 people were reported to have been killed in this first phase of the war.<sup>1</sup>

Another explosion took place in the north of Georgia. South Ossetia had declared themselves part of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic in 1989, much to the ire of Georgia, developing a nationalist movement under Zviad Gamsakhurdia.

## MAP OF GEORGIA<sup>2</sup>



<sup>1</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abkhazia>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/graphics/maps/large/gg-map.gif>

South Ossetia has been de facto independent of Georgia since the war ended in 1991, but the conflict already had a few violent escalations. Georgians strongly believe, and not without reason, that Russia stands behind the Abkhazian and Ossetian separatists.

Under President Shevardnadze, Georgia, which was one of the most corrupt areas under the Soviets, sank to new lows in political and economic corruption. This process went hand in hand with the concentration of power in the hands of Shevardnadze, turning his presidency into a dictatorship with the typical features of an authoritarian regime.

President Shevardnadze used political and economic corruption to serve his regime and managed to integrate it into the political culture of Georgia. As any dictator, Shevardnadze controlled the state apparatus using it as his own tool of power to elevate or punish people at will. A person who would stand up this policy would be “neutralized” without delay.

In November 2003, the so-called Rose Revolution took place. It washed away President Shevardnadze and his government and installed Mikheil Saakashvili, a new young leader of Georgia, who promised the Georgian people and the West that a new regime would reign in Georgia. High expectations gave citizens enthusiasm and hope.

However, within a comparatively short period of time it became clear that the new regime suspiciously resembled the previous one. Shevardnadze’s team, which occupied the highest echelon of power, was replaced by new faces, a younger generation of Saakashvili’s colleagues, but their politics was no different. The new power and its president ruled Georgia with a high degree of political and economic corruption based on authoritarianism and nationalism.

Democracy in Georgia did not become a reality under Saakashvili. The continuing

situation of misinformation in the press illustrated it vividly. Ex-President Eduard Shevardnadze had tremendous experience of effectively planting misinformation by being the chief of the KGB in Georgia for many years. The new president, Mikheil Saakashvili, did not skip a beat, and continued in the same vein.

## **CORRUPTION AND OPPRESSION BY PRESIDENT SAAKASHVILI'S REGIME**

The corruption under President Saakashvili had the same rampant character as under President Shevardnadze. The government concentrated power in its hands and suppressed freedoms and liberties by playing a nationalistic card.

Many citizens became unhappy with this policy. The tolerance of the Georgian population towards the actions of the government rapidly exhausted and citizens erupted with peaceful protests in the beginning of November, 2007. Article 19: the Global Campaign for Free Expression pointed out its concern:

On November 2, 2007, thousands of protestors gathered outside the Georgian Parliament calling for early parliamentary elections and demanding the resignation of President Mikheil Saakashvili, amid accusations of authoritarianism and corruption. The government rejected the demonstrators' demand for early elections and yesterday broke up protests in Tbilisi, using batons, tear gas and rubber bullets against unarmed demonstrators. As a result of violent clashes with the police, 500 people have sought medical treatment; among the injured was Georgia's Public Defender (Human Rights Ombudsman) Sozar Subari. The violence was followed by President

Saakashvili's declaration of a 15-day state of emergency, entailing bans on all kind of protests, strikes and demonstrations and prohibiting all television and radio broadcasting, with the exception of Georgia's public broadcaster. The media that have been silenced include the opposition outlets Imedi and Kavkasia, and international news channels such as CNN, BBC and Euronews.

Moreover, on the evening of November 7, the offices of Imedi TV were stormed by riot police, who demanded the immediate suspension of broadcasting. Particularly worrying is the brutality of this attack. According to our information, masked and armed police officers pointed their guns at employees and destroyed equipment. This is despite Imedi's assurances that no one was going to resist. The station stopped all broadcasting by the evening of November 7. Broadcasts of the Imedi radio station were also suspended and the website made inaccessible. Riot police used tear gas to disperse several dozen people outside the station's premises, who had gathered to support the channel. Shortly after another opposition television station, Kavkasia, a relatively small station broadcasting serving only Tbilisi, went off the air. During the demonstrations, Imedi carried extensive coverage of the opposition demonstrations and statements by opposition leaders. It was strongly criticized by high-level public officials for inciting protesters.

Georgia has ratified the European Convention on Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which, among others, protect the right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. Freedom of expression constitutes one of the essential foundations of a democratic society

and imposes on governments the duty to guarantee the expression of pluralistic political ideas and unhindered access to views and sources of information which challenge the status quo. This guarantee is applicable not only to information or ideas that are favorably received, but also to those that offend, shock or disturb the State or any sector of the population. Moreover, it is exactly at times of political instability that people have a need for accurate and comprehensive information from a variety of sources.<sup>3</sup>

The opposition accused President Saakashvili of running a centralized government intolerant of dissent and undermined by high-level corruption and abuse by police and prosecutors. Opposition leaders appeared undeterred after the clashes. They labeled the action a political crackdown and mass punishment, and called for Georgians to gather in renewed protests.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the violence by the government forces which took place in Tbilisi in November 2007 was unheard of even under President Shevardnadze.

