

Georgia: 100 days of the new government

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The first half of February marked one hundred days since the Georgian Dream (GD) government coalition, under Bidzina Ivanishvili as Prime Minister, took office. This period, which has been marked by a no-holds-barred political struggle with the camp of President Mikheil Saakashvili, has seen both a number of significant changes and the partial continuation of previous policies. Above all, however, the situation in Georgia still bears the characteristics of a transitional period, and it is unclear which way the country will head under the new leadership. The makeshift nature of current affairs is the result of several factors: the intense political struggle for influence in the country (mainly in the context of this autumn's presidential election); the nature of the new ruling power, which is internally heterogeneous, lacks a clear political programme, and is dominated by the politically inexperienced Bidzina Ivanishvili; and the social expectations, aroused by these political changes, of a quick and general improvement in living conditions. Georgia's future will become clear over the next few months: a settlement regarding the head of state will emerge; the new government's political priorities, their effectiveness and their ability to deliver on the promises they have made will be put to the test; and the stability and cohesion of the two main political camps, as well as the state of the economy, will become clear. At the moment, it seems that there is no danger of Georgia making a comprehensive withdrawal from the reforms undertaken since 2003; but stagnation in internal and external policies seems probable, primarily as a result of the lack of a clear vision for the development of the country.

Political changes

Georgian Dream's victory in the parliamentary elections held last October ended the nearly nine-year rule of President Mikheil Saakashvili's camp. As a result, there has been a significant overhaul of the political scene. The president's defeated United National Movement (UNM) has been relegated to the opposition and has partially shrunk, losing 11 deputies in parliament and a number of representatives from local authorities (who switched sides, or more often resigned their positions and withdrew from public life, due to severe pressure from supporters of the new government). It has also recorded a sharp drop in its public support since the elections; in a National Democratic Institute [NDI] poll from last November it had about 10% support, although at this moment it probably has more. However, it has not undergone a total collapse, and it seems to have retained the potential to fight for a return to power in the future, which in itself is something unique in the history

of Georgia since 1991.

The new dominant political force, Georgian Dream (GD), which enjoys a strong social mandate (scoring over 60%, according to the NDI), is an electoral coalition without a clear political profile. It is *de facto* controlled by its leader and campaign sponsor, the oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili. Within the coalition, the political positions of the clearly pro-Western members are, despite their high offices of state (the speaker of parliament, ministers, etc.), weak and completely dependent on the Prime Minister's will. This was demonstrated most recently by the dismissal, and effective public humiliation, of the most pro-Atlantic member of the new government, the defence minister Irakli Alasania, from the position of first deputy prime minister. The stances of the head of government himself, both on domestic and foreign policy issues, are still difficult to determine.

GD's victory has fundamentally changed the system of government in the country, which is now actually operating in parallel to that provided by the constitution. Although the basic law says that the president is the head of the executive and the architect of state policy, the actual centre of decision-making is located in the office of the Prime Minister. This is due to the strong public support for the new government, as well as the strong resentment against the president, whom the general public now primarily associates with the flaws and weaknesses of the system that has been built since 2003. The president retains control of potentially powerful legal instruments, such as forcing the government to resign and appointing a new one, but he is unlikely to take this step in the current situation.

Criticism and concerns

The measures taken by the new government in the first 100 days have raised a number of questions about their democratic and legal nature, the government's political priorities and its long-term political stability. Since coming to power, the government's efforts have focused on settling accounts with the previous government, both in the political and legal spheres. Politicians from the presidential camp (at both the national and regional levels), senior government officials and entrepreneurs associated with the previous government have been subjected to informal pressure, investigation and arrests (according to information from the current opposition, several thousand officials and local government officials from the UNM have been summoned to the prosecutor's office and the tax authorities). This process has raised concern among Georgia's Western partners, both because of concerns about the state of the country (in this case, no sharp decline in the institutions' efficiency has been observed), as well as the threat to democratic standards. Very much like during Saakashvili's time in office – criticism has been made of the new government's use of 'selective justice' for political purposes (by the US Secretary of State and the Secretary General of NATO – but also by Georgian non-governmental organisations, which before the elections had been fairly sympathetic towards GD).

Settling scores with the previous government meets the expectations of the public, and provides the new government with political 'fuel'. These moves have been accompanied by socially popular actions, including the lowering of gas and electricity prices, the announcement of an increase in social benefits and wages in the public sector, and

protectionist rhetoric about defending the Georgian market from the flood of “low-cost and low-quality products from abroad”. The political struggle with the Saakashvili camp and the government’s generous social expenditures are currently providing it with popularity, although this does not guarantee stable social support in the longer term.

Foreign policy

Ivanishvili’s government has declared that there is no alternative to the pro-Western orientation in foreign policy, nor is there any significant social support in Georgia in favour of any other approach. In many cases, the new government has continued the previous government’s line in relations with the EU and the US. At the same time, relations with Western partners will be strongly affected by the new government’s internal policy, and by allegations (which have arisen since the elections) of the instrumental use of law enforcement and the judiciary as part of its political struggle. There is also a feeling that the new government, although it has declared the inviolability of its pro-Western orientation, does not have any ideas of its own for backing up this declaration with concrete actions, and that it has limited itself to honouring the obligations undertaken by its predecessors (it has declared that it will keep Georgian troops in Afghanistan after 2014), and continuing processes which have already begun (negotiations on an Association Agreement with the EU and on visa liberalisation). In combination with the West’s flagging interest in Georgia, this could effectively lead to stagnation in Tbilisi’s relations with the West. The current moves in regional policy (visits to Baku, Yerevan and Ankara) have revealed Georgia’s limited room for manoeuvre in the international arena, and the new government has had to make a *de facto* retreat from attempts to modify its current course (including a failed attempt at talks on gas prices with Azerbaijan).

In this situation, a scenario seems plausible in which the greatest challenge for the new government’s foreign policy may be normalising relations with Russia. It is in this area where the new government could most distinguish itself from its predecessors; the more so, as the process of rebuilding relations will start from zero, which will make it potentially easier to achieve tangible results quickly. Additionally, in his election campaign Ivanishvili made a personal commitment to the electorate that he would improve relations with Moscow. The Georgian government’s moves have so far been cautious (a meeting between the Georgian Prime Minister’s special representative and the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister was held, as have talks about partially opening up the Russian market to Georgian products), and have been accompanied by clear statements on the country’s territorial integrity and the lack of any alternative course to the pro-Western one; yet it seems unlikely that dialogue with Russia will be halted after this initial stage. It is already clear that Russia is ready to develop relations with Georgia – albeit selectively, conditionally, and with clear political consequences. One example may be the wine market, which is unlikely to be re-opened to all Georgian manufacturers, but only to those with the right political affiliations; or the case of the Borjomi water company, which will probably return to the Russian market, but with a Russian shareholder.

The political course, both in domestic and foreign terms, will not be clarified before the presidential election, and the accompanying entry into legal force of constitutional

amendments which will strengthen the Prime Minister's position. In the very likely case that the current ruling camp's candidate wins, the entirety of state power will end up in the hands of Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili.