



FPC Briefing: Comrades in arms, or a marriage of convenience?

An analysis of 'Georgian Dream'

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In the Tbilisi State Concert Hall on 11th December, Bidzina Ivanishvili completed his transformation from reclusive billionaire to political phenomenon. Launching his new political opposition movement, Georgian Dream, Ivanishvili said that the country's current leadership was "unacceptable both internally and internationally"¹. He vowed to build a state which valued "honesty, dignity and professionalism" and where the people controlled the government, rather than the other way around.

Georgian Dream has been touted as a political coalition to bring together leading opposition forces in a bid to topple President Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM) in October's parliamentary election. Yet the two men he has named as his key allies – Irakli Alasania of the Free Democrats and the Republican Party's Davit Usupashvili – did not speak. Instead, Ivanishvili's speech was bookended by a performance from his rapping son and speeches by cultural and sporting figures.

This raises questions: about the future of the alliance, about Georgian Dream, and about Ivanishvili himself. Is this a real political organisation or a philanthropist's hobby? Is the collaboration with Alasania, generally considered to be one of the smartest opposition politicians, a partnership which can last? And, even if it holds, can the opposition win? Interviews conducted by the author with both Ivanishvili and Alasania in late November, as part of a trip organised by their public relations advisers, helps to shed light on the movement which has shaken up Georgian politics.

Ivanishvili: the return of the prodigal son

Ivanishvili was born in Chorvila, a village in the hills of west-central Georgia. He went to Moscow as a student and stayed there, making his fortune in the 1990s in real estate, retail, construction, iron ore mining, and banking – he stayed clear of strategic, highly prized and dangerous sectors like oil and gas².

He came back to Georgia more and more in the new millennium, particularly after the bloodless Rose Revolution of 2003 ushered in Saakashvili and his team of young, pro-Western liberals. In his home region and in Tbilisi, he has acquired the reputation of a kind of benign Keyzer Söze³: his hand is everywhere through his philanthropy, but without any visible signature. In his home region he has funded hospitals, factories, a wedding centre, and a military training facility; in Tbilisi he has helped to restore the national opera. He also gave regular stipends to hundreds of cultural and artistic figures – all anonymously.

His support for the government soured after the authorities crushed anti-government demonstrations in 2007. "I was wrong to believe in Saakashvili", he says. The 2008 war was another turning point. He began quietly supporting opposition groups before announcing his own entry into political life in October.

Ivanishvili insists that his motives for going into politics are purely altruistic and patriotic. "I am not a public person" he says, but entering the race to unseat the UNM was not a matter of choice; it was a necessary step for the country. Already fabulously wealthy (his personal fortune is estimated at \$5.5

¹ 'Ivanishvili Launches Public Movement' *Civil Georgia* 11 December 2011. Available at: <http://goo.gl/A0Niz>

² Stevenson, W 'The Good Oligarch' *Prospect Magazine* July 2010. Available at: <http://goo.gl/i9Wae>

³ Ed. The shadowy puppet master from the 90s film *The Usual Suspects*



billion, around half the state budget) and famously private, it is clear he has not gone into politics for personal gain.

Critics have accused him of being pro-Russian, or – more conspiratorially – a Kremlin agent sent to overthrow the Georgian government. This accusation has been voiced by Petre Tsiskarishvili, head of the parliamentary majority, among others⁴ – his coalition partner Alasania dismisses the accusations as “horseshit”.

The government appears to be taking no chances, however. Previously a Russian citizen, he was granted Georgian citizenship in 2004; in 2010, he was granted French citizenship too. After he entered politics, this was cited as the reason to remove his Georgian citizenship (as an individual may not hold two at once), despite repeated declarations that he would renounce his others. A presidential order in October stripping him of his Georgian nationality was upheld at the end of December by a court⁵.

He insists, quite reasonably, that the decision is political in nature. The decision blocks him from setting up his own political party. Undeterred, he said in conversation that he would simply put his brother or his son as head of the party to ensure that his name remains on the sheet. Although there is no doubt that the government is acting unfairly, his solution raises question about his ego. If Saakashvili stepped back from politics and installed a family member as the leader of UNM, the opposition would rightly blast it as nepotistic and opaque. Establishing a dynasty is hardly in the spirit of transparency and accountability which Ivanishvili espouses.

