



BULLETIN

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Georgia after the Presidential Election: Autumn of the Patriarchs

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On 27 October, Georgians will elect a new president to replace Mikheil Saakashvili, the head of state since 2004. The winner will most probably be the ruling party's candidate, Giorgi Margvelashvili. The election will also bring a change in prime minister as the man currently in that role, Bidzina Ivanishvili, has announced that he will soon resign from the post. The fact that the two major politicians will leave their posts will result in a new political scene. It may also affect Georgia's foreign policy, though in the near future it shouldn't harm the country's rapprochement with the European Union.

A Year of the Georgian Dream Coalition. After the elections, constitutional amendments will come into force. As a result, the president will cease to be the most important person in the Georgian political hierarchy. Although the president will continue to represent Georgia in international relations, the role of parliament will increase and the prime minister will become the head of domestic and foreign policy. Soon after the elections, Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili is expected to nominate a successor. It seems that this will be a person from his party Georgian Dream (GD), guaranteeing the former prime minister informal influence over the governance of the country. Ivanishvili enjoys considerable popularity in the country and is confident about the victory of ruling party candidate Giorgi Margvelashvili. The latter is not known as one of the country's main politicians. Among the more well-known political figures are Interior Minister Irakli Garibashvili (GD) and the leaders of the coalition parties, parliament Speaker Davit Usupashvili (Republican Party) and Minister of Defence Irakli Alasania (Our Georgia–Free Democrats). However, it seems that Ivanishvili's support will ensure Margvelashvili's victory. It is uncertain whether this will happen in the first round of elections. The need to carry out a second round would be beneficial for Saakashvili. He would remain in his post long enough to take part as the head of state in the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius, where the initialling of an Association Agreement between the EU and Georgia is planned. It would be a symbolic crowning of his pro-Western terms in office. The candidate from Saakashvili's party (United National Movement, or UNM), Davit Bakradze, has little chance of winning the election.

The parliamentary elections of October 2012 resulted in the first-ever peaceful transfer of power in Georgia. However, the GD government did not bring about revolutionary changes in domestic and foreign policy. The priorities remain the same: integration with the EU and NATO, and implementation of internal reforms resulting from these processes. However, voters expected mostly fulfilment of three of GD's pre-election promises: to improve the standard of living, to punish the UNM government's abuses of power, and to repair relations with Russia with the hope of resolution of the conflicts over Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Although the coalition government started to implement its programme, none of the objectives have yet been achieved.

Why Georgians are Disappointed. From 2006 to 2008, the Georgian economy under Saakashvili's party grew by 10% annually. This was due to the friendly environment for foreign investment and neoliberal policies. However, it did not translate into an increase in society's standard of living. Since then, the significant decline in economic growth in the country has been the result of the armed conflict with Russia in 2008 and the global economic crisis that started about the same time. While the official unemployment rate is 16%, the rates among certain groups, especially young people, is much higher. Thus, many of Georgia's voters latched onto the pre-election promises made by GD. Their faith was strengthened by the image of the leader of the party, Ivanishvili, as an effective manager (a man with assets

estimated to be worth more than \$5 billion) and a caring “patriarch”, who not only promised to improve the economic situation but also had provided financial support to groups such as the Orthodox Church, artists, and people of his native village. A year of the coalition government, however, has not led to significant changes in Georgians’ standard of living. This has meant disappointment for many who voted for GD.