Many praised Saakashvili for the reforms, but the reforms in question mainly benefited the tiny urban middle classes, meaning most people, especially in rural regions, had yet to see improvements to their standard of life. Mike Sidwell reports:

The opposition has accused Saakashvili's administration of prosecutorial abuses and intolerance towards any opposition. While only last week the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee expressed concern at reports of excessive force being used by Georgian prison officials, allegedly

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<sup>3</sup> STATEMENT: DEMONSTRATIONS AND MEDIA REPORTING REPRESSED IN GEORGIA. ARTICLE 19, the Global Campaign for Free Expression, 8 November 2007. <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/press/georgia-demos-and-media.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> C.J. Chivers. Georgia protests erupt in violence as police try to clear demonstrators. The International Herald Tribune, Europe. November 7, 2007. [http://www.iht.com/articles/2007/11/07/europe/07georgia.php#end\\_main](http://www.iht.com/articles/2007/11/07/europe/07georgia.php#end_main)

resulting in several deaths. The forceful methods used last week in dispersing the protestors – the BBC reported tear gas, rubber bullets and water cannons being employed against thousands of protestors, raises concerns over human rights.

From November 2nd, protestors assembled in front of the Parliament in Tbilisi to campaign for early parliamentary elections, push for changes to the current electoral system, greater political pluralism, and the release of political prisoners. The opposition leaders who organized the protest, the largest since the Rose Revolution, emphasized the peaceful nature of the demonstration and their support for the constitution. According to TI Georgia's report, the government's lackluster efforts to enter into a serious dialogue frustrated the protestors to the point that they called for Saakashvili's resignation.

The government took these demands as rumblings of a coup and responded on November 7th violently with riot police, blaming the aggression from some protestors for the heavy-handed measures. A 15-day state of emergency was declared and radio and television stations were banned from broadcasting news reports. Two independent television stations were also completely taken off the air, with conflicting reports regarding the damage inflicted by the riot police to one of them. The government aired recorded conversations, allegedly between leaders of the opposition and the Russian intelligence service, as justification.

Two opposition leaders were accused of espionage, although the charge against one of them has since been dropped, and three Russian diplomats

expelled. For its part, Russia rejected the allegations from the Georgian government that its intelligence service played any part in supporting a coup effort and reciprocated by declaring three Georgian embassy officials in Moscow *personae non grata*.

The media, civil society organizations and foreign governments have widely renounced the excessive force used by the Georgian government, the imposed state of emergency and the media restrictions, as being out of proportion to the situation and undermining democracy.

President Saakashvili faced growing international criticism over the reported events. In a statement issued on November 8, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Louise Arbour, stressed that she was “particularly worried over reports of disproportionate use of force, including against Georgia's Public Defender, the detention of opposition leaders and the beating of demonstrators.” TI Georgia describes how “police officers and riot police not only violently dispersed the protesters, who were unarmed and varied in age and gender, but continued to pursue them down side streets and into shops and other buildings.” The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe has called for the Georgian authorities to hold a full and independent inquiry to determine whether excessive force had been used against the protesters.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Mike Sidwell. In Georgia, it's not coming up roses. November, 2007. Transparency International: Global Coalition Against Corruption. [http://www.transparency.org/publications/newsletter/2007/november\\_2007/spotlight](http://www.transparency.org/publications/newsletter/2007/november_2007/spotlight)

Mike Sidwell concludes: “The events are also likely to be a setback for Saakashvili’s ambitions for Georgia to join NATO, which has condemned the imposition of emergency rule and the closure of media outlets as incompatible with Euro-Atlantic values.”

Even worse are the cases of those who attempt to oppose the corruption and become subjects of persecution in Georgia. The case of Sul Khan Molashvili became one of examples how the government treats those who tries to stop it. On July 28, 2005, the trial of the former president of the Georgian Chamber of Control, Sul Khan Molashvili, commenced in the criminal court division of the Supreme Court in Tbilisi. There was evidence that the prosecution was politically motivated as Molashvili had alleged the misuse of public funds by President Saakashvili, as well as other leaders of the Rose Revolution, and their relatives before their seizure of power in 2003. Molashvili was tortured in detention and his trial was scheduled in such a way that international observers could not attend the hearing.<sup>6</sup> This case serves as an example how the government of President Saakashvili persecuted individuals who dare to oppose the regime.

One of the direct results of the corruption were arbitrariness of the actions of the police. Government agencies did not feel bound by the law and would carry out policy, which was dictated by president and his clique. Accordingly, the opponents to the regime and minorities become victims of the repressive state mechanism.

One of the major victims of the authoritarian regime was the opposing Labor Party. Historically, from the very beginning, the Labor Party protested the rule of Saakashvili.<sup>7</sup> The

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<sup>6</sup> The case of Sul Khan Molashvili. BRITISH HELSINKI HUMAN RIGHTS GROUP. <http://www.bhhrg.org/CountryReport.asp?ReportID=250&CountryID=10>

<sup>7</sup> GEORGIA: LABOR PARTY PROTESTS GEORGIAN PRESIDENT-ELECT'S ELECTION FORECAST. Asia Africa Intelligence Wire, January 13, 2004. [http://www.accessmylibrary.com/coms2/summary\\_0286-20049654\\_ITM](http://www.accessmylibrary.com/coms2/summary_0286-20049654_ITM)

party leadership criticized Saakashvili and his team for their methods of obtaining power and dealing with the dissent.

As a result, the party was attacked in 2003 when a bomb went off outside its office.<sup>8</sup> It was a signal to the party members that they were under attack by the new regime.

The regime used fabricated charges including such serious accusations as espionage and plotting against the government. Thus, Shalva Natelashvili, the leader of the Labor Party, was charged with espionage and conspiracy to overthrow the government, as Nika Gvaramia, the deputy chief prosecutor, said on November 8, 2007. Charges have been brought, he said, based on evidence obtained through surveillance on employees of the Russian Embassy in Tbilisi, whom the Georgian side described as operatives of the Russian intelligence service.