More generally, his conception of his political role is a world away from the partisan, winner-takes-all approach of most post-Soviet politicians. He sees himself staying in frontline politics for just two or three years as one of a troika of posts – President, Prime Minister and Speaker – of which the other two would be held by his allies in Free Democrats and the Republican Party.

The problem, he says, is not the president so much as a lack of political culture. Having helped to foster this, and having strengthened accountability and respect for the democratic process, he would move to the background or even to the parliamentary opposition, there to act as a benign force on the new Georgian democracy.

Depending on your point of view, this is either an admirable civic spirit or a remarkable confidence bordering on arrogance. Analyst Tom De Waal has written of Ivanishvili that Georgia “does not need another Messiah”, who believes that the solution to the country’s problems is nothing more than their own personal intervention⁶.

Certainly, Ivanishvili seems entirely convinced of his own abilities. “A force has appeared”, he says, “which can stop the government from moving the country towards catastrophe.” For a man with no political experience, such iron-clad determination in his ability to overthrow the ruling party and reshape the country’s political culture in less than five years is remarkable.

To shore up his expertise, Ivanishvili has recruited a team of experts to craft policies in domestic and foreign affairs. On some issues his views are fully formed already. Dismissing the government’s accusations that he is close to Russian leader Vladimir Putin, he insists that Russia was the aggressor in the 2008 war over the rebel province of South Ossetia, although Saakashvili “could have made better choices” in avoiding Moscow’s trap.

⁴ ‘Ruling Party MPs Speak of ‘New Pro-Russian Center’ around Ivanishvili’ *Civil.ge* 8 November 2011. Available at: <http://goo.gl/jp4bz>

⁵ ‘Ivanishvili Loses Court Case over Citizenship’ *Civil.ge* 28 December 2011. Available at: <http://goo.gl/Y7pmU>

⁶ De Waal, T ‘The Titan of Tbilisi’ *Foreign Policy* 30 November 2011. Available at: <http://goo.gl/8t0Ya>



Nonetheless he bluntly acknowledges the fact that Putin is not going anywhere and that Russia must be dealt with frankly and directly. With the war and the country's democratic deficit making NATO and EU membership a distant dream, repairing ties cannot be outsourced. "Nobody will build a good relationship with Russia for us", he says ruefully. President Saakashvili fails to acknowledge this, and any willingness for dialogue with Moscow is taken as evidence of being part of a murky Kremlin plot. This is despite the fact that 73% of Georgians support dialogue, according to a January 2012 poll by the International Republican Institute⁷.

Ivanishvili is also very clear on the government's other shortcomings. Tackling low-level corruption and liberalising the economy, he argues, has diverted attention from Saakashvili's suppression of dissent (often under the guise of preventing further Russian threats), control of the media and impetuous decision-making. The president, Ivanishvili says, "uses the constitution as his personal notebook." Enforcing the rule of law will be paramount.

His religious beliefs have attracted some attention in staunchly Orthodox Georgia. In one of his only interviews before entering politics, with Russia's *Vedemosti* in 2005, he said that he was a "materialist". Since then he has backtracked, and was insistent that he was a Christian. He has quietly contributed a significant sum to Sameba Cathedral, a vast new church which dominates the Tbilisi skyline, which seems like a genuine act of piety rather than a cynical ploy (especially as much of it was funded some time ago).

Since entering politics he has made an ally in Georgia's Patriarch, the most popular man in the country by a significant margin, who backed his quest for citizenship⁸. The Ivanishvili camp has been keen to flag up the regular meetings between the country's holiest man and its richest, knowing that blessing by the Patriarch could give a major boost in the polls.

Ivanishvili is clearly passionate about his entry into politics and the issues facing Georgia, but also measured and restrained. He seems perpetually cordial and unflappable. Enconced in his futuristic business centre above Tbilisi, he could be talking about his stock prices rather than his country. This may be an asset or a liability.

Irakli Alasania: The Pragmatist

Where Ivanishvili seems every inch the urbane businessman, his closest political partner Irakli Alasania looks and sounds like a Georgian everyman. We first meet in Nikozi, a village near the South Ossetian border where the locals crowd around Alasania in the snow to complain about their lack of heating.

