

Georgian Leaders Fall Out

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President and prime minister in public row over who should attend United Nations meeting.

Georgia's president and prime minister are both products of the governing coalition's election win in 2012, but they are finding it increasingly difficult to get on, in part due to confusion about which of them has seniority.

Some observers believe the answer is neither, and that real power still lies in the hands of Bidzina Ivanishvili, the wealthy businessman who led the Georgian Dream coalition to victory and then spent a year as prime minister.

Insiders say the tensions between Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili and President Giorgi Margvelashvili have been visible for some months, but they hit the headlines over the summer with a dispute over official protocol, specifically who should represent Georgia at this year's United Nations Climate Change conference.

After months of argument about who should go to the September 23 event, it is the prime minister rather than the president who is attending.

In post-Soviet Georgia, successive presidents were undisputed heads of state and held a lot of power. That began to change when Georgian Dream won the parliamentary election. Even though Mikheil Saakashvili had another year as president, the new administration began chipping away at his powers.

After Margvelashvili was elected in October 2013, constitutional changes came into force that transferred many of the powers formerly held by Georgian presidents to the country's parliament and prime minister. Ivanishvili stepped down in November, saying he was leaving political life, and the prime minister's job went to Garibashvili.

Earlier this year, the president was formally invited to the Climate Change Summit, but the prime minister's office issued a statement saying that he, not Margvelashvili, would be attending.

The president then told Rustavi-2 TV that the foreign ministry had withheld the UN's invitation addressed to him.

Deputy foreign minister David Zalkaliani explained that the UN letter had been mistakenly addressed to ex-president Saakashvili, and that his ministry had written back to point out the error. This was the reason for the delay, he said.

Both the president and the foreign ministry published the correspondence between them in support of their respective positions.

On September 11, Margvelashvili gave up, saying his trip to the UN trip had been "derailed".

"In my view, this was an improper step undertaken against the institution of president because of an interdepartmental stand-off, rather than in the interests of our state," he said added

A day before Margvelashvili's TV appearance, the Kviris Palitra weekly headlined an interview with Ivanishvili in which he openly criticised the president.

"It would be indelicate to send two separate delegations from a small, poor country to America. But this individual [Margvelashvili] isn't considering that and is continuing to compete. He thinks it's healthy competition," Ivanishvili said.

These comments polarised divisions on the issue between the Georgian Dream and the opposition minority in parliament, with the former reinforcing their backing for the prime minister.

"The matters that will be discussed at the UN are directly related to the work of government, so it's the head of government, the prime minister, who should go to New York," Georgian Dream politician Irakli Sesiashvili said. "It's as clear as daylight."

The United National Movement (UNM), Saakashvili's party ousted from power by Georgian Dream in 2012, accused Ivanishvili of undermining the president's role.

"It is a matter of shame for the government to be fighting the president and derailing his international trips on the instructions of some ordinary citizen," UNM parliamentarian Sergo Ratiani said.

In his September 11 statement, the president warned that attempts to stop him performing his proper functions would have a negative impact on the democratic process.

"If anyone believes that the country has to be in absolute unison, that there shouldn't be the normal balance of forces, or that power should be concentrated in one place, they don't understand what democracy is," he said.

The issue of how exactly executive powers are divided in the amended constitution and where the boundaries lie is a genuine one.

"Some chapters of the constitution haven't been worked through properly," Korneli Kakachia, associate professor of social and political sciences at Tbilisi State University, "and that gives rise to certain legal problems that affect the political process."

Despite lack of clarity in some areas, no one disputes that the president remains head of state, armed forces commander-in-chief, and the state's chief representative in foreign affairs.

Kakachia said the behind-the-scenes role Ivanishvili seemed to be playing was worrying.

"This confrontation has revealed another problematic aspect of Georgian democracy," he said. "It has become apparent that Ivanishvili de facto remains national leader and that he maintains his influence over Georgia's government and politics, without holding any position. In other words, he's governing from the shadows. This is a huge problem that's going to be a major flaw in Georgian politics over the next few years.

The next battleground seems to be a dispute about where the president is supposed to live. In the Kviris Palitri interview, Ivanishvili criticised Margvelashvili for moving into a palace built by Saakashvili. That prompted Georgian Dream members of parliament to propose a motion questioning whether the president should have such an enormous, money-draining residence.

Sopho Bukia is an IWPR-trained journalist who works for the Rustavi-2 broadcasting company.

[Corrected story: In the original version, we implied that we interviewed Zaal Anjaparidze when the quotes were taken from an internet posting. We also misidentified him. We apologise to Mr Anjaparidze for both errors. The offending parts are removed.]

Location: [Georgia](#)

Topic: [Political reform](#)

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