

IRI's poll of Georgia on support for COVID-19 management and concerns over Economy



By KHATIA BZHALAVA

The survