

# Christina Pushaw - Don't underestimate the threat of Georgia's "knight in shining armour"

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By Christina Pushaw

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When I first encountered ultra-conservative Georgian millionaire **Levan Vasadze** at a rally in Tbilisi last year, I didn't take him seriously. How could I? Dressed as a medieval knight on horseback and flanked by Orthodox priests, he led several thousand followers down Rustaveli Avenue. The occasion: A protest against a small demonstration marking the International Day Against Homophobia.

Like many international observers of Georgia, I saw Vasadze as a provocateur at the fringes of public life. His antics struck me as entertaining, too ridiculous to be dangerous. Amid the grim process of [state capture](#) by pro-Russian oligarch **Bidzina Ivanishvili**, Vasadze's [sensationalist rhetoric](#) – liberalism is “an immoral diabolical cult” and credit cards prepare society for “the coming of the anti-Christ” – provided absurdist reprieves from politics as usual.

But on 16 June, as I watched Vasadze's speech to a crowd gathered to protest Tbilisi's upcoming gay pride parade, I realized my mistake. I had underestimated him.

His talking points echoed **Alexander Dugin**, a Russian ultra-nationalist widely [considered](#) to be the Kremlin's chief ideologist. Not coincidentally, Vasadze is a [close associate](#) of Dugin. Vasadze attends Dugin's forums on “Eurasianist” philosophy, which elevates Russia as the spiritual leader of the Orthodox Christian world. If Dugin's “Eurasia” were a reality, Georgia would be a vassal state subordinate to Moscow. So too would Ukraine, Moldova, and other former Soviet states with large Orthodox Christian populations. And Russia, [according to Dugin](#), would be “the only national community within a supranational imperial complex.”

In Tbilisi on 13 June, Vasadze stopped short of openly endorsing Russian imperialism, sticking to more popular stances. He began his address in Georgian, with his usual message: The survival of the nation depends on the preservation of traditional family values, and the West is destroying these values by promoting the “gay agenda.”

But then, he added [something new](#): A promise to “organise citizens’ brigades.” These paramilitaries, he said, would include military veterans and athletes capable of “break[ing] through any police cordon” to confront the Tbilisi Pride marchers this week – or, in Vasadze’s words, “the propagandists of perversion.”

Late in the address, Vasadze switched to fluent English – honed during his studies at Emory University – to address US President **Donald J. Trump**. He [called on](#) Trump to “drain the swamp at the US Embassy in Tbilisi,” which Vasadze believes is controlled by “Hillarists” (supporters of **Hillary Clinton**) and “globalist dogs” hell-bent on destroying Georgian culture.

But beyond the crude epithets, the English portion of Vasadze’s speech revealed a surprisingly sophisticated understanding of his audience. He did not issue threats of paramilitary attacks on gay pride parades in English. In fact, he assured Western listeners that “no one” in Georgia would “persecute, oppress, or beat people” because of their sexual orientation. Finally, Vasadze appealed to American conservatives to support him in upholding “religious freedom” and “free speech” in Georgia – values, he emphasized, that they share.

The contrast between his English- and Georgian-language remarks is telling. Similar discrepancies emerge when comparing his Georgian rhetoric to his Russian. He speaks the language at a native level, having made his fortune as an entrepreneur in post-Soviet Moscow. To Russian audiences, Vasadze enthusiastically [endorses](#) Dugin’s “Eurasianist” vision of Russian imperialism. But to his Georgian followers, Vasadze – dressed in traditional national costume – appears as a quintessential Georgian nationalist.

Despite his lurid phrasing in all three languages, Vasadze is undeniably articulate and charismatic. He also has a stronger grasp of the nuances of American political culture than most Georgian politicians. Many of his points resonate with conservatives in the United States, who tend to oppose foreign meddling, support religious freedom, and promote traditional family values. And, as the organiser of the 2016 [World Congress of Families](#) in Tbilisi, Vasadze is trying to make inroads into this politically influential group. American conservatives – from former president **George W. Bush**, to the late Senator **John McCain**, to Vice President **Mike Pence** – stand out among the world’s most prominent defenders of Georgia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. Therefore, Vasadze’s ability to reach this constituency is especially alarming.

