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Georgia needs a political alternative

The recent elections in the small Caucasian country were played out between two familiar faces. But Georgia deserves some fresh wind

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This week, Georgia had the opportunity to change its government by constitutional means and, in doing so, take a huge step towards implementing European democracy. But from the very beginning, it seems like this opportunity was illusory and hypothetical. The opposition was fragmented and the ruling party 'Georgian Dream' benefitted not only from its lobbying power, but also from the capital of its leader, the billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili.

Eight years ago, Ivanishvili was able to triumph over Mikhail Saakashvili in the elections and clearly has no plans to step down. Following the parliamentary elections on the 31 October, 'Georgian Dream' is to remain in power for a third term. Such a feat has eluded both the successful reformer Saakashvili and Eduard Shevarnadze, a politician with global reach.

Ivanishvili's main rival remains Saakashvili, who makes no secret of his intention to give the oligarch a dressing down in his own inimitable style in the event that he returns to power. And these are not just empty words – the former president 'survived' a crushing defeat in 2012 and was twice 'resurrected' thanks to his influence and connections in Ukraine. He cannot be dismissed so easily.

Strange as it may seem, the Saakashvili factor plays into the hands of the billionaire. As long as Georgian citizens face a choice between Mikhail and Bidzina, the majority are likely to vote for the latter. Granted, under Ivanishvili there have been no reforms and the national currency has depreciated. But, at the same time, his regime is not as brutal as Saakashvili's was. Saakashvili dragged Georgia out of the swamp and transformed it into a functioning state, but he also systematically oppressed his opponents. Many fear that, if he returns to Georgia victorious, he will launch a new wave of repressions.

The opposition hasn't learnt from past defeats

In Georgian society, the need for a third party is long overdue. Many political parties, as before, are attempting to fill this gap. Of these, 'European Georgia', a party formed by Saakashvili's former allies, should be mentioned. However, as the recent elections have confirmed, neither 'European Georgia' nor anyone else has managed to meet this public need.

It seems that the opposition hasn't learnt from past defeats. In 2016 and 2018, just as in 2012, they were still calling Ivanishvili a 'Kremlin agent', even though this kind of propaganda stopped working long ago. First of all, it remains pure speculation, given that Georgia under Ivanishvili has secured a visa-free regime and free trade with the EU. Second, ordinary people are interested above all in issues such as employment and healthcare. This became especially obvious in spring, when 'Georgian Dream' ratings rose thanks to its successful handling of the coronavirus pandemic, and in autumn, when the situation became worse and its ratings fell.

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Fragmentation has become another problem for the opposition. Smaller opposition parties have been just as critical of Saakashvili as they have of Ivanishvili. Such an atmosphere has clearly not worked in favour of the opposition. In 2012, when the opposition won the parliamentary elections, it was united and had Ivanishvili's substantial capital behind it.

This lack of unity has played into the hands of both the ruling party and Saakashvili. The latter has consciously attempted to polarise the political process to convince voters who are disillusioned with the authorities that he is the only alternative to the ruling party. As a result, a whole host of small but ambitious parties have failed to reach even the one per cent threshold, while those who have reached it will only gain four or five seats each. Meanwhile, Saakashvili's 'United National Movement' will gain up to 40 seats. The problem is that the former president was clearly counting on victory over Ivanishvili as well as over the rest of the opposition.

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both the OSCE monitoring mission and the US embassy have declared the elections legitimate. The ruling party has obviously claimed more votes than it would have done in a fair contest, but all the same it has surpassed the rest by some measure. According to official data, it received 48 per cent of proportional seats, which together with the majority seats is more than enough to form a government. The parallel vote tabulation showed that it gained nearly 46 per cent. The difference is not so great.

On the second day, the opposition took to the streets in protest at the election results. Its leaders are threatening to boycott parliament, despite calls for cooperation from Western partners. Such a scenario is undeniably harmful to Georgian democracy. The opposition already boycotted parliament back in 2008, thus creating a political vacuum which was filled by Ivanishvili four years later.

In any case, it won't be easy for the new government. The pandemic has hit the economy hard and a crisis is looming for Georgia. If the government cannot cope with these challenges, we could see an early election and the opposition could be given a second chance relatively soon. Ivanishvili is not immortal, either – sooner or later he will have to meet the demands of the West, which is looking to prevent Georgia from being transformed into a typical post-Soviet hybrid regime.

Thus we are faced with an important question: will there come a time when the West and the USA take Georgia seriously? If Biden becomes US president, we can likely expect a tougher stance on democracy. But since replacing Ivanishvili with Saakashvili is hardly possible, only one solution remains: the active support of new political forces in the country. And this should be done soon, otherwise political life will return to its old, stagnant ways.



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