

Georgia's Honest Cops and Crooked Politicians

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The new government in Georgia arrested former Prime Minister Vano Merabishvili. That is no less significant an event than the late Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's driver winning the presidential election in mid-April.

It was Merabishvili who orchestrated the Georgian miracle of turning the notoriously corrupt police into an honest force that now doesn't take bribes — even large ones. In a country where stealing used to be a national pastime, with one-third of all convicted thieves in the Soviet Union from Georgia, Georgia's crime rate dropped to the lowest in the world.

Georgia's corrupt officials, who once prospered under former Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze from 1995 to 2003, returned to positions of power through the democratic elections of October 2011. They could not publicly complain that the police had denied them the right to kill and loot, so they fabricated corruption charges against the new authorities, focusing particularly on Merabishvili.

In an attempt to discredit the transparent state structures and police who refused to take bribes, Merabishvili's enemies claimed he was running an illegal construction business, killing people on the streets and taking a share of the profits from every gallon of gasoline sold in Georgia.

One of the charges sounds even more absurd than those brought by Russia's prosecutor general against opposition leader Alexei Navalny. Merabishvili is charged with confiscating a dacha that he really liked, handing over ownership to the Interior Ministry and visiting the dacha himself on occasion.

The original owner of the dacha, Zurab Lobzhanizde, was the director of the Madneuli mining company when Shevardnadze was president. Immediately after the Rose Revolution of 2003, Lobzhanizde fled to Switzerland, along with many other crooks and thieves holding government positions. The Madneuli company was sold at public auction, and, not surprising, Lobzhanizde's dacha, in addition to hundreds of others, were confiscated and put under the ownership of the Interior Ministry.

It turns out that the interior minister is accused of doing exactly what the law required of him: confiscating property abandoned by thieves who stole the properties in the first place.

The worst thing is not only that the criminals who have returned to power are now dismantling all of the reforms put in place by the previous leadership. The worst part is that Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream party won 70 percent to 80 percent of the vote in a by-election held in April, almost the same margin of victory that United Russia consistently claims.

Georgians have shown that the uninspired and ignorant masses have no need for successful reforms, transparent government or a favorable business climate. This is because the average person has no plans to go into business anyway. He is content to vote for a leader like multi-billionaire Ivanishvili who has furtively obtained great wealth and now promises to give everybody enough handouts to make them happy. The more farfetched his promises, the more the people believe him.

Considering what has happened in Georgia and Venezuela, I would like to ask the die-hard proponents of universal suffrage this question: Do you really think it is in everyone's best interests when the good guys are forced through elections to hand over authority to the bad guys?

After all, once they have their hands on the reins of power, the bad guys never let go.

Yulia Latynina hosts a political talk show on Ekho Moskvyy radio.

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