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Ivanishvili's Georgian Passport Is Redundant

By Paul Rimple

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On Oct. 5, Georgian billionaire and philanthropist Bidzina Ivanishvili dropped a political cluster bomb in Tbilisi when he announced his plans to establish a party and personally take on President Mikheil Saakashvili's machine in the 2012 parliamentary elections. Authorities reacted as expected.

First, the civil registry revoked the Georgian citizenship of Ivanishvili, who holds passports of several countries, thus preventing him from holding any office or establishing a political party. Next came the accusation of being a Russian stooge. Then came the intimidations.

On Oct. 11, Ivanishvili's son, Bera, was making a music video titled "Georgian Dream," a song dedicated to his father's political bid. The producer received an anonymous phone call that compelled him to stop production. The cast and crew had to wait several hours before being permitted to go home, leaving the clip's intended finale unfilmed.

Nobody had a problem with Ivanishvili when he was bankrolling the construction of Georgian churches, hospitals and roads or passing out cash to the needy, but when he decided to step out of his reclusive megacosm to challenge Saakashvili, the authorities hit the panic button.

Georgian law is clear on dual citizenship, yet Ivanishvili's status was made public in March 2011, when Forbes noted his passport collection in its list of world billionaires. Authorities revoked his citizenship after Ivanishvili announced that he would enter politics and terminate his Russian and French passports.

In a pair of stream-of-consciousness open letters, Ivanishvili has offered to buy out any television station for three times its value. He identified exactly who he considers a "pseudo-opposition" puppet and has also challenged anybody to prove his ties to a Russian conspiracy.

While the letters are entertaining, there is nothing in them that indicates that Ivanishvili has a political vision, which follows an unfortunate trend in Georgian opposition politics. Anybody can criticize the government, but a lone savior's promise to "come to power" is not a political platform.

Annulling Ivanishvili's citizenship cannot prevent him from funding somebody else, and intimidating a music video crew only supports his claims that Saakashvili has a monopoly on power. But allowing Ivanishvili to freely pursue politics would demonstrate Georgia's commitment to join the "trans-Atlantic democratic community of states" is sincere and that the government is confident in the democratic institutions it has established.

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