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Presidential elections in Georgia – questions, despite a clear favourite

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On 27 October presidential elections will be held in Georgia. The favourite to win is the candidate of the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) coalition, Giorgi Margvelashvili. It is not clear whether he can win in the first round.

These elections are a turning point in the country's recent history. They mark the end of the model of government formed after the 'Rose Revolution' of 2003, both in terms of personalities (it sees the end of the rule of Mikheil Saakashvili and his associates) and the form of government (a constitutional amendment passed in 2010 changing the state from a presidential system of government to one based on cabinet and parliament will come into force after the elections. Margvelashvili's probable victory will also end the state of hostile cohabitation between the Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili and the outgoing president.

At the same time, although the ruling coalition has a strong democratic mandate and its candidate seems certain to win, subsequent political developments are difficult to predict. This is primarily related to Prime Minister Ivanishvili's declared intention to withdraw from active politics after the elections, as well as Margvelashvili's unexpected announcement that he will not participate in a second round of voting, should there be one. There is also uncertainty regarding the post-election situation (the possibility of protests) and the future of the incumbent president once his immunity expires, since attempts may be made to bring charges against him.

Therefore, it is difficult to predict who will be running Georgia after the elections (including representing the state at the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius on 28–29 November), or what the domestic political situation will be (also affecting the relations with the West).

The campaign and the candidates

Compared to last year's parliamentary elections, the presidential elections have caused less excitement. Public sentiment clearly favours the GD coalition (which has 50% public support, and the personal popularity of Prime Minister Ivanishvili stands at 69%, according to data from September in a survey commissioned by the National Democratic Institute, NDI), and is unfavourable towards the former ruling camp (Mikheil Saakashvili's party has 12% support). The stakes are lower for the presidential election, as the political changes coming into force after the elections start to take effect. In this situation, the leaders of the two main political camps are not running in this election.

The favourite, Giorgi Margvelashvili (39% support in a poll for NDI), who until this July was the Education Minister, is a former rector of the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs, a school supported by Western donors, which teaches public administration and law. Although respected, Margvelashvili lacks his own base of supporters, and will owe his likely victory to the popularity of the Prime Minister alone.

Currently running second in the polls is Davit Bakradze (18%), a former speaker of the Georgian parliament (2008–2012). Due to this function – prominent, but not connected with real power - he is a recognisable politician and yet, unlike Saakashvili for example, he has not been greatly blamed by the public for the abuses of the previous government. Given the unpopularity of the previous leadership team, as well as the arrests and prosecutions involving its leaders, Bakradze has become one of the most prominent members of his political camp, although he is not the kind of politician who can boost his support significantly.

The third relevant candidate is Nino Burjanadze, whose support in the polls currently runs at around 7% (although this may be an underestimate). In the past Burjanadze chaired the Georgian parliament (2001–2008), and during the 'Rose Revolution' was one of Saakashvili's closest associates, but since 2008 has been in sharp conflict with him. She has had contacts with the government of the Russian Federation; for example, in March 2010, she was received by then Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. Burjanadze has been running an aggressive campaign, sharply criticising the previous, but also the present government. In contrast to the two major candidates, who have declared pro-Western courses, she is an almost openly pro-Russian candidate.

Questions to be answered

Despite the lesser significance of the current presidential race, it is important as a turning point for Georgia. After the elections, the government will resign (as a result of the new amendments to the Constitution), and Prime Minister Ivanishvili will probably leave politics. This poses a series of questions, both of a personal (who will be the next prime minister and cabinet) and systemic nature (the functioning of the new system of government). Nor is the future role of Ivanishvili clear. He is not only the prime minister, the founder of the coalition and the leader of its most important party, but also the most popular politician and the richest man in the country (according to Forbes estimates, the value of his assets is US$5.3 billion; the budget of Georgia in 2013 was US$4.36 billion). The prospect of his departure raises questions about the cohesiveness of the ruling coalition, as well as concerns that the system of state management could take on an extra-institutional character.

The confusion has been deepened by the announcement from Giorgi Margvelashvili (made in response to public suggestions to this effect from Ivanishvili) that if he does not win outright in the first round of voting, he will withdraw from the second. This move is aimed at mobilising Margvelashvili's electorate and ensuring victory with over 50% of the vote for him (as he has not been perceived as a very convincing candidate). However, carrying out this plan would lead to a political crisis, and the result of a hypothetical clash between Bakradze and Burjanadze would be difficult to predict.

It is also difficult to predict the post-election situation, especially the behaviour of Nino Burjanadze, who has stated that any other result than a victory for her would be proof of fraud. Large-scale rallies in her support are unlikely, but her determination and intransigence (which have been proven in the past) mean that violent protests on a limited scale must be reckoned with.

Finally, an important and unclear issue in Tbilisi's relations with the West is the future of President Mikheil Saakashvili, whose term of office – and thus his immunity from prosecution –will expire in mid-November (if the elections are decided in the first round). Prime Minister Ivanishvili's position, repeated consistently over the last year, that the former president may be brought to justice for alleged abuses during his term of office, means he may be arrested and put on trial. If this were to happen, it would have far-reaching negative consequences for Tbilisi's relations with the West.

Regardless of the outcome of the election, Mikheil Saakashvili's departure from the post in November marks the definitive end of almost a decade of his dominance of Georgian politics and the top-down modernisation of the country by his political camp.