Police searched the Labor Party headquarters and Natelashvili's apartment and seized unspecified documents. Similar charges have been brought against Tsotne Gamsakhurdia, brother of Konstantine Gamsakhurdia, who was the leader of the opposition Freedom Party.<sup>9</sup> The government used Stalin's old method of fabricating "enemies of the people" in order to shut down the opposition. It includes persecution of the "enemies" as well as members of their families, a practice notorious under Stalin's rule and resurrected in modern Georgia.

Despite the persecution, the Labor Party continued its struggle against Saakashvili's regime. In December 2007, it filed a suit against the Central Election Commission with the Tbilisi city court. The Labor Party challenged the Central Election Commission's refusal to

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<sup>8</sup> Explosion Rocks Georgian Labor Party's Headquarters. Voice of America, *November 19, 2003*.  
<http://www.voanews.com/english/archive/2003-11/a-2003-11-29-20-Explosion.cfm>

<sup>9</sup> Labor Party Leader Wanted for 'Coup Plotting' and 'Espionage'. Civil Georgia Daily News Online, November 8, 2007. <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=16263>

consider its complaint blaming presidential candidate Mikheil Saakashvili for using the administrative resource in the election campaign.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, the devastating war with Russia in August 2008 was criticized by the opposition. Thousands of antigovernment demonstrators poured into the streets of Georgia's capital, Tbilisi, on November 7, 2008, hoping to weaken the government of President Saakashvili as it strove to maintain power despite a catastrophic war with Russia and growing economic malaise at home.<sup>11</sup> The opposition demanded Saakashvili to resign, but this never happened. For this reason, the Labor Party continued being persecuted by the authorities.<sup>12</sup>

The events of November 2007 demonstrated the readiness of the authorities to use force to quell the opposition. The Western honeymoon with Mikheil Saakashvili quickly came to an end. Mark Almond points out: "The infighting and the mutual accusations of crime, corruption and killings among the Rose Revolutionaries is the starkest case yet of the reality of a post-people power country contrasting with the myth peddled abroad in the Western media. No journalist who painted a rosy picture of the new rulers of Georgia has yet come forward to correct, let alone apologize for their myth-making under the guise of reporting."<sup>13</sup>

The 2004 presidential elections and 2008 parliamentary elections in Georgia had proved to be the litmus paper of the Georgian regime, confirming its authoritarian character.

Criticizing the elections as rigged, Levan Gachechiladze, leader of the United Opposition

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<sup>10</sup> GEORGIA'S LABOR PARTY SUES CENTRAL ELECTION COMMISSION. United Nation Observer Mission in Georgia, December 31, 2007.

<http://www.unomig.org/media/headlines/?id=9874&y=2007&m=12&d=31>

<sup>11</sup> Protesters Condemn President of Georgia. The New York Times, November 8, 2008.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/08/world/europe/08georgia.html>

<sup>12</sup> Mark Hackard. Interview with Georgian Labor Party Leader. National Interest on Line, August 20, 2008.

<http://www.nationalinterest.org/Article.aspx?id=19610>

<sup>13</sup> Mark Almond. Black Roses: When Reformers Fall Out – Georgia's Transition from 'People Power' to Caucasian Cockpit. BRITISH HELSINKI HUMAN RIGHTS GROUP. November 11, 2007.

<http://www.bhhrg.org/CountryReport.asp?ReportID=273&CountryID=10>

Bloc, which included the Republican Party, the Conservative Party of Georgia, Georgia's Way, People's Front, Freedom Movement, Movement for United Georgia, National Forum, Kartuli Dasi, Ourselves)<sup>14</sup> called to boycott the newly elected parliament.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the government of Georgia proved again its antidemocratic nature.

On May 6, 2010, opposition members were fiercely removed from the site of the parade in celebration of Police Day in Georgia,<sup>16</sup> which was a sign of inability and ineptness of the regime to embrace the idea of opposition and political dialogue. This action, which was deliberately carried out, could be considered as the regime's demonstration of scorn for the opposition and guidance to the police force regarding how to deal with the opposition movement.

In June 2010, a large group of people gathered in the Chkhorotsku Region to protest against the lack of police activity in the investigation of the murder of 29 years old Elguja Akhalaia allegedly perpetrated by a police officer. One of the participants, a member of Protect Georgia, commented on the situation:

I am worried about my motherland. I am here today to protest against such an act of unprecedented lawlessness. A police officer killed a man. Then he threw the body into the river. Almost a year has passed since the incident... Nobody has been punished and the case has not been closed so far.

He further stated that the murder allegedly had been committed after the local prosecutor was appointed the Chairman of the Council. This is one of the examples

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<sup>14</sup> Election Guide, May 2008 <http://www.electionguide.org/election.php?ID=1412>

<sup>15</sup> Georgia opposition vows boycott, BBC News, May 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7417689.stm>

<sup>16</sup> [http://georgiamediacentre.com/content/video\\_police\\_intimidation\\_opposition\\_released](http://georgiamediacentre.com/content/video_police_intimidation_opposition_released)

demonstrating the level of corruption and impunity of the Georgian law enforcement high rank officials.<sup>17</sup>

The regime of President Saakashvili heavily suppressed the opposition. On May 5, 2009, it stopped a mutiny at a military base in Mukhrovani, which was announced as a Russian provocation. Many military and civilians were arrested and one of the leaders killed while two other wounded.<sup>18</sup> The opposition made an effort to attract world attention to the abuses of the regime and blocked the main railroad station in Tbilisi on May 27, 2009.<sup>19</sup> On May 28, 2009, police attacked demonstrators in Tbilisi. Many protesters as well as some police officers were injured during the attack.<sup>20</sup>

On October 7, 2010, Georgian authorities arrested Dzhoni Nanitashvili, General Director of the Trialeti TV Channel. According to the one of the anchors of the Channel, Lado Bichashvili, Natanishvili has been arrested in retaliation for providing air to the opposition parties. In June 2010, the journalist of the channel was also attacked by Georgian law enforcement officers when he attempted to videotape the demolition of the monument to Joseph Stalin.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> სამეგრელო: ახალაიების სამართალი ასე ჭრის..., (Samegrelo: Akhalaia is going around the law) <http://7days.ge/index2.php?newsid=1780>

<sup>18</sup> В Грузии убит “один из лидеров мятежа” (“One Of The Leaders Of Mutiny” Is Killed In Georgia). BBC Russkaia Sluzhba, May 21, 2009.