Alasania, clad in a leather jacket, listens to them with a furrowed brow, promising to raise the issue in parliament (the Free Democrats have one MP). He visits the homes of locals – unemployed men, an elderly couple whose house was shattered during the war and is still in tatters – and seems to communicate with empathy and a man-of-the-people touch. At the café in the town of Gori where we hold the interview, he goes to the counter to pay himself: perhaps a stage-managed touch, but it feels genuine.

Alasania was Georgia's Ambassador to the UN during the war with Russia before he left the government to go into opposition, frustrated at what he saw as Saakashvili's blundering into the Russian trap and the government's lack of transparency. Before his UN post he was the

⁷ Available at: <http://goo.gl/EYyOm>

⁸ 'Georgia Church Leader: Ivanishvili Should Have Georgian Citizenship' *Civil.ge* 13 November 2011. Available at: <http://goo.gl/9aLA2>



government's point man on settling the conflict over Abkhazia, the other rebel province. His father was a Georgian colonel who was killed in Sukhumi, the Georgian capital, during the war with the separatists in 1993.

Far from making him a bellicose nationalist, this history has led Alasania to seek moderation and compromise, a goal which was destroyed in the war of 2008. He decries Saakashvili's continued rhetoric on Abkhazia and South Ossetia and paints a disconcerting picture of the president's insistence on regaining control of the two provinces as soon as possible.

Saakashvili is still saying the same thing: in his New Year's message, he said that – as Jews wish to meet each other 'next year in Jerusalem' - Georgians should begin a tradition of wishing to meet "next year in Sukhumi", the Abkhaz capital. Hardly the mark of a conciliator.

Alasania's pragmatic streak – in foreign and domestic affairs - is a marked contrast with the incumbent and indeed with his grandstanding coalition partner. For instance, although Ivanishvili concedes that police reform and changes in the university admission system are positive outcomes of Saakashvili's tenure, Alasania – who has served at the heart of government – is more willing to admit his former boss's achievements. "I believe he was *sincere* in talking about democracy and liberalism", he says.

But Alasania believes that Saakashvili created a model in which power was concentrated in the executive out of perceived necessity: an authoritarian model of government was required to push through the reforms which Georgia so sorely needed. Saakashvili's regular citation of Singapore as a model – which Alasania slams as a "crazy idea" – is instructive, given the 30-year role of Lee Kuan Yew in crushing corruption and liberalising the economy at the expense of the democratic process.

All told, Alasania is a much lower-key figure than Ivanishvili (both in character and in poll ratings). His lack of bombast has been something of a drawback in Georgian politics so far, but his new partnership gives him an opportunity to harness his pragmatic politics to Ivanishvili's well-financed publicity machine.

Advantages and drawbacks of the coalition

For both parties, the coalition has its advantages. For Ivanishvili, it provides an opportunity to learn from an experienced politician, albeit one whose strength to date has been in policy rather than electoral politics. Alone, Ivanishvili could seem something of a rogue outsider, without any political allies and without experience of key policy issues. By embedding himself within Georgia's political landscape, the billionaire may broaden his appeal without losing any of his core attributes – his philanthropic record and his business acumen.

For Alasania, the alliance provides him with additional firepower, an arrangement he sums up as "my politics and his resources". Within the context of the campaign, Ivanishvili's war chest can be considered more or less limitless. If he is willing to put those resources at the disposal of his coalition partners – which is a very significant question – Free Democrats and the Republicans will be able to spread their message far more effectively than at present.

Although Georgia's media environment will remain skewed in the government's favour, Ivanishvili's funds can pay for the technical infrastructure of an election race, from regional campaign offices to vehicles for transporting activists. This organisational aspect could be critical. As one analyst has argued, "[a]lmost overnight, the Georgian government had to contend with an opposition that can



use resources and afford the same kind of expensive modern campaign and infrastructure that in recent Georgian elections has only been within the provenance of the UNM⁹.

There are also risks. Ivanishvili may feel compromised or limited by his coalition partners, who are currently polling much lower than he is. Although Alasania and Usupashvili are not particularly polarising figures – like, for example, former Parliament Speaker Nino Burjanadze – they may detract from what he perceives as his own brand and his own message. His history in the cut-throat world of Russian business is unlikely to have taught him to dilute control of his operations.

