

Moscow's 'Political Trap' For Georgia: 'Stable Instability'

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Georgia's flag. .

BY [VLADIMER PAPA](#)* MARCH 10, 2020

It is commonly believed that Moscow is interested that openly pro-Russian political parties come to power in the former Soviet countries. Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are the best examples of this trend in the post-Soviet space. Russia united these countries in the Eurasian Economic Union which has no economic prospects but instead is driven by political goals.

(<http://cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13296>).

In my opinion, it is to oversimplify the actual situation to think that the only goal of Moscow is to have political parties with openly pro-Russian orientation govern the post-Soviet countries. In reality

the situations that have developed in various post-Soviet countries are not homogenous and, therefore, it is necessary that the situations in each post-Soviet country be examined individually.

In this regard, the situation in Georgia is of particular interest. Despite its clearly Euro-Atlantic orientation (<https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/162767/52b05938ffcd3ea8b9c6d499e1515b35.pdf>), Georgia is not free from the so-called “Pro-Russian” phenomenon. As a result, not only the main opposition parties (United National Movement (UNM) and the European Georgia–Movement for Liberty (EGML), which were separated from the UNM, blame the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party to be pro-Russian, but the ruling party also considers that the key opposition parties play into the hands of Russia and thus are of pro-Russian orientation as well.

(<https://caucasusedition.net/nationalism-and-hegemony-in-post-communist-georgia/>).

Notwithstanding the political ‘divorce,’ the UNM and its splinter-party EGML easily find a common language, especially in order to oppose the GD. For instance, the UNM supported Grigol Vashadze as the joint candidate in the second round of the 2018 presidential elections together with the EGML and alongside other smaller political parties (<https://www.france24.com/en/20181128-georgia-second-round-presidential-election-zurabishvili-vashadze>). This means that it is not excluded in the future that the UNM and the EGML will be able to be united again either in an electoral bloc or in a parliamentary coalition.

A key argument brought up by the opposition parties to prove that the GD is pro-Russian is that its founder and Chairman, Bidzina Ivanishvili, became a billionaire in Russia

(<http://www.tabula.ge/en/story/70418-ivanishvilis-business-interests-in-russia-what-thou-givest-away-is-thine>) and that he is still ‘managed’ by Russian President Vladimir Putin. The opposition was effective in its criticism of the mistakes the GD made in reforming the judicial and electoral systems. The opposition is quite successful in persuading even American politicians, friends of Georgia, in the pro-Russian orientation of the GD’s party leader

(<https://www.georgianjournal.ge/politics/36175-bidzina-ivanishvili-is-vladimir-putins-puppet-says-congressman-olson.html>).

The GD’s accusation of the UNM and its splinter parties of being pro-Russian is based on the support Vladimir Putin provided to Saakashvili in carrying out the Rose Revolution in 2003 (https://www.rferl.org/a/Bloom_Off_Rose_In_Georgia/1351943.html) and solving the problem in Achara in 2004 (<https://www.rferl.org/a/1052653.html>) and in transferring Georgia’s strategic facilities to Russia (<https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/russia-s-economic-imperialism?barrier=accesspaylog>), as well the GD party’s references to the mistakes made during the Russia-Georgia war in 2008 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/sep/30/georgia-attacks-unjustifiable-eu>).

Taking into account that Georgia, which adopted a Parliamentary Republic model by its Constitution, is to hold parliamentary elections in the fall of 2020 and it is very important to find out what the

expectations of Moscow are vis-à-vis these upcoming elections and what kind of political forces it wants to come to power in Georgia.

Moscow's 'political menu' of opposition parties in Georgia is diverse: there is an openly pro-Russian party, the United Georgia–Democratic Movement (UGDM), and the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG) which was founded as a patriotic party and at the same time it is in favor of active cooperation with Russia. On the other hand, there are publicly pro-Western parties which have a relatively large number of voters; that is, the UNM and the EGML. It is noteworthy that the ruling GD party is also publicly pro-Western.

It is to be underlined that a newly established political party, Lelo, stands out from this political 'landscape.' Its public statements are pro-Western and the party is not burdened by its prior political experience either. However, its founders and leaders are the leaders of one of the largest banks in Georgia (<https://jam-news.net/founder-of-georgias-largest-bank-creates-political-party/>) which is perceived in the country as the main 'culprit' in bankrupting many people in the country. Therefore, Lelo probably will find it difficult to achieve significant success in the approaching parliamentary elections.