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/international/2009/05/090521\\_georgia\\_coup\\_killed.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/international/2009/05/090521_georgia_coup_killed.shtml)

<sup>19</sup> Оппозиция заблокировала железнодорожный вокзал в Тбилиси (Opposition Blocked Railroad Station in Tbilisi). Rosbalt-Kavkaz, May 30, 2009.

<sup>20</sup> В Грузии начались уличные бои демонстрантов и полиции (Street Fighting Between Demonstrators and Police Began On The Streets In Georgia). Zavtra, May 29, 2009. <http://www.zavtra.com.ua/news/guns/123326/>

<sup>21</sup> В Грузии арестован гендиректор телеканала «Триалети» (Director of the Trialeti TV Channel was arrested in Georgia), October 7, 2010, <http://www.nregion.com/txt.php?i=39106>

For almost three years<sup>22</sup> of his second term as a president Mikheil Saakashvili not only deviated from the democratic course promised at the beginning of his first term but also strengthened his grip to power by resorting to the Stalinist oppressive methods. Such development resulted in increasing disillusionment of the Georgian population with Saakashvili, who, according to Georgian opposition leaders, is responsible for the disintegration of the country and establishing an authoritarian and terrorist regime which propagated war.<sup>23</sup> Saakashvili's second term was also more revealing of his repressive practices towards the opposition members, political opponents and individual dissidents. The May 2009 brutal crackdown on members of Georgian opposition<sup>24</sup> demonstrated that President Saakashvili's rule evolved into a classic dictatorship where opponents were persecuted by all possible means.

The standoff between Russia and Georgia also fueled Georgian nationalism and provided scapegoats to Saakashvili's regime, which frequently played the Russian card to gain support among the Georgian political elite, Georgian population and to score some political points with the international community as well as to eliminate political opponents.

In November 2010, Georgian authorities reported capturing thirteen people including four Russians and nine Georgians who allegedly delivered "information to the intelligence unit of the Russia's Defense Ministry, known as the GRU."<sup>25</sup> The Russian Foreign Ministry responded by accusing the Georgian authorities of "provocation" and an attempt to "maintain anti-Russian hysteria in the country." The statement issued by the Russian Foreign Ministry

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<sup>22</sup> Interview: Despite Apparent Reelection, Saakashvili's Popularity Not High. [http://www.nytimes.com/cfr/world/slot3\\_20080107.html](http://www.nytimes.com/cfr/world/slot3_20080107.html)

<sup>23</sup> Лидеры оппозиции в Грузии активизируют борьбу с Саакашвили (Leaders of Georgian opposition activate resistance to Saakashvili), <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/166892>

<sup>24</sup> В Грузии начались уличные бои демонстрантов и полиции (Street Fighting Between Demonstrators and Police Began On The Streets In Georgia). *Zavtra*, May 29, 2009. <http://www.zavtra.com.ua/news/guns/123326/>

<sup>25</sup> Now Main Intelligence Directorate.

also stated that “President Mikheil Saakashvili’s government suffers from a “chronic anti-Russian spy mania.”<sup>26</sup>

The dramatic shift to authoritarianism and omnipotence and impunity of the Georgian authorities prompted the Georgian opposition parties to issue a joint declaration, which called to remove Saakashvili from the presidency. Opposition leaders described Saakashvili’s policies as attempt to ensure the stranglehold by his regime.<sup>27</sup>



An unarmed protester almost beaten to death by Georgian police during a peaceful rally in front of Parliament building in Tbilisi.

<http://sulanews.wordpress.com/2011/05/26/არწი-ხიდაირბევიმვილო-,, და/#more-454>

In fact, during the first years following the Rose Revolution under Saakashvili’s rule, Georgia could be seen as democratic only as a façade, while later it gained all the attributes of a fully fledged authoritarian regime. The political opponents to Saakashvili’s regime became

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<sup>26</sup> Georgia Arrests Russian Spies Operating Before War <http://www.businessweek.com/news/2010-11-05/georgia-arrests-russian-spies-operating-before-war.html>

<sup>27</sup> Саакашвили сдал 20 per cent территории Грузии и привел страну к экономической и социальной катастрофе: заявление (Saakashvili surrendered 20 percent of the territory of Georgia and led the country to economic and social disaster), <http://www.regnum.ru/news/polit/1330594.html>

victims of torture, arbitrary detention, intimidation and disappearances. Brutal crackdowns on opposition demonstrations continued to be an alarmingly regular element on the Georgian political scene. Having solidified his position as a ruthless ruler, Saakashvili put a lot of effort into cleansing Georgia of his political opponents, independent mass media and human rights activists who attempted to voice their criticisms of the regime and to expose its corrupt policies. The violent May 2011 crackdown during which police used water cannons, rubber bullets and tear gas on the opposition demonstrations in Tbilisi and Batumi had marked the point of no return for Saakashvili's regime, which had openly revealed its true anti-democratic nature.<sup>28</sup>