Another unfulfilled promise has been the pledge to punish alleged abuses of power by UNM government officials. The GD victory in the parliamentary elections was largely due to public outrage after the disclosure of videos of torture being used in a prison in Tbilisi in September last year. The Saakashvili administration’s fight against the mafia had instead turned into a violation of the human rights of prisoners. The symbol of this phenomenon, in the opinion of the public, was former Minister of Defence and Home Affairs Bacho Akhalaia. Since last year’s elections, dozens of UNM politicians have been arrested, including Akhalaia, who was accused of violence against prisoners and even his subordinates. In August, however, he was acquitted of three charges concerning torture and the illegal imprisonment of soldiers. The prosecution announced that it would appeal to a higher court. It promises a new indictment concerning a case in which prisoners were supposedly beaten by Akhalaia in 2006, and which led to a bloodily suppressed prison rebellion. Another arrested leader of UNM is the former head of the Interior Ministry and later Prime Minister Vano Merabishvili. The prosecution accuses him of illegally spending public funds for his party’s election campaign in 2012 and covering up a case of murder committed by officials of the Interior Ministry in 2006. The prosecutors’ lack of tangible results, the weakness of the evidence, and delays in submitting the case to the court, along with the protracted period of detention of UNM officials, raise many doubts. The current opposition believes that this may prove that there are political motivations behind the actions of the prosecutors given the absence of actual evidence of crimes by the former officials. For a large number of GD proponents and opponents of Saakashvili, however, this demonstrates simply the ineffectiveness of the justice system in the country.

This argument is used by the party of well-known politician Nino Burjanadze (Democratic Movement-United Georgia) to criticise the government. The former parliament speaker and former collaborator with the president is currently Saakashvili’s most ardent opponent. Burjanadze’s party is growing in popularity. It has slowly become the third-ranked political power in Georgia, after GD and UNM.

Failure of Rapprochement with Russia. Criticism by Burjanadze and others disgruntled with the coalition includes the lack of improved relations with Russia. The new government has negotiated with the Russian side on the resumption of Georgian wine and mineral water exports. Although these products were accepted back in to Russia, that country’s consumer protection agency has already warned of the possibility it may restore the ban on imports of wines because of problems with hygienic standards. Politically motivated bans on Georgian imports were put in effect in 2006 to 2013. The current threat of another ban is part of Russia’s tactic to put pressure on the government in Tbilisi over the planned signature of the Association Agreement between Georgia and the EU.

Solving the problem of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, despite the Georgian government’s conciliatory rhetoric towards Russia, is still just as unrealistic as it was when UNM was in power. The continued deterioration of the situation is evident, taking into account the construction by the Russians of barbed wire barriers around the occupied territory of South Ossetia. As a result, Russia’s occupation forces have seized a significant area of arable land previously controlled by the government in Tbilisi. Meanwhile, Burjanadze, who was the first Georgian politician after the war of 2008 to meet with the Russian leadership, tries to present herself as the only person who can persuade the Russian side to agree to concessions. The possibility of the appearance of other, pro-Russian parties on the political arena critical of GD can’t be excluded.

What Alternative to Georgian Dream? Conclusions for the EU. The lack of improvement in the economic situation, failure to punish authoritarian practices under Saakashvili, and stagnation in relations with Russia, has disappointed Georgians and led to a fall in the coalition’s popularity. Despite this, the GD candidate for president won’t be challenged by the opposition candidate. Saakashvili and Ivanishvili’s departure from office will create a new balance of power that will have more of an impact on the direction of domestic and foreign policy of Georgia than the outcome of these elections. The GD leader’s decision to “appoint” his successor will be crucial in this respect.

The emergence of critics of the GD coalition who also take a pro-Russian stance may raise concerns about the future prospects of Georgia’s integration with the EU and NATO. Burjanadze is demanding punishment for former UNM officials and is becoming increasingly popular. It’s unlikely that she will challenge the GD candidate in the current election, but she will still influence public opinion. Her rhetoric strengthens the climate of condemnation of Saakashvili’s party. For many, it may be tantamount to a rejection of the pro-Western course of UNM’s time in office.

Any crisis or breakdown in the current pro-Western coalition after the elections may strengthen the pro-Russian forces. It will also mean a decrease in the popularity of European and Euro-Atlantic integration. Before initialling and later signing the agreement with the EU, it is necessary for the EU to increase its efforts to stabilise the political and economic situation in the country. It must support the government in Tbilisi in the face of Russian pressure on the economy or on security in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In addition to diplomatic pressure on Moscow, the EU should increase financial support for Georgia. Also needed is a public information campaign explaining to Georgians the benefits of entry into the free-trade zone with the EU and facilitation of travel to Member States to study or work there.