

Allure of Georgian Dream Fades

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Opinion poll shows ruling bloc less popular than before, but some say it's normal to tire of a government after a couple of years

After a recent opinion poll suggested that the Georgian government was losing popular support, politicians and commentators have been arguing about what it means, and whether the figures are even accurate.

In a survey commissioned by the International Republican Institute and conducted in February, 55 per cent of respondents felt the country was heading in the wrong direction, compared with 33 per cent a year earlier.

Asked which party they would vote for if a parliamentary election was due, just 36 per cent said they would choose the current Georgian Dream coalition. That is a big drop from the 56 per cent support the bloc was given in IRI's February 2014 survey.

Forged as a coalition by businessman Bidzina Ivanishvili, Georgian Dream inflicted an overwhelming defeat on the United National Movement of then president Mikhael Saakashvili in a parliamentary election held in October 2012.

Georgian Dream politicians say the latest poll results are unreliable.

"I have never commented on research done by IRI and NDI [National Democratic Institute]." Irakli Sesiashvili, a Georgian Dream member of parliament, told reporters. "Although I greatly respect these organisations, we and the public generally have some concerns about the organisations that carry out the research. They have narrow political interests and views.

"To me, this study isn't definitive."

IRI commissioned the survey from Baltic Surveys/Gallup Organisation, while the field work was done by the Institute of Polling and Marketing, a Georgian organisation.

Sesiashvili's Georgian Dream colleague Gia Volski also cast doubt on the IRI poll, and suggested that people's opinions were coloured by temporary economic factors.

"The survey coincided with a period of major fluctuations in the lari [currency], which naturally influenced many of the issues," he said.

The decline in support for Georgian Dream shown in the IRI poll does not mean the UNM, now the main opposition party, is gaining ground. Fourteen per cent of respondents said they would vote for it, the same as in February 2014.

Nevertheless, UNM politicians say the survey vindicates their criticism of the ruling majority.

"The problems of economic crisis and rising crime are what worries the public. Accordingly, that leading to... falling ratings for the government," UNM parliamentarian David Darchiashvili said. "Overall, I think the survey results are an accurate reflection of the state of affairs in this country."

Another UNM politician, Giorgi Baramidze, said the views reflected in the survey were shared by his party.

"They [the Georgian Dream administration] don't believe the mirror that this survey has held up. They are refusing to accept reality, and that's very sad," he said.

Like Darchashvili, Baramidze referred to public concerns about crime.

In the IRI survey, 62 per cent of respondents thought the crime situation was deteriorating. Yet crime did not feature among the many issues they listed as major current problems, and just two per cent mentioned it as a future concern. Similarly, 34 per cent felt corruption was getting worse – yet 98 per cent had not personally paid a bribe in the last 12 months.

Iago Kachkachishvili, a sociologist at the Institute for Social Studies and Analysis, believes the responses given in the poll reflect a general mood of dissatisfaction.

"The survey was done amid the depreciation of the lari. The economic situation has got worse and prices have gone up," he said. "In circumstances like that, things get worse in other areas, too, so people are unhappy."

Khatuna Lagazidze, a political scientist with the Centre for European Values, said it was hardly surprising for a government in power since 2012 to become more unpopular.

“The third year is very important for variations in ratings. It makes sense that they should be falling,” she said, while noting that this was a “steep decline” caused in part by “a lack of strategic vision”.

“We don’t know where the country is heading,” she added.

Lagazidze said that while the government had failed in some areas, it had been successful in other ways but had generated “zero publicity” about this.

“When there’s no communication, you get a vacuum and a sense of unhappiness with a government that isn’t delivering. That is reflected in the survey,” she said.

In Lagazidze’s view, even if Georgian Dream’s popularity continues to fall, it will still win next year’s parliamentary election.

“But it won’t be able to get the kind of majority it needs to form a government by itself,” she said. “In that case, it will have to make major concessions to the political forces that come in second and third. And that probably isn’t what Georgian Dream is dreaming of.”

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