On February 4, 2013, in Tbilisi, former political prisoners organized a meeting during which they made an evaluation of Saakashvili's regime. The former political prisoners called for the impeachment of President Saakashvili and demanded that he be tried in the International Court of Justice in The Hague. They also demanded to turn Prison No. 1 in Tbilisi into a museum of torture.<sup>29</sup> Vladimir Vakhania, an attorney, criticized the judicial system in Georgia stating:

Court verdicts are not supported by any evidence. Objections are neither considered nor noted in the verdicts. Beatings and torture of inmates became a regular thing. The level of deaths in prisons does not even surprise us anymore.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> არნო ხიდირბეგიშვილი: „და წვიმა ყველა ნაკვალევს შლის...“ (Arno Khidirbegishvili: Rain will wash all traces off), სულას ბლოგი (Blog It), May 2011, <http://sulanews.wordpress.com/2011/05/26/არნო-ხიდირბეგიშვილი-„და/#more-454>

<sup>29</sup> В Грузии бывшие политзаключенные требуют создать музей пыток (Former Political Prisoners Demand Creation of a Museum of Torture), Caucasian Knot, February 2013, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/219632/>

<sup>30</sup> Суд, потерявший независимость (Court that lost its independence), Ekho Kavkaza, July 2012, <http://www.ekhokavkaza.com/content/article/24644737.html>

Mikheil Saakashvili's opponents also criticized him for bragging about the success of his reforms in eliminating corruption. Nino Burdzhanaдзе, former speaker of the Georgian Parliament and leader of the United Georgia Democratic Movement, described the situation of corruption in Georgia as the "system of elite corruption." Only the political elite was entitled to participate in the corruption schemes while low level officials were completely excluded.<sup>31</sup> As a result, the amount of monetary funds siphoned through the corruption schemes considerably increased. According to Soso Tsiskarashvili, President of the Club of Independent Experts, the share of the shadow economy in Georgia reached 72 percent during Saakashvili's presidency, which makes Saakashvili's claims that his government had uprooted corruption inconsistent with reality. Gela Nikolaishvili, a human rights advocate, also lamented that the reforms were nothing but a façade to cover up numerous human rights violations that took place in Georgia, where there were at least 118 political prisoners in the country at that time.<sup>32</sup> Ahead of the October 2013 Presidential Elections, Georgia once again became a stage for political drama, which polarized Georgian society. In August 2013, President Mikheil Saakashvili and Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili entered an open confrontation on board of the USS Berkeley warship. President Saakashvili accused Prime Minister of being in "cahoots with Georgia's enemies" and lack of love for his homeland, while the Prime Minister responded by accusing President Saakashvili of being responsible for the 2008 Russian-Georgian War.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Бурджанадзе: коррупция в Грузии – элитарная (Burdzhanaдзе: Corruption in Georgia is elitist) Newsland, September 2010, <http://newsland.com/news/detail/id/562587/>

<sup>32</sup> Эксперт: В Грузии свирепствует элитарная коррупция (Elite corruption is on rampage in Georgia). Polemika, September 2012, <http://polemika.com.ua/news-99162.html>

<sup>33</sup> Саакашвили и Иванишвили повздорили, оценивая роль Грузии в августовской войне 2008 года (Saakashvili and Ivanishvili squabbled assessing the role of Georgia in the August 2008 War). Caucasian Knot, August 2013, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/228452/>

In August 2013, activists of the National Front organized protests in front of President Saakashvili's residence in Tbilisi. The protestors burned a copy of the six-point ceasefire Medvedev-Sarcozy Agreement signed by Mikheil Saakashvili in 2008, and a photo of Saakashvili accusing him of committing crimes against the state and violating of the Constitution of Georgia.<sup>34</sup>

The role of Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili in the Georgian politics grew rapidly. He had an enormous influence on all aspects of life in Georgia, An eccentric billionaire, who owns a private zoo and made his fortune in Russia, Georgia's geopolitical nemesis, who was President Saakashvili's Prime Minister, was not a new face in Georgian politics.<sup>35</sup> For the first time, he announced his political aspirations in October 2011. Before that, he preferred to remain in shadows, which is consistent with his profile of a Russian-based oligarch, who owns interest in a number of Russian banks, construction sites, real estate property, agricultural and industrial companies, hotel business and fine arts market, which he allegedly relinquished before entering politics.<sup>36</sup> However, he has not given up his ownership of substantial number of shares of Gazprom,<sup>37</sup> a natural gas extracting company mostly controlled by the Russian government, which alludes to his close ties with the Russian ruling

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<sup>34</sup> В Грузии "Национальный фронт" провел акцию с требованием осудить Саакашвили "за измену родине" (In Georgia, National Front organized an action demanding to convict Saakashvili of treason). Caucasian Knot, August 2013, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/228494/>

<sup>35</sup> Géorgie: mais qui est cet étrange oligarque franco-russe? (Georgia: who is this strange Franco-Russian oligarch?) *Le Huffington Post*, May 2012, [http://www.huffingtonpost.fr/matthieu-ranvier/georgie-oligarque-franco-russe\\_b\\_1506299.html?ref=france](http://www.huffingtonpost.fr/matthieu-ranvier/georgie-oligarque-franco-russe_b_1506299.html?ref=france)

