

Georgia Freezes Opposition Footballer's Bank Funds

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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TBILISI, Georgia — A Georgian court froze the bank accounts of retired footballer and opposition leader Kakha Kaladze in a money-laundering investigation that opponents of President Mikheil Saakashvili's government say is a campaign of legal harassment.

The football star, who won the Champions League twice with Italy's AC Milan, will run against the ruling party in October parliamentary elections as part of the newly formed Georgian Dream coalition led by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili.

"It's obvious that it's a political persecution," said Maya Panjikidze, a spokeswoman for Georgian Dream. "We consider the court's decision illegal."

The Prosecutor General's Office said in a statement Friday that Kaladze was under suspicion after he received \$6 million in his bank account and then withdrew 1.6 million lari (\$97,000) "in a short period of time."

Also Friday, a Georgian court released assets seized from Ivanishvili after he paid a \$49 million fine.

Ivanishvili's Cartu Bank, JSC Cartu Group, and a 21.7-percent share in Progress Bank were seized in June after the billionaire refused to pay a multimillion-dollar fine.

At the time, Ivanishvili argued that it was illegal to confiscate the assets, saying he had passed all shares in the companies to his son. The authorities, however, said the asset transfer had not been registered with the Georgian central bank.

Ivanishvili paid the 80-million lari fine last week but said the penalty was illegal.

Ivanishvili, 56, whose fortune is estimated at \$6.4 billion by Forbes magazine, has united and breathed new life into the fractured opposition, angering the government, which still leads opinion polls.

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