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Saakashvili, It Seems, Will Not Pull a Putin

By Paul Rimple

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In a move that took everybody by surprise, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili plucked Vano Merabishvili from his imposing position as the interior minister and appointed him prime minister. Parliament then quickly passed a bill increasing the prime minister's authority. The baton has been passed. Saakashvili, it seems, won't pull a Putin.

Merabishvili is perhaps the second most powerful figure in the Georgian government. He directed Georgia's remarkable police reform and designed a well-coordinated law enforcement policy from scratch. The police who have reduced the crime rate and beat opposition protesters into submission are all his.

As a political figure, the laconic big gun operated behind a curtain like the Wizard of Oz. But without the curtain, Merabishvili talks just like any other Georgian politician.

"I plan to fight against unemployment like I fought for years against crime and corruption,"

he said.

On July 3, Merabishvili announced his four-year, $12.2 billion program called More Benefit to the People, which will be centered on employment, agriculture development and health care, the same issues that opposition politician Bidzina Ivanishvili has based his campaign on. This package includes $3.6 billion to increase monthly pensions, $1.8 billion for social aid programs, $2.4 billion for agriculture and $2.4 billion for education. Merabishvili also promised vouchers worth about $600 to each family in Georgia. The country's annual federal budget is about $4.2 billion.

Previous prime ministers also had programs designed to relieve poverty that looked good on paper but fell far short of their stated goals. The difference now is that Ivanishvili has put the hot foot on the Saakashvili government. Merabishvili even acknowledged that the government discovered it "knows too little about the problem of unemployment," a damning disclosure in any other country, but he quickly established a new employment ministry.

Some people say Merabishvili has been demoted, which is nonsense. He instructed Saakashvili to put former Defense Minister Bacho Akhalaia in his place. Others are calling Merabishvili's program suspiciously leftist, which is also bunk. It is simply a populist response to Ivanishvili.

Ivanishvili says Merabishvili's appointment "will not save these authorities." He's partially right. The appointment itself is meaningless unless the government follows through on its objectives to create jobs. Putting Merabishvili in charge of parliament is a sign that after eight years of ignoring the issue, the government is earnest about confronting it this time.

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