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Saakashvili Gives Birth To a Real Opposition

By Paul Rimple

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About 10,000 people gathered Friday in front of Tbilisi's parliament building to hear President Mikheil Saakashvili and members of his United National Movement party, or UNM, bash Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili. The last time the UNM held an opposition rally was in 2003, when it led tens of thousands of people to protest rigged parliamentary elections and ended up overthrowing the regime of Eduard Shevardnadze. The times have truly changed.

Members of the UNM want us to believe that 30,000 people showed up while Ivanishvili's majority party, Georgian Dream, took credit for allowing 5,000 to peacefully gather to criticize them. Either way, the fact thousands and not hundreds of people came out is a sign that the UNM is still a relevant party.

Not all of the 10,000 people who attended the rally were UNM supporters. Some were chronic protesters that come out regardless of the message. Others were curious. The UNM is

rebranding itself as a new party that has learned from its mistakes. Convincing people that this is the case is one thing. Getting them to realize how important it is for the country to have a competent opposition is another.

Georgian Dream leader and speaker of parliament Davit Usupashvili understands this. He says the "survival" of UNM is the task of the Georgian democracy. Sadly, few of his colleagues share these sentiments.

Since coming into power, Georgia Dream has spared no efforts to make the UNM pay for its sins by trying to obliterate it. The new authorities have arrested a score of former UNM officials and have initiated investigations into Saakashvili's closest allies. Ivanishvili wants Saakashvili to answer questions about the 2008 war with Russia. Two days before the rally, Georgia Dream released declassified information on how Saakashvili spent public funds on extravagant holidays and luxurious gifts. In the experiment called democratization, Georgia hasn't yet figured out it should be nurturing democratic competition instead of eliminating it.

Nevertheless, we are witnessing a new era in Georgian politics where bills actually get debated and the president exercises his right to veto. The UNM is an opposition with a vision and experience. It is also the most competent body there is to keep Georgian Dream in check. Who cares how many came out to demonstrate on Friday? Finally, a political rally was held in Tbilisi in which nobody demanded that the leader of the ruling party to step down.

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