

New Georgian Leader Faces Up to Challenges

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President-elect Saakashvili begins to confront Georgia's economic collapse and endemic corruption.

After his resounding victory in last week's presidential election, Georgia's new leader Mikael Saakashvili faces both enormous expectations and immense challenges.

"My presidency will be government by the Georgian people," Saakashvili said shortly after his victory was confirmed. "The president of Georgia will be the friend of every family in the country. I will never leave anyone in trouble and I will never allow a single citizen to be humiliated."

Saakashvili won with more than 97 per cent of the vote. But this massive vote of confidence has a reverse side. Experts agree that ordinary Georgians want to see a radical change for the better in their lives and now they are pinning their hopes directly on the man whom they call simply "Misha".

Two domestic issues – cracking down on corruption and turning round the failing economy – are top on the president's immediate agenda, and ordinary people appear to believe they are the most critical problems facing Georgia:

The economy is in a disastrous state. The government has debts of 1.7 billion US dollars and the International Monetary Fund, IMF, suspended its credit programme last year. Western lending agencies have made positive noises about resuming aid to Georgia and an IMF delegation is due to come to Tbilisi in February to discuss restoring the programme.

But Niko Orvelashvili, director of Tbilisi's Institute of Economic Development, said he was worried that a number of leading businessmen who advised the former government and gave it financial support are still exerting influence. He doubts so far that Saakashvili's economic team, led by finance minister Zurab Nogaideli, is up to the task.

"What worries me is the new administration's attitude to economic problems," Orvelashvili said. "A man who simply lacks an economic way of thinking, and I mean the new finance minister Nogaideli, cannot be the key member of the economic team."

Orvelashvili warned, "I have had conversations with several representatives of different donor agencies and they all have the same position, as if they'd agreed among themselves: if the first tranches are spent intelligently and honestly, the aid will continue; if not, the credit of trust will be lost very quickly."

The president won immense popularity last year chiefly for his bold promises to attack high-level corruption in Georgia. Even before the election, a number of prominent figures, including the head of Georgian railways, the former energy minister and the head of the country's football federation have had criminal charges laid against them.

Saakashvili told journalists at the end of December that the interim government had started tackling the problem, by pursuing corrupt officials who had dubious foreign bank accounts.

"We have been in touch with the governments of at least seven countries with requests to find and freeze

their accounts and we've had a good response," Saakashvili said, promising that he would use "legal mechanisms" to have the money returned to Georgia.

"It is not only a question of social justice and filling up the state treasury. It is a kind of security for future presidents because in future these men would not only use this money to finance their television and radio stations and newspapers, which is normal, but would finance subversive activities, such as terrorist acts. That's why we have to get rid of this septic tooth."

Levan Ramishvili, one of the heads of the influential non-government Liberty Institute, welcomes this initiative as entirely legal and says it is a good way of swelling the budget to pay pensions and salaries.

"Saakashvili's coming to power stemmed from the inability of the former leadership of Georgia headed by Shevardnadze to solve these problems," Ramishvili said. "Shevardnadze frequently promised voters that his hand will not tremble when it comes to fighting corruption. It was this desire in society to end the syndrome of impunity that led to the change of regime in Georgia."

So far, Georgians report encouraging signs from both the traffic police and the tax authorities, who are not demanding bribes as much as they used to.

But Ramishvili cautioned that the anti-corruption drive would only work if it was carried out consistently. "Even though criminal charges have been opened against several former officials, I am not inclined to look at that optimistically," he said.

"First of all there has to be radical reform, not just cosmetic reform, in the law-enforcement agencies, especially in the prosecutor's office. We have to learn from the experience of countries like the United States, Italy and Hong Kong in fighting organised crime, and then use all our powers to arrest people."

One key problem remains which is how the new leader will deal with former president Shevardnadze and his family and entourage. Shevardnadze has repeatedly said that he intends to stay in Georgia. "I have spent all my life in Georgia, apart from a few years in Moscow in a top job, and I want to stay here," he told journalists after he resigned in November.

However, many experts expect him to leave the country. If the anti-corruption drive begins to touch people close to the former president, "you can't call it repression, but it won't be easy for him," said Ramishvili.

How far will the crackdown go? "Everything is possible, if you take into account that politics cannot be absolutely isolated from economics or law and because very few of those who have been in politics for the last ten years are completely pure," commented David Darchiashvili of Tbilisi's Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development.

"But you can't put everyone in jail, so some people will be forgiven some things. And those who most helped the victory of the revolution will be forgiven the most."

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