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Saakashvili and His Rival Are Afraid of Each Other

By Paul Rimple

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When President Mikheil Saakashvili wakes in the morning, the first thing he sees out the window of his glass-domed presidential palace is another house made of glass and steel, only this house cost millions of dollars more and is on a higher hill. This is the home of his political rival, billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili.

On Oct. 1, one of these men will claim victory before the last ballots to the parliamentary elections are counted. What worries a lot of people is that it's the country as a whole that may end up losing the elections.

When Ivanishvili announced plans a year ago to challenge Saakashvili, the country instantly split into two camps: for and against. Although Saakashvili has been trying to spin Ivanishvili as a pro-Russian, anti-U.S. dinosaur bent on dragging Georgia back to its corrupt past, the truth is, their ideological differences are about as divergent as their homes.

They are both pro-NATO and pro-European integration, both aspire toward Georgia's territorial unification, both see the unemployment problem as the government's primary domestic challenge, and both have no use for each other.

This last point is particularly important. They don't hate each other. They fear each other.

Saakashvili is afraid Ivanishvili's money will corrupt the political process. Ironically, it's the lack of democratic institutions that would help prevent the political buyout that Ivanishvili is soapboxing. He is scared Saakashvili's authoritarian tendencies are going to destroy the nation, but Ivanishvili hasn't convinced anybody that he can do a better job. It doesn't help matters that he has surrounded himself with a hodgepodge team of opposition leaders — from liberals to extreme nationalists to a former football star. The only thing uniting them besides Ivanishvili's finances is a common enmity: Saakashvili.

Ivanishvili has promised to win by a large margin and has set out his own conditions for recognizing the election results. If he loses, people are afraid of violent confrontation. From day one, authorities have aggressively targeted Ivanishvili by imposing excessive fines and seizing his assets for alleged campaign violations. It is difficult to say whether Georgians still have the stomach for mass protests, and we also don't know if Saakashvili's police will restrain themselves from beating people if there are rallies, as they have in the past.

What we do know is the country has not been this polarized since 1991, and that's what people are most afraid of.

Paul Rimple is a journalist in Tbilisi.

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