



Interview

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## After a Summer of Protests, Can Georgia's Government Regain Its Lost Trust?

*This summer's protests in Georgia led to changes to the country's electoral system. But the country's new Prime Minister, Giorgi Gakharia, is a man protesters wanted ousted from the last government, in which he led the Interior Ministry. In this interview with World Politics Review, Europe & Central Asia Program Director Olga Oliker and Analyst for EU Eastern Neighbourhood Olesya Vartanyan consider what Gakharia's tenure will bring, and how the parliamentary elections next year might play out in this atmosphere.*

Earlier this month, Georgia's Parliament approved a new government led by Giorgi Gakharia, a controversial former interior minister who was nominated by the ruling Georgian Dream party despite his role in a violent crackdown on anti-government protests that rocked the capital, Tbilisi, this summer. Gakharia will now try to restore public confidence in the government ahead of parliamentary elections that are expected to be held early next year. Meanwhile, the main opposition party, the United National Movement, or UNM, also has work to do if it hopes to retake power. In an email interview with WPR, Olga Oliker and Olesya Vartanyan of the International Crisis Group discuss the challenges facing both the ruling party and the opposition in Georgia.

### **What kind of message does the approval of Giorgi Gakharia as prime minister send to the opposition?**

It's something of a "put up and shut up" message from Georgian Dream, not just to the opposition in Parliament but also to protesters. During the mass demonstrations that took place last summer, protesters demanded changes to the electoral system to allow for

more proportional representation, which the government agreed to. Protesters also subsequently demanded that Gakharia step down as interior minister, a role from which he had ordered the violent dispersal of the protests. But instead of being ousted, he was promoted to prime minister, in a vote boycotted by opposition parties. That's a pretty clear message.

Gakharia's appointment is also a message to the opposition and to the country as a whole that Georgian Dream is planning to win the parliamentary elections that are expected early next year. The party's popularity has been declining for some time; in the 2018 presidential election, Georgian Dream's preferred candidate, Salome Zourabichvili, only won after being forced into a runoff, a far cry from the landslide victories of years past. Gakharia is close to Georgian Dream's founder and chairman, Bidzina Ivanishvili, as are the new defense minister, Irakli Gharibashvili, and the interior minister, Vakhtang Gomelauri. With these personnel moves, the ruling party is ensuring that the government is united going into the campaign.

The next election will be an important test for Georgian Dream. The recently passed electoral reforms eliminated the required minimum

threshold for parties to enter Parliament, which means there will be a greater diversity of parties. The majority party will therefore need to work harder to secure majorities for its laws. But a unified party will not be enough for Georgian Dream to secure a win; it will also need a policy agenda that rebuilds its popularity. Whether its leaders have a real plan for that is unclear.

**What policy issues is Gakharia likely to focus on as prime minister? What are the most pressing challenges he faces in implementing his agenda?**

Gakharia and his team have two goals that don't fully align with one another. First is to win in the upcoming parliamentary elections, which means we can expect the government to focus on social programs to help the most vulnerable. But voters are frustrated that Georgian Dream has failed to spur the economic development and growth they expected during the party's seven years in power. Finally making good on that promise would require a different sort of reform agenda: one that could attract foreign investment but might also involve public sector spending cuts, which could prove less popular in the short term.

Implementing reforms in the midst of an election campaign would be difficult, but Gakharia may be up to the task. He forcefully pushed through reforms during his time as interior minister, including the creation of a human rights department, the professionalization of regional law enforcement investigators, and increased transparency for crime statistics.

He will still have to deal with the fact that protesters and the opposition blame him for the violent crackdown on protests, which caused several injuries and resulted in the prosecutions of some demonstrators. More protests are likely, and would test the government's ability to respond appropriately.

The other question for Gakharia is how to deal with simmering disputes in the Russian-backed breakaway regions of South Ossetia and

Abkhazia. Tensions have risen again this year over a police observation station that Georgia placed along its administrative boundary with South Ossetia. The latter responded by closing border crossings and a war of words erupted between leaders on both sides, tempered only by Russian and European efforts to mediate. Gakharia and his team will need to prevent the dispute from escalating, while at the same time standing up to Moscow and repairing economic ties with Russia. Balancing those priorities will be a tall order.

**Given Georgian Dream's declining popularity, how well-positioned is the United National Movement to prevail in the upcoming elections?**

The UNM has loyal supporters, especially in the western regions of the country. It hasn't been able to garner enough support to win previous elections, but its fortunes could turn next year, depending on the strength of opposition to the Georgian Dream-led government.

But the UNM has its own problems. It remains unofficially helmed by the divisive Mikheil Saakashvili, who served as president of Georgia from 2004 until 2013. His supporters remember him fondly for the sweeping democratic reforms he implemented during the 2000s, but his detractors blame him for the many domestic challenges facing Georgia in the aftermath of the five-day war with Russia in 2008.

He has also been away from Georgia for more than five years, and during that time he has fallen out of touch with the country he once led, while gaining considerable international notoriety. In 2015, he switched his citizenship to Ukraine in order to serve as governor of the Odessa region under then-President Petro Poroshenko, but the two subsequently had a falling-out and Saakashvili was deported last year. His Ukrainian citizenship has now been restored by President Volodymyr Zelensky, but a Georgian court convicted him in absentia of charges related to abuse of power last year, so

he cannot return to his country of birth. A UNM victory next year would likely result in that conviction being reversed, but Saakashvili's personal travails do not help the party's chances.

The UNM has a good chance at maintaining its position as the dominant opposition force, but in order to win, it will need to cooperate

with other parties. In some ways, this could be easier with the new electoral system, as there will be more parties to align with after the elections. But those parties' members and leadership will balk at diktats from Saakashvili, so the UNM will need to find a way to become more independent of his influence.