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A Paranoia Epidemic Grips Many in Georgia

By Paul Rimple

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There is the Georgia with new roads, buildings and parks and policemen in new cars and uniforms who never take bribes. It's the Georgia the World Bank has twice named the top reformer in the world and former U.S. President George W. Bush called the "beacon of democracy." This, we know, is all because of Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili.

Then there is the Georgia where people take the batteries out of their phones when they talk politics. They unplug the television set if it is part of the Silknet network because they believe that Interior Minister Vano Merabishvili owns that telecommunications provider and that he is listening. They whisper that they would support Bidzina Ivanishvili but are afraid of what would happen to their family members if they did.

Their fears may seem extreme, but they will tell you how their relatives or their neighbor's relatives have been victims of the Georgian criminal justice system, where judges — not prosecutors — convince the innocent that it's better to accept a plea bargain and pay than to

fight, lose and end up in an overcrowded prison cell for years.

Fear, experts say, is a negative effect induced by a perceived threat. The threat can be entirely fictitious, but the resulting fear is real enough. Today in Georgia, an epidemic of paranoia is gripping the nation and is affecting all segments of society, including the presidential administration.

Since Ivanishvili announced his plans to organize an opposition against Saakashvili, authorities have stripped him and his wife of their Georgian citizenship, seized more than $3 million of his bank's cash and announced that Ivanishvili possessed items of an "occult character used to predict the future." They also sacked Zurab Abashidze and Victor Dolidze, two city lawmakers belonging to Our Georgia-Free Democrats, an opposition party associated to Ivanishvili.

Saakashvili finally came out and stated a "serious opposition force" is trying to throw the country into the past. And this is just the beginning. Meanwhile, the major television networks have been busy smearing Ivanishvili. Some countries call it slander, but in Georgia it's "free media."

The upsurge in fear is a dangerous condition that results in irrational behavior. A nation that unplugs electronic devices before they talk in their homes needs a government to reassure them that their fears are misguided. Instead, they have a government manic over one man's aspiration to enter politics.

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