
Rising Star Says Georgian President 'Fundamentally Misguided'

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TBILISI -- It's only been a year since Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili secured a second term in office in early elections.

But as the country's political establishment grows increasingly disenchanted with Saakashvili, speculation is mounting about early presidential elections and possible alternatives to the former architect of the Rose Revolution.

Much of the attention has focused on 35-year-old Irakli Alasania, Georgia's former UN ambassador, who recently stepped down after more than two years in the post.

At first glance, the boyish and eloquent Irakli Alasania -- who became eligible for the presidency only in December, when he turned 35 -- could be mistaken for any one of the young, high-energy officials Saakashvili has cultivated for his government cadre.

Prior to his UN post, Alasania was tapped by Saakashvili to serve as his special aide in Georgian-Abkhaz peace talks, as well as chairman of the Tbilisi-based Abkhaz government-in-exile.

But speaking to RFE/RL in the Georgian capital in late December, Alasania said his decision to leave the United Nations was prompted by a growing disenchantment with the Georgian president and his failure to improve ties with Abkhazia and Georgia's second breakaway region, South Ossetia.

"One of the key factors in making my decision was the emergence, over the past several years, of a fundamental difference between my vision and that of the president's regarding conflict resolution and other current issues," Alasania said. "I was involved in conflict resolution as the presidential representative and negotiator with the Abkhaz side. This perspective, I think, allows me to say that a lot of real opportunities were lost for starting direct and open negotiations with the Abkhaz side."

Trusted Negotiator

Alasania is regarded by many as the Georgian official who came closest to resolving Tbilisi's "frozen conflicts" -- the historic standoff with its breakaway regions.

His father, a Georgian general, was killed in 1993 by separatists in the final days of the Abkhaz-Georgian civil war. Despite the personal tragedy, Alasania emerged in subsequent years as one of the few officials to gain the trust of Abkhaz authorities.

In May 2008, he traveled to Sukhumi to offer a peace deal that was the product of three years of negotiations.

The deal, which guaranteed safe return to Abkhazia of Georgians displaced by the civil war and a mutual disavowal of military force, was said to have the backing of both sides. But it was never signed.

Alasania suggests Moscow is partly to blame for scuppering the deal, saying Russian army troop movements into Abkhazia and other provocations ultimately unnerved negotiators on both sides.

But he holds others responsible as well, and says the deal had the potential to defuse mounting tensions in the breakaway regions and possibly even prevent the August war over South Ossetia.

"I think that if this agreement had been signed, the risk of resumed military activities would have been significantly reduced. I can't say it would have prevented it altogether, but it could have helped establish the trust that we needed to see between the two sides," he said.

This, though, wasn't the only factor. "The militaristic sentiments and rhetoric we've heard from Saakashvili during the past few years have been fundamentally misguided," he said. "They didn't help the dialogue."

Alasania also cited the lack of a "firm and consistent" strategy on Moscow.

Missed Chances

This summer's ruinous war with Russia cost Georgia dearly, both in terms of its short-term NATO ambitions as well as with regards to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which quickly declared independence in the war's aftermath.

It has also left Georgia facing a precarious security situation. With international monitors blocked from both South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Russian troops and separatist militias have had free reign over the territories.

Reports of violence remain frequent, and few Georgians from the regions have risked returning to their villages, sparking a fresh refugee crisis affecting tens of thousands of people.

Alasania, who rose through the ranks of the country's national security structures before taking on the Abkhaz and UN posts, cites "an abundance of unexplored options" in expressing confidence the breakaway republics could still be restored to the Georgian fold.

But without foreign monitors on the ground, he says, the threat of resumed military action remains.

"There's no mechanism for monitoring and supervising the occupation forces," he says. "Those security mechanisms are essential. This would allow us to follow the activities of the Russian military and the separatist armed groups, to understand their military capacity and locations. This in turn would help protect the rights of Georgian citizens still left in the occupied territories."

'Collective' Governance

Alasania has joined the chorus of opposition voices calling for early elections. But despite being tapped as a potential presidential replacement, he has been coy about his own political intentions.

He has given few interviews and press conferences since returning to Tbilisi, preferring to spend much of his time in consultations with members of the political opposition -- most notably Sozar Subari, Georgia's human rights ombudsman, who himself is an open critic of Saakashvili. (Georgia's GHN news agency has reported that the country's ambassador to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Viktor Dolidze, has

also left his post with plans of joining a political alliance with Alasania.)

When asked whether he harbors presidential ambitions of his own, Alasania prefers to deflect attention away from himself and onto the idea of a "national consensus" uniting ordinary citizens as well as government officials.

He has called for the adoption of a new electoral code and a relaxation of media guidelines that favor the ruling administration.

Alasania says that, and a new, consensus-based approach to government, could put Georgia back on the proper democratic tracks, and prevent a future president -- whoever it might be -- from stumbling into a misadventure like the August war.

"We need to institutionalize the decision-making process. Decisions should not be unilateral -- they should be based on the advice of responsible, competent and professional people, and they should be collective," he said.

"One of the main reasons the president succumbed to provocation during the crisis was because he didn't have a range of opinions and ideas to choose from. This system doesn't exist in Georgia; it's never been created. Transparency in preparing and carrying out decisions, as well as collective decision making, would reduce the chances of the commander in chief making mistakes or bad decisions."