Given the widespread opinion that Moscow favors an openly pro-Russian party come to power in Georgia, it can be inferred that the Kremlin made a serious mistake by failing to promote the UGDM at the end of 2019. Namely, the Chairwoman of this party, Nino Burjanadze, visited Moscow in December in regard to setting free Vazha Gaprindashvili, a Georgian medical doctor who was illegally detained for crossing the 'Russian occupation line' in South Ossetia in November 2019 (<https://civil.ge/archives/327860>). Upon returning to Georgia, she announced with great confidence that Russia would release the doctor from the illegal detention no later than December 13, 2019. (<https://www.interpressnews.ge/en/article/104959-nino-burjanadze-insists-georgian-doctor-will-be-released-no-later-than-this-friday/>). If he had been released, Nino Burjanadze's image and popularity would have been certainly significantly increased among voters.

In fact, it was not the case and the doctor who was detained by the occupation regime was set free only on December 28, 2019 (<https://www.rferl.org/a/prominent-georgian-doctor-released-in-separatist-south-ossetia/30348946.html>). In other words, the release of Vazha Gaprindashvili from illegal detention on December 28 cannot be credited to Nino Burjanadze's effort.

What, then does this interesting case, full of drama, indicate?

If it were in Moscow's interest to support an openly pro-Russian political party, Nino Burjanadze would not have been lied to and as she was promised, Vazha Gaprindashvili would have been released no later than December 13, 2019.

This development should not come as a surprise if we take into consideration the following circumstance. If an openly pro-Russian political party comes to power in Georgia, then Moscow will have to make some compromises with Tbilisi and, first of all, this would be restoring the territorial

integrity of Georgia which is not definitely in the interest of Moscow. Russia occupies 20% of Georgia's territory (<https://www.cnbc.com/2019/01/22/russia-is-still-occupying-20percent-of-our-country-georgias-leader-says.html>) and it is quite sufficient for Russia to cause destabilization in Georgia, if necessary.

Thus, Moscow prefers that openly pro-Russian parties be represented in the Parliament of Georgia only in relatively small factions but if it is not the case, it will be of little concern to the Kremlin.

For Moscow, it is much more important to maintain a consistently unstable political situation in Georgia in order to hamper the strengthening of its statehood and economic development. As a result, it will be practically impossible for Georgia to access Euro-Atlantic structures given the persistent instability in the country.

Moscow's goal is that notwithstanding the outcomes of the 2020 parliamentary elections in Georgia, they should exacerbate the political situation in the country and lead to an irreconcilable confrontation among the country's political parties. To achieve this goal, Moscow will use any means available (<https://www.theneweuropen.co.uk/top-stories/paul-knott-on-vladimir-putin-brexit-and-politics-1-6450371>), including its already traditional cybercrimes (<https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2019/07/06/deter-russian-cyber-attack-cold-war-column/1587711001/>).

The most recent cyberattack, which was carried out against Georgia in the fall of 2019 (<https://edition.cnn.com/2020/02/20/politics/russia-georgia-hacking/index.html>), can be considered to be a 'dress rehearsal' to interfere with Georgia's upcoming parliamentary elections.

The former President of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, can be regarded among the instruments available for the Kremlin to destabilize the situation in Georgia. He was successfully used as an instrument for destabilization in Georgia (<http://georgiatoday.ge/news/1741/Gvaramia-Confirms-Conversation-Had-with-Saakashvili>) as well as in Ukraine (<https://www.unian.info/politics/1623096-weeks-milestones-saakashvili-acceleration-russias-destabilization-plan-for-ukraine-and-complications-in-interior-ministry.html>).

For Georgia to escape from the 'political trap' set by Moscow and thus avoid further destabilization in the country, it is indispensable that the Government of Georgia conduct the 2020 parliamentary elections in a maximally democratic and fair manner without any rigging and the opposition parties should bear in mind that the destabilization in Georgia only serves the interests of the Kremlin. In this regard, the agreement reached between the parties with the active participation of some embassies (US, EU, Germany, etc.) on the system for the parliamentary elections of 2020 should be considered as encouraging (<https://civil.ge/archives/341385>).

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