For Alasania, lacking the resources and the star power of Ivanishvili, the danger of losing control of the movement is magnified. He implicitly concedes that Ivanishvili's overwhelming ambition could have its drawbacks: "We Georgians should *never* give one man overwhelming power", he warns. The public launch of Georgian Dream was a symbolic demonstration, with the coalition partners relegated to the wings whilst Ivanishvili's non-political associates filled the stage.

The biggest concern for both the Free Democrats and the Republicans, therefore, is ensuring that their parties are not marginalised by a supremely confident and supremely well-resourced Ivanishvili. At the moment this is a remote danger, but one which the coalition partners are no doubt pondering. Ivanishvili hits the headlines and seems to genuinely spook the government: Alasania and Usupashvili do not.

Prospects

All of which circles around the most fundamental question – can the coalition win a majority in the election? Ivanishvili is utterly confident that he can, but Alasania, whilst determined, is more equivocal.

Independent polling in Georgia is hard to come by, but according to the estimates which exist, the coalition is still significantly behind the UNM. One poll released by the Institute of Social Studies and Analysis puts the coalition at 32% and the UNM at 36%. Another, by the Institute for Polling and Marketing, gives the UNM 42% and Ivanishvili's coalition 18%¹⁰.

During the interviews, both men insisted that their analysts believed they were actually polling much closer to the first figure, around 30-40% If the truth is somewhere in between, the coalition as a whole is still far off overturning the UNM's majority.

Partly this is a result of the government's genuine popularity and its political organisation, which is impressive by Georgia's standards. Partly it reflects manipulation of the media and heavy-handed tactics to pressure the public into voting for the UNM ("ski masks and submachine guns", says an adviser to the coalition, describing government tactics in western Georgia). Partly it reflects the opposition's inexperience and youth.

To have a reasonable chance of winning a majority, the coalition needs three things. Firstly it needs unity. Public apathy in Georgia will not be overcome, and the 'culture of fear' which both partners decry eroded, if the only credible opposition bloc spends its time in internal fighting or threatens to crack up. Ensuring a smooth working arrangement between the parties, and achieving complete understanding on how they are presented to the electorate, is essential for this.

⁹ Mitchell, L 'The Georgian Government's Goldilocks Problem' *The Faster Times* 4 January 2012. Available at: <http://goo.gl/IMGtj>

¹⁰ Available at: <http://goo.gl/u7mjW>



From the interviews both seem confident on the subject, and their acknowledgement of the risks is welcome, but the election is still some way off and cracks could easily appear. Alasania insists that Free Democrats and the Republicans will work to limit the risks of Ivanishvili accruing too much power, but the extent of their influence remains to be seen.

Secondly, the coalition will need a nationwide presence. This is something which opposition groups in Georgia have never managed to achieve so far: their appeal has been mostly limited to the urban intelligentsia of Tbilisi. Setting up local offices and spreading a clear message to the provinces – which is achievable using Ivanishvili’s resources and organisational clout – is vital, and is understood by the parties as such.

Thirdly, the coalition needs an articulate message, one that goes beyond simply ‘not Saakashvili’. Even accounting for manipulation of the media and heavy-handed tactics, the president remains more popular than the alternatives. The coalition partners’ vision sounds excellent in principle but is at risk of falling prey to oversimplification: more democracy, more prosperity, more peace. Without condoning the government’s failings, reality is more complicated than this.

However given Georgia’s political apathy and its predilection for personalities over policies, a vague platform may not be such a bad thing if backed up by the right individuals. It seems that the coalition has them: in Alasania, the experienced international diplomat, with a close personal history of involvement with the country’s most pressing issues; in Ivanishvili, a God-fearing philanthropist and successful businessman.

Time will tell if the coalition can endure. It will have to ensure attacks from without – the government’s attempts to sideline Ivanishvili, in a way which it has never done to Alasania, are not over yet. Before the elections, it will continue to lean on all its administrative and judicial resources to retain its dominance and marginalise Georgian Dream.

Just as importantly, the coalition will have to endure pressures from within. As well as star power, the force which overturns the rule of the UNM will need political experience and an understanding of policy: this is only achievable if the coalition partners work together. On his own, Alasania lacks the resources and the branding; alone, Ivanishvili lacks the political expertise.

In the long run the challenge is to govern well, not just win the election. Whether or not the partners are comrades in arms, or are just in a marriage of convenience, will define whether they can meet this task.