<sup>36</sup> Géorgie: mais qui est cet étrange oligarque franco-russe? (Georgia: who is this strange Franco-Russian oligarch?) *Le Huffington Post*, May 2012, [http://www.huffingtonpost.fr/matthieu-ranvier/georgie-oligarque-franco-russe\\_b\\_1506299.html?ref=france](http://www.huffingtonpost.fr/matthieu-ranvier/georgie-oligarque-franco-russe_b_1506299.html?ref=france)

<sup>37</sup> Géorgie: mais qui est cet étrange oligarque franco-russe? (Georgia: who is this strange Franco-Russian oligarch?) *Le Huffington Post*, May 2012, [http://www.huffingtonpost.fr/matthieu-ranvier/georgie-oligarque-franco-russe\\_b\\_1506299.html?ref=france](http://www.huffingtonpost.fr/matthieu-ranvier/georgie-oligarque-franco-russe_b_1506299.html?ref=france)

elite known as *siloviki*, former officers of the FSB and military intelligence service, cultivated by Vladimir Putin.

After Mikheil Saakashvili was elected president, Bidzina Ivanishvili, rated the 153<sup>rd</sup> richest person by Forbes,<sup>38</sup> returned to Georgia and received Georgian citizenship. Following his return to Georgia, he provided financial support to Saakashvili's administration. However, the relationship between Mikheil Saakashvili and Bidzina Ivanishvili reportedly deteriorated a year before the 2012 parliamentary elections and two years before the 2013 presidential elections.<sup>39</sup> Such an abrupt political shift defies the genuineness of his political agenda. It should be noted that in 2013 Georgia officially became a parliamentary republic, which gave broad powers to Bidzina Ivanishvili, who was confirmed by the parliament as Prime Minister on October 25, 2012.<sup>40</sup> It is more than doubtful that such a shadowy figure as Bidzina Ivanishvili, who, for example, is not allowed to enter Canada as Canadian authorities suspect him of being involved in smuggling diamonds from Angola,<sup>41</sup> would steer Georgia towards genuine democracy. Despite the fact that little is known about this reclusive 'oligarch' worth about 6 billion dollars, his first statements recommending President Saakashvili to resign after winning the elections and his "unspecified threats of prosecutions" exposed him as a hardcore pragmatic pseudo-democratic politician pursuing his own thirst for power. Another remark made by him during his interview with the *New Times*, a Russian magazine, in which "he

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<sup>38</sup> Bidzina Ivanishvili, Forbes, <http://www.forbes.com/profile/boris-ivanishvili/> as of March 2012

<sup>39</sup> Бидзина Иванишвили (Bidzina Ivanishvili), Lenta.ru, November 2012, <http://lenta.ru/lib/14169182/>

<sup>40</sup> Иванишвили утвержден на посту премьера Грузии (Ivanishvili conformed as Prime Minister), Grani.ru, <http://grani.ru/Politics/World/Europe/Georgia/m.207883.html>

<sup>41</sup> Géorgie: mais qui est cet étrange oligarque franco-russe? (Georgia: who is this strange Franco-Russian oligarch?) Le Huffington Post, May 2012, [http://www.huffingtonpost.fr/matthieu-ranvier/georgie-oligarque-franco-russe\\_b\\_1506299.html?ref=france](http://www.huffingtonpost.fr/matthieu-ranvier/georgie-oligarque-franco-russe_b_1506299.html?ref=france)

wondered why ethnic Armenians lived in Georgia when their own homeland is next door,” has also revealed his nationalist agenda.<sup>42</sup>

*The New Republic* reports:

Over that time, Georgia’s richest man—his current net worth, \$6.4 billion according to Forbes, equals almost half of the country’s GDP—has left his mark on practically every aspect of life here. He has paid for schools, restored museums, bought boots for the army (“They were running around in slippers,” he told a *New York Times* reporter) and gas for police cars. He has paid, unbeknownst to anyone until recently, for the construction of the Georgian Orthodox Church’s main cathedral, Tsminda Sameba, whose gold-plated dome looms above Tbilisi on roughly the same level as the spheres and rhombuses of Ivanishvili’s own residence. He has taken over theaters and paid the actors’ salaries.

With the Georgian Dream Party’s coming to power, systematic persecution of political opponents, including members of the United National Movement, began. In June 2013, approximately thirty deputies of the Tbilisi City Assembly belonging to the United National Movement were detained and interrogated.<sup>43</sup>

President Mikheil Saakashvili had promised democracy, civil liberties, respect for human rights and freedom for the Georgian people. However, democracy in Georgia did not become a reality under his rule.

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<sup>42</sup> Georgian Leader Emerges as an Enigma, *New York Times*, October 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/09/world/europe/georgian-leader-bidzina-ivanishvili-emerges-as-an-enigma.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/09/world/europe/georgian-leader-bidzina-ivanishvili-emerges-as-an-enigma.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)

<sup>43</sup> Мэрия Тбилиси подтвердила задержание 30 представителей местной власти (Tbilisi City Hall Confirmed Detention of 30 Members of the Local Government Body). *Ria Novosti News Agency*. June 27, 2013. <https://ria.ru/world/20130627/946114154.html>

## THE CURRENT POLITICAL SITUATION IN GEORGIA

The Soviet Union created the political culture in which the government enjoys full impunity of action and conducts policy arbitrary. It is worthy to note that Joseph Stalin, the notorious Soviet dictator, born Dzhughashvili, was Georgian. The culture was inherited by presidents and governments of independent Georgia. As a result, unlawful searches, arrests, confiscation of property, and other forms of mistreatment flourished after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The government possesses enormous power in Georgia. It can arbitrarily decide on the fate of an individual's property, livelihood, and well-being. The authorities can easily, without any due process, confiscate land, real estate, and other valuable possessions. The regime has many tools to shut their opponents down. The whole state apparatus is designed to protect the interests of the government and is managed by corrupt politicians. Those who raise their voices are dismissed from their positions, harassed by police and put into prisons. The regime sees a threat in any voice of criticism and any leak of information.

