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# Billionaire Takes on Saakashvili

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Supporters greeting Ivanishvili, unseen, after the Tbilisi congress Sunday. **David Mdzinarishvili**

TBILISI, Georgia — A billionaire in Georgia has sued authorities for revoking his citizenship and launched a campaign aimed at unseating President Mikheil Saakashvili.

Bidzina Ivanishvili, a French and Russian national and a Forbes-listed magnate worth $5.5 billion, had his Georgian citizenship revoked in October after authorities learned about his French passport.

Georgia said he was granted citizenship in 2004 and obtained his French citizenship in 2009, in violation of a law that prevents someone from acquiring other citizenship after getting a Georgian one.

But Ivanishvili claimed that the move followed his harsh criticism of Saakashvili, whom he accused of a crackdown on opposition and increasingly authoritarian policies.

Ivanishvili made a fortune in banking and retail businesses in Russia and had for years stayed away from politics.

A court in the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, started hearings Monday in Ivanishvili's case.

On Sunday, Ivanishvili also launched Georgian Dream, a public movement he says will challenge Saakashvili's rule and push for a free-and-fair parliamentary election next year and the presidential vote in 2013.

Several thousand people gathered for Georgian Dream's first congress held in Tbilisi's music hall. Among the crowd was several stars of Georgian culture, art and sports as well as former ministers and opposition politicians.

Ivanishvili's son Bera opened the event with a performance of his rap song "Georgian Dream."

"The country's leadership has completely exhausted ... and has become the main obstacle for society and state development," Bidzina Ivanishvili, 55, told the meeting.

"The time has come for all of us to wake up and to fulfill the Georgian dream," he said.

Saakashvili, 43, who swept to power on a wave of street demonstrations in 2003, has since faced down popular protests against his rule by opponents who accuse him of curbing freedoms in the Caucasus state, which is at a crossroads of oil links between the Caspian Sea and the West.

Analysts say Ivanishvili poses a credible threat to the government, partly due to his huge financial resources but also as he is untarnished by the political machinations of the past.

The businessman has been denounced by the Georgian government as a "Kremlin stooge" and stripped of his Georgian citizenship.

He was originally granted a Georgian passport under a presidential decree signed by Saakashvili in 2004, when he returned to Georgia from Russia. Georgia does not permit multiple citizenship.

The businessman says he is ready to renounce his Russian citizenship and sell his businesses in Russia — including a chain of Russian drug stores and Moscow real estate.

Georgia's central bank in October opened an investigation into a bank owned by Ivanishvili, and police have seized millions of dollars from its accounts on suspicion of money laundering.

Georgian football captain Kakha Kaladze, who attended the congress on Sunday together with Ukrainian football star Andrei Shevchenko, said he had decided to quit the Georgian national team in protest against the authorities.

*(Reuters, AP)*

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