

How Saakashvili Fights Georgia's Media Mogul

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In the past eight years, many people have come along to challenge the leadership of Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili. All were former allies, discredited along the way. They formed opposition parties, vengefully denounced the regime on the streets and were either ignored or were stomped out by the police before dematerializing into the political dung heap of oblivion.

But then Bidzina Ivanishvili, the richest man in the country, changed the rules for opposition politics. He's already achieved more than his predecessors by moving the political battleground from the streets to the media. Of course, the ensuing political saga is no less a mind-bending experience.

Imagine a country where 88 percent of the population gets their information of current events from television, and the only three stations that broadcast across the country are Georgian variations of Fox News. Despite his billions, Ivanishvili cannot compete with 30-minute news programs exclusively devoted to Saakashvili in action while coverage about Ivanishvili is

entirely negative.

To even out the playing field a bit, Ivanishvili created his own television station, Channel 9, but no Georgian cable distributor will carry it. Consequently, he started up his own cable company, Global TV, which he gave to his brother. Then the government moved in.

As part of a promotional campaign, Global TV began installing satellite dishes to subscribers for free. The independent Chamber of Control, which was set up by the government to monitor political party funding, called the promotion bribery. The Tbilisi city court agreed and fined Ivanishvili a total of \$45.4 million.

Then the police went on a cross-country, overnight blitzkrieg to seize 300,000 satellite dishes that authorities believed might be used to commit a crime. To everybody but the government, the move looks like a clear-cut effort to restrict the media.

To save face, the parliament made a U-turn on "must-carry" rules for cable providers just days after declaring that there is no threat to the pluralism of information and that imposing obligations on private companies is wrong. Legislation will soon be passed that "envisages carrying all television channels by all cable operators during the electoral period."

While the Georgian government's efforts to improve access to information are laudable — even if it only for a short period — we know the person who really deserves the credit is Bidzina Ivanishvili.

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