

Georgian Opposition Claims Repression

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Purported members of Georgia's media interviewing journalist Ekaterine Dugladze. She sees it as harassment.

BATUMI, Georgia — Wherever she goes, journalist Ekaterine Dugladze is followed by a group of men carrying video cameras. Saying they're reporters, they shove microphones in her face and pester her with meaningless questions and vulgar remarks.

Dugladze, who works for an opposition-funded news agency, says they're henchmen of President Mikheil Saakashvili sent to harass her.

"They prevent me not only from working but even from moving around," Dugladze said. "This is the authorities' way of responding to the questions we ask them."

Saakashvili boasts that Georgia has become a "beacon of democracy" since he took office in 2004.

But critics say that democracy is dimming. Opposition leaders, watchdogs and journalists complain of official intimidation and accuse the government of resorting to Soviet methods of clamping down on dissent.

The small but strategically located South Caucasus nation is the West's most loyal ally in a troubled region.

The United States has indicated that it will closely monitor the Oct. 1 parliamentary election and the state of democracy there.

Ahead of the vote, Bidzina Ivanishvili, the multibillionaire who leads the largest opposition grouping, has been hit with gargantuan fines and stripped of his citizenship.

The global watchdog Amnesty International last month urged the government to "stop violence against [the] opposition ahead of elections."

In February, UN special rapporteur Maina Kiai voiced alarm over an "increasing climate of fear and intimidation against opposition parties, labor unions and members of nongovernmental organizations."

There's no doubt that the energetic, U.S.-educated Saakashvili has driven impressive reforms since leading the peaceful Rose Revolution demonstrations in 2003 that drove out a sclerotic and corrupt regime.

The traffic police, once infamous for extorting bribes from motorists, have been transformed into a respected force.

Formerly suffocating bureaucracy has been streamlined through the establishment of offices where citizens can obtain birth certificates or register businesses in a matter of minutes.

Saakashvili has rooted out corruption in the education system by introducing standardized university admission exams, ending the notorious practice of parents bribing university officials to get their children accepted.

Georgia now ranks 64th on the Corruption Perception Index compiled by Transparency International, compared with 130th in 2005.

The president has also assiduously pursued closer relations with the European Union and NATO, and Georgia has contributed sizable troop contingents to the international military campaign in Afghanistan.

"Saakashvili's best legacy will be as Georgia's great modernizer," said Thomas de Waal, a Caucasus scholar at the Carnegie Endowment.

But critics say Saakashvili's reforms came at the expense of democratic freedoms.

In 2007, police used tear gas to break up demonstrations calling for his ouster and temporarily banned newscasts by independent television stations.

Saakashvili's popularity also soured after the devastating five-day war with Russia in 2008, which damaged the impoverished nation's infrastructure, turned tens of thousands of people into refugees and tightened Russia's grip on two separatist regions.

Last year, police violently dispersed protesters who had occupied the capital's main avenue

for days. A policeman and a demonstrator died after being hit by a car speeding from the scene.

The 56-year-old Ivanishvili, whose party is called Georgian Dream, made most of his estimated \$6.4 billion fortune in the Russian banking and mining industries and has spent hundreds of millions of dollars on charity projects in Georgia.

Ivanishvili's entry into politics has energized and united Georgia's notoriously fragmented opposition, and he has emerged as Saakashvili's main opponent.

Saakashvili's party remains Georgia's most popular, but Georgian Dream is gaining ground.

A June opinion survey by the U.S.-based National Democratic Institute showed that Saakashvili's United National Movement leads the polls with 36 percent support, down from 47 percent in February, while Georgian Dream has 18 percent, up from 10 percent.

"I've taken the mask off his face. He is not a democrat; he is a pure dictator," Ivanishvili said in an interview at his residence outside the Black Sea resort city of Batumi. "It doesn't even smell of democracy here."

Ever since Ivanishvili announced his political ambitions, he has faced an array of legal actions against him.

The government stripped Ivanishvili of his Georgian passport last year because, while Georgian from birth, he also holds a French passport from years living in France, and Georgia prohibits dual nationality.

That effectively banned Ivanishvili from the race. But Saakashvili relented under Western pressure and pushed through a law allowing EU citizens to run for office.

Ivanishvili also had Russian citizenship from living in Russia during the 1990s, but he renounced that when he launched his campaign.

The authorities have accused Ivanishvili of buying votes by handing out free satellite TV dishes and offering cars to his party and other campaign funding violations. He has been fined tens of millions of dollars.

A top Ivanishvili ally, retired football star Kakhi Kaladze, has had his bank accounts frozen due to suspected money laundering.

On Friday, the Tbilisi City Court ruled that Kaladze's contributions to Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream were illegal and ordered him to pay a fine of more than \$10 million within a week, but it kept his accounts blocked.

Meanwhile, Ivanishvili's activists complain that local officials seek to prevent them from campaigning and meeting voters across Georgia.

"By pulling out all the stops to block a legitimate political rival, Saakashvili has to some extent damaged his democratic credentials," said Gemma Ferst, a Caucasus analyst for the Eurasia Group, a New-York based political risk consultancy.

Nodar Chachua, a journalist at a TV channel funded by Ivanishvili, said security officials have demanded that he spy and inform on his colleagues and Ivanishvili and threatened to release a video of him having sex with an ex-girlfriend if he refused.

"This is not a democracy. These are typical Soviet methods of dealing with society," said Chachua, 26, who works for Channel 9, owned by Ivanishvili's wife. Prosecutors are investigating his claims.

Giga Bokeria, head of Georgia's security council and a top ally of Saakashvili, dismisses allegations that freedom of speech is under threat, saying the government in fact tolerates a raucous, anything-goes press environment. He would not comment on Chachua's allegations until the end of the probe.

Georgian media are "very active [and] very critical, and sometimes there is an aggressive message toward the current government, which is again completely legitimate and legal," Bokeria said.

The security chief cited a recently enacted law that increases Georgians' access to television networks critical of the government for the next two months ahead of the election as evidence of the government's commitment to freedom of speech.

Bokeria said the men trailing Dugladze, the journalist, are rival reporters who are copying the opposition network's aggressive methods.

"This was a new tactic established by Info 9 itself, and then the reaction came which [mimics] their behavior toward local public officials," Bokeria said. "We have no authority over how media outlets on either side of the political spectrum behave."

The Saakashvili camp also portrays Ivanishvili as a Kremlin stooge, pointing to Russia as the source of his wealth.

"In today's Russia, these kinds of things do not happen without close affiliation with ... the Kremlin," Bokeria said. Ivanishvili denies those allegations.

Aslan Chanidze, who runs a media freedom NGO in Batumi, said Ivanishvili may have his own faults, but his entry into politics will make the election and Georgian politics as a whole more competitive.

"When Misha came to power, everybody fell in love with him, but in Georgia, you must understand that you cannot make an idol of one person," Chanidze said, using Saakashvili's nickname. "I don't want there to be just one party; I want there to be many parties. I want pluralism."

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