In October 2013, a new president, Giorgi Margvelashvili, was elected in a vote of confidence for the country's eccentric oligarch prime minister, Bidzina Ivanishvili. The victory of Ivanishvili's candidate, Giorgi Margvelashvili's, presidential election cemented the prime minister's triumph over the country's outgoing leader, Mikheil Saakashvili.<sup>44</sup> Since that time Georgia became the domain of Bidzina Ivanishvili, who dictates his will to the Georgian government.

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<sup>44</sup> Shaun Walker. Georgia elects oligarch PM Bidzina Ivanishvili's candidate as president. *The Guardian*, October 28, 2013.

The new government almost immediately turned back to the old practices of prosecuting and persecuting political rivals. In 2014, the United National Movement complained about the Prosecutor General's Office's long-term prosecution.<sup>45</sup>

On October 8, 2016, Georgia hosted its ninth parliamentary elections, which resulted in the ruling Georgian Dream coalition, which included such parties as the Conservative Party of Georgia, the Industry Will Save Georgia Party, the Republican Party of Georgia, the Our Georgia – Free Democrats and the National Forum, winning the vote with 48.61 percent, while the opposition United National Movement received 27.04 percent of all votes.<sup>46</sup>

In May 2016, Bidzina Ivanishvili promised to do “everything possible” to not allow Mikheil Saakashvili's allies, the United National Movement, to regain power in Georgia.<sup>47</sup>

According to Tbilisskaia Nedelia News Agency, the leaders of the United National Movement Nika Melia, Giga Bokeria, Eka Kherkehidze, and Nugzar Tsiklauri were beaten up in the village of Kortskeheli on May 22, 2016. The attackers were a group of about seventy young men who supported the Georgian Dream Party.<sup>48</sup>

On June 15, 2018, a member of the United National Movement, Beso Katamadze was beaten up in Ozurgeti. According to the victim, five activists of the Georgian Dream Party attacked him after he criticized the party on his Facebook account.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> ЕНД обвиняет главную прокуратуру в продолжении преследования парти (The United National Movement Accuses the Prosecutor General's Office of Continuation of Prosecution). Gruzia Online News Agency. August 16, 2014. <http://www.apsny.ge/2014/pol/1408247165.php>

<sup>46</sup> Ruling Party in Georgia Decisively Wins Parliament Vote. Reuters News Agency. October 9, 2016. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-georgia-election-idUSKCN1272AT>

<sup>47</sup> Иванишвили не допустит возвращения команды Саакашвили к власти (Ivanishvili Will Not Let Saakashvili's Team Return to Power). Sputnik News Agency. May 30, 2016. <https://sputnik-georgia.ru/georgia/20160530/231902782.html>

<sup>48</sup> Лидеры «Единого Национального Движения» избиты в Грузии (Leaders of the United National Movement were Beaten Up in Georgia). Kavkazskii Uzel News Agency. May 22, 2016. <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/282931/>

<sup>49</sup> Оппозиционный депутат избит в Грузии (An Opposition Deputy was Beaten Up in Georgia). Kavkazskii Uzel News Agency. June 15, 2018. <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/321744/>



Riot policemen fire teargas during a rally against a Russian lawmaker's visit in Tbilisi. Photograph: Irakli Gedenidze/Reuters.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/20/georgian-police-teargas-crowd-russian-lawmaker-parliament>

On October 28, 2018 Salome Zurbashvili, supported by the Georgian Dream Party, won the presidential elections. She, who served as a Minister of Foreign Affairs under Saakashvili, carried out the same policy of reigning the country as her predecessors. And the discontent with her rule led to mass protests. In response, the government of President Salome Zurbashvili did not hesitate to use power against opposition protesters on June 20, 2019. *The Guardian* reports: Police fired tear gas canisters into the crowd at regular intervals for hours on end, sending people fleeing to adjacent streets, only to return. Later, in the early hours of Friday, they used rubber bullets and water cannon.<sup>50</sup> Many opposition protesters were injured and detained.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Shaun Walker Dozens injured after Georgia police fire rubber bullets at demonstrators. *The Guardian*, June 21, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/20/georgian-police-teargas-crowd-russian-lawmaker-parliament>

<sup>51</sup> Tbilisi: police, protesters clash. 100s arrested and injured. Photos. JAM News. <https://jam-news.net/tbilisi-police-protesters-clash-100s-arrested-and-injured-photos/>



Injured protesters treated by paramedics. <https://jam-news.net/tbilisi-police-protesters-clash-100s-arrested-and-injured-photos/>

A new wave of antigovernment protests took place in November 2019. Dozens were arrested and police used water cannon to disperse protesters outside the parliament building in Tbilisi. Huge steel gates were erected around the parliament building to keep demonstrators away.<sup>52</sup>

On December 12, 2019 new protest rallies shook Tbilisi. The police responded with force and detained 12 protesters, including the leader of the opposition New Georgia party, Giorgi Vashadze, after they tried to block the entrance to the parliament building. Those detained were among dozens of activists who tried to block the legislature's entrance to

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<sup>52</sup> Orlando Crowcroft & Reuters. Tbilisi protests: Why do tens of thousands of Georgians want early elections? Euronews, last updated: 30/11/2019. <https://www.euronews.com/2019/11/30/tbilisi-protests-why-do-tens-of-thousands-of-georgians-want-early-elections>

protest against the election of 19 candidates to the Supreme Court. The protesters said the candidates were "rubber-stamp judges" controlled by the authorities.<sup>53</sup>



Giorgi Vashadze (center), the leader of opposition New Georgia party, was among those arrested. (file photo)

The current government uses arbitrary criminal charges in order to suppress the opposition. Several criminal cases have been opened against opposition leaders amid mass protests against the government and Bidzina Ivanishvili's ruling Georgian Dream party that began in the summer of 2019, and several arrests have been made.

The fate of Gigi Ugulava, one of the most prominent opposition leaders, illustrates the policies of the regime. In February 2020, Georgian opposition leader Gigi Ugulava was sentenced to 38 months in jail on charges of misusing public funds while the mayor of Tbilisi,

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<sup>53</sup> Police In Tbilisi Detain 12 Protesters, Including Opposition Leader. RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, December 12, 2019. <https://www.rferl.org/a/police-in-tbilisi-detain-12-protesters-including-opposition-party-leader/30321684.html>

faced his second conviction on similar charges, in a case the opposition says is politically motivated. The Supreme Court verdict was for a new case of alleged misuse of funds, and the jail time he has already served was not counted against it."This is a shameful decision made by the Ivanishvili regime," Tina Bokuchava, a leader of the opposition United National Movement, told reporters.



Opposition supporters chain the gate of the parliament during a rally to protest against the government and demand an early parliamentary election, in Tbilisi, Georgia November 17, 2019. REUTERS/Irakli Gedenidze. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-georgia-politics-protests/tens-of-thousands-gather-in-tbilisi-to-demand-snap-elections-in-georgia-idUSKBN1XR0K1>

Ugulava was first imprisoned for a similar offense in September 2015, for four-and-a-half years, but was freed in January 2017 after his sentence was reduced. A year later, Ugulava, mayor of Tbilisi from 2005-2013, was sentenced again, to 15 months in prison, in

the same case, but his sentence was considered to have been served. Dozens of ex-officials including an ex-prime minister have been arrested on charges such as abuse of power and corruption since the Georgian Dream Party came to power in 2012 after defeating then-president Mikheil Saakashvili's party in an election.<sup>54</sup>

Overall, the members of the United National Movement and other opposition activists continue being targeted by the Georgian regime. Its members and supporters fall victim to the political repression going on in the country. Western countries have expressed concerns that the Georgian government has used selective justice to persecute political opponents, an allegation that officials deny.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, the facts prove the opposite: the Georgian authorities use the methods of oppression of the opposition which fit the classic model of an authoritarian regime.

In addition, corruption is a highly important political issue in Georgia. It is deeply embedded in the government, which uses corruption as a mechanism of power and benefits the officials. A person who dares challenge the system of bribery and graft is looked at as a political opponent of government policy and is the subject of persecution.

Since 2014, the country conditions of Georgia have worsened significantly after President Margvelashvili took over the power in the country with the help of Bidzina Ivanishvili. Under his rule, the last attempts to fight corruption, including political corruption, in Georgia were crushed as well as the attempts to make the country more democratic in general. On the contrary, the ruling elite consolidated more power, suppressed the opposition, and kept Georgia an authoritarian state with a strong Soviet legacy like neighboring Russia,

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<sup>54</sup> Georgian Opposition Leader Gets Three More Years in Jail. The New York Times: Reuters, February 10, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2020/02/10/world/europe/10reuters-georgia-opposition-arrests.html>

<sup>55</sup> Georgian Opposition Leader Gets Three More Years in Jail. The New York Times: Reuters, February 10, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2020/02/10/world/europe/10reuters-georgia-opposition-arrests.html>

Azerbaijan, and Armenia. The years following 2014 have been years of political repression, ethnic strife, and violation of human rights in Georgia.

In the post-Soviet Georgia, disloyalty to the regime often results in labeling a person an “unreliable element” and treating him or her accordingly. Opponents to the regime and members of their families have been subjected to intimidation, abuse, disappearances and arbitrary detention. Law enforcement agencies are under the total control of the corrupt and authoritarian regime which does not tolerate political opinion inconsistent with its nationalist and antidemocratic agenda.

The current Georgian president, Salome Zurbashvili, continues the politics of the predecessor Georgi Margvelashvili and his Georgian Dream Party. According to Bloomberg, she was elected to continue the policies of the old guard, after a rancorous vote that triggered allegations of election fraud from the losing candidate.<sup>56</sup> She served under President Mikheil Saakashvili and was one the leaders of the Georgian Dream Party. These facts reveal that Salome Zurbashvili belongs to the sort of politicians who could be called ‘political chameleons’ like Ukrainian ex-President Petro Poroshenko or Myanmar’s President Aung San Suu Kyi. Politicians of this sort comply with human rights abuses and violations in their countries in order to preserve or develop their political careers. It leads to the conclusion that the political situation will not change in Georgia and the current president and her government has no intention of changing the authorities’ attitude toward those who were mistreated before the new elections in November 2018.

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<sup>56</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-12-16/georgia-to-swear-in-new-president-as-opposition-calls-protests>

In fact, the regime has many tools to shut the opponents up. The entire state apparatus is designed to protect the interests of the government and is managed by corrupt politicians. Those who raise their voices are dismissed from their positions, harassed by police and put in prisons without due process. The regime sees a threat in any voice of criticism and any leak of information. It showed its brutal nature in the crackdown on peaceful demonstrations and in cases of those who criticized the government from inside, confirming the fact that the government in Georgia remains repressive, corrupt and authoritarian.