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Georgia: Ivanishvili has announced that he is leaving

Marek Matusiak, Gruzja: Iwaniszwili zapowiada odejście z polityki

On 2 September Georgia's Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili confirmed that he intends to leave politics. In an open letter he stated that with the candidate from the ruling bloc set to win the presidential election to be held on 27 October, his political priorities – ousting Mikheil Saakashvili and his bloc from power – will eventually be accomplished. Ivanishvili intends to put his energy and resources into "establishing civil society in Georgia". He also announced that he will still feel responsible for the situation in the country and should the need arise he will be ready to return to politics. Bidzina Ivanishvili is the most popular politician in the country (with 69% of support in society, according to data from June this year in a survey commissioned by the NDI) and the richest person in Georgia. His announced withdrawal from politics has provoked strong criticism from the opposition and doubts among certain allies from the Georgian Dream coalition.

Commentary

- Though stepping down, Ivanishvili will de facto retain instruments of influence over both the ruling coalition (he created its key element – the Georgian Dream-Democratic Georgia – top down before the last election) and the government, which is expected to be led by a close aide to Ivanishvili (for example Minister for Interior Irakli Garibashvili). The coalition candidate for the presidential election – Georgi Margvelashvili – does not have political base of his own and will owe his victory to support from Ivanishvili. With Ivanishvili's large popularity and the scale of his wealth (which *Forbes* estimated at US$5.3 billion in March this year, in comparison Georgia's budget for the current year, which is US$4.36 billion) there are grounds to be concerned that the country will be run in an informal manner, beyond institutions and Ivanishvili will retain key influence on the situation in the country without the political accountability he would have as prime minister.

- Almost a year on from the election it is not yet clear what direction Georgia will take under the Georgian Dream coalition. It is due to a certain extent to a cohabitation between the government and President Saakashvili and the fight over the influence on the state's mechanisms which is absorbing the new government. It is also due to the fact that the Georgian Dream coalition lacks a vision of the country's development. The outgoing presidential bloc has been accused – which in many cases has been justified – of having excessively restrictive police and penal policies, of limiting the freedom of the media and political activity and of having a doctrinally neoliberal economic policy which

ignores social issues. However, in the period following the election, apart from a more liberal climate of public life (which is the effect of the actions taken by the government and an objective weakening of the central authorities as such) and some social measures, it is difficult to indicate either the specific achievements of the new government or the elements of any long-term strategy. The impact of Ivanishvili leaving politics may not be limited to a further weakening of the decision-making power of the ruling bloc but may also affect its cohesion (the Georgian Dream is a coalition of six parties). This seems unsettling, particularly in the context of economic growth being slower than had been expected (1.8% in the first half of 2013 year on year, against 7% annually as forecast in the budget) and of changing international circumstances (including flagging US interest in the region and Russia's growing determination to win back its influence).