In his address to Trump on 13 June, Vasadze voiced a familiar Kremlin demand: *Get the US out of Georgia*. Ordinarily, this would be dismissed outright. The Trump administration, like US policymakers from both parties, considers Georgia a strategic American ally and condemns Russian aggression and occupation. But Vasadze presented the Kremlin's demand in a sophisticated way, carefully calibrated to appeal to an influential subset of conservative Americans. At a time when Georgia is low on the list of policy priorities, and when few Americans have a nuanced understanding of the regional context, Vasadze's message could resonate beyond Tbilisi.

Consider **Pat Robertson**, one of America's most prominent Evangelical Christians. After Russia invaded Georgia in 2008, Robertson [condemned](#) Moscow's "vicious dismemberment of the tiny nation" and warned of an "unfolding sequence of Russian aggression." But in 2016, Robertson's CBN News channel featured an in-depth [interview](#) in which Vasadze positioned himself as the guardian of Georgia's national identity – giving no indication of his pro-Kremlin agenda.

This shape-shifting is exactly what makes Vasadze so dangerous. Many of those who have not pored over his lengthy interviews, in three different languages, make the mistake of believing he is on their side. This group includes conservative Georgians, Russians, and Americans. Liberals, on the other hand, see him as a clown. And this is just as dangerous.

Georgians who hope to live in a modern European state – and their Western partners – should not discount Vasadze as a crackpot. Indeed, he represents an emerging threat to Georgia's stability and sovereignty that must be addressed before it's too late.

And that time may be coming soon.

Since taking power in 2012, the ruling Georgian Dream party has lost credibility both in the West and popularity at home. The government has made a string of blunders over the past year, from case-fixing to election-rigging, that has drawn public ire. With a crucial parliamentary election scheduled for next fall, Vasadze is preparing to fill the void.

The paramilitaries he describes could be instrumental in grassroots campaigning, especially in the rural areas Vasadze is likely counting on for support. On election day, these formations could be deployed to intimidate voters – just as Georgian Dream organised local criminal authorities at polling stations last November. Ultimately, these groups could foment widespread civil unrest, providing a convenient pretext for Moscow to intervene in Georgia.

Ivanishvili, as the wealthiest person in the country and the puppet-master of the ruling party, still wields enormous power. Nevertheless, it is well within the realm of possibility that he will allow Vasadze to take the reins. A self-professed "non-politician," Ivanishvili has not held

elected office in six years and largely avoids public life. Despite Ivanishvili's long-standing ties to Moscow, his government has attempted to walk the tightrope between Russia and the West. This status quo cannot hold.

With pressure from Washington to support a strategic deep-sea port project – which Russia [vehemently opposes](#) – Georgia's omnipotent oligarch can no longer pretend to play both sides. Ceding power to Vasadze peacefully, through an election, would enable Ivanishvili to placate Russia while maintaining a veneer of respectability in the West. But in a fiercely independent country where the wounds of 2008 have not healed, will people elect a leader so committed to imposing Russia's will on Georgia?

It's possible. The pro-Western opposition is divided and crippled by the exile of charismatic ex-president **Mikheil Saakashvili**. The ruling party, united only by hatred for Saakashvili, lacks any coherent principles or vision for Georgia's future.

Vasadze, by contrast, is speaking to deep-rooted issues of national identity to manipulate the public into thinking he has the nation's interests at heart. His emphasis on religion is to his political advantage: Year after year, surveys show that the most trusted institution in the country – by far – is the Georgian Orthodox Church. And this will not change anytime soon. Georgia is one of only [two countries in the world](#) where youth are, on average, more religious than people over age 40.

If he can successfully exploit Georgians' faith and dissatisfaction with the status quo to advance his Kremlin-friendly agenda, Vasadze will accomplish by 2020 what the Russian military failed to do in 2008: Returning this fiercely independent nation to Moscow's control. If we want to stop him, we must not underestimate him.

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