Will the fourth president of Georgia be a president without portfolio?

On October 27 the next president of Georgia will be elected. It will be the fourth president in Georgia’s history, and, unlike past presidents — Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Eduard Shevardnadze, and Mikheil Saakashvili — this one will be granted largely ceremonial functions. According to recent amendments to the constitution, after the inauguration of the fourth president, the center of the Georgian government will shift to the prime minister, and to a lesser extent, to the parliament.

However, this fact did not deter the ambitious citizens of Georgia, and almost 60 people expressed a desire to become president. Only 23 made it to the official start of the election campaign — the central election committee weeded out the applicants that were well-known only in narrow circles or among their relatives. Of the 23, three real candidates for president have emerged: the candidate of the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) coalition, Giorgi Margvelashvili; the ex-speaker of parliament, David Bakradze, from the former ruling party United National Movement (UNM); and another former chairman of parliament, Nino Burjanadze, representing Democratic Movement - United Georgia.

According to various surveys, Margvelashvili has the greatest chances of winning. He is easy to read — a protégé of the current de facto ruler of Georgia, Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, he may not even bother to campaign very much, but just remind voters when he meets them who sponsored his candidacy. Objectively speaking, he can’t do much more than that. In the public’s mind the GD coalition, its members, its acts, etc. are firmly associated with Ivanishvili.

People, of course, have become somewhat disillusioned with Georgian Dream. Not all of its socio-economic program was implemented. The justice that it had promised meaning, in part, ending the United National Movement as a political party, did not happen, and Georgian Dream has even cooperated with UNM. Crime levels have increased slightly, the energy sector has somewhat declined, prices have risen slightly, etc. But the personal authority of Ivanishvili is quite high and there is still hope that Georgia, finally, is heading on a more or less steady course. Keenly aware of the realities, the prime minister, campaigning for Giorgi Margvelashvili, announced boldly that, “A vote for Margvelashvili is a vote for me.” If at some point in the election campaign that will not be enough, Ivanishvili will certainly find a way to point out who should receive the votes. Of course, Margvelashvili.

Nino Burjanadze is solidly in second place according to the same survey. She made a risky bet in her campaigning and called for normalizing relations with Russia, which were catastrophically ruined by the previous government, and were not patched up substantially by the current regime. People remember how Burjanadze was received by Vladimir Putin shortly after the war in August 2008, and her promises to improve relations with Moscow, without which Georgia will have a difficult time, do not seem empty. Her intention to do away with the UNM also appear realistic, considering how they led the country into a coma. "Saakashvili and his team will be behind bars if the court rules their actions were criminal!" vows Burjanadze. There is no doubt that she will do whatever it takes to see this happen. On top of everything, Nino Burjanadze was seriously offended by her long-time partners when they failed to find a post for her. And after she switched to the opposition, they inflicted blows and painful defeats on her in the political arena.
National party candidate David Bakradze is in solid third place in the polls, significantly behind Margvelashvili and Burjanadze. Perhaps it could not be any other way. Public resentment against the UNM is still too fresh. After losing a parliamentary election, undergoing a succession of scandals, and seeing the arrests of some leaders and criminal cases opened against others, the fact that the National party was able to keep a definite party structure, even with its losses, and to remain an influential force in Georgia, can already be considered a success. Bakradze is running his campaign in what seems to be the only effective way in his position, by sharply criticizing his rivals. Mentions of Margvelashvili are accompanied with a reminder of Georgian Dream's broken promises, and Burjanadze, with a warning that this lady in one fell blow will pass Georgia over to Russia.

However, despite the apparent predictability of the elections, the two favourites could still run aground on several reefs.

First, according to the same survey, the election will probably not be decided in one round. Neither Margvelashvili nor Burjanadze will garner enough votes.

Secondly, which of the two candidates would win a second round is an open question. The fact is that Burjanadze is on the rise, and Margvelashvili is gradually slipping. The situation in South Ossetia, where Russian troops are demarcating the border of the partially recognized republic, shifting it deep into Georgian territory, is contributing to the decline in the polls for Georgian Dream. The immature comments of Ivanishvili, who basically admitted his helplessness when faced with Russia, didn't help his protégé. All the while Burjanadze assures the public she has the ability to find a common language with Russia. The decision of the prime minister to step down from his post and focus on his job in the civilian sector for the benefit of Georgia also had a negative effect. A regular guy who is ready to vote for Margvelashvili, "because it's the same thing as voting for Ivanishvili," could be understandably puzzled: how can it be a vote for Ivanishvili, when he left government? In short, the gap between Margvelashvili and Burjanadze will narrow and which of them will be the favourite when the second round approaches is far from clear.

Thirdly, there may not be a second round, and not because Margvelashvili will beat Burjanadze outright in the first round, but because the National party might have something to say about it. For them, a Burjanadze victory would be extremely dangerous. Burjanadze is determined and seems to be quite capable of thoroughly ploughing up the Georgian political field, after which there might be only memories left of the National party. And if the UNM accepts the defeat of Bakradze as inevitable and recognizes the high probability of a second round, then it might throw all its resources, including electoral, into victory in the first round for Giorgi Margvelashvili, who is not as independent of a candidate or as radical as Burjanadze. After assisting him like that, the Nationals would be able to count on a trouble-free political existence, albeit in a limited arena. They can only hope that Margvelashvili doesn't subscribe to the Roman maxim about destroying situational allies who know your weakness. But this is unlikely. People who know Margvelashvili say he is a very decent, gentle person.

With all of the campaign hoopla, not many people have given thought to the future prime minister. But, as noted above, it is the prime minister that will become the leading figure after the presidential elections. Ivanishvili has said nothing specific about who will be his successor. Other prominent representatives of the GD have added fuel to the fire with various statements they have made. But the question of the future prime minister remains open, which invites speculation on a variety of scenarios.

Another question has also come up. If the functions of the president will be largely nominal, then how can the ferocity of the current election campaigns be explained? How will the candidates fulfil their big promises, if the authority vested in the president will be insufficient to take on the larger issues?

Here it would be useful to recall the circumstances under which the constitution was amended to curtail the president's powers in favour of the prime minister, which will come into effect after the current presidential elections. These amendments were written and adopted by the previous parliament, where Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement held a constitutional majority. It was done with him in mind. Saakashvili was barred by the constitution to run for a third term as president. He didn't want to take a page from his eastern neighbours, and give himself the opportunity to become president for the third or time or more, which would have discredited him in the eyes of the West. And then the constitutional redistribution of power was proposed. There are no restrictions on continuing to administer the country as prime minister.

However, the plan failed. The unexpected painful defeat in the parliamentary elections, which meant the party lost the prime minister post, ruined the hand of the Nationals. We will find out very soon if their successors consider it necessary to have the president's powers limited. If Burjanadze were to win the presidential elections, there is no doubt that she would not accept a purely "ceremonial" position. She will certainly attempt to regain, if not the full
power of the presidency, then at least some of its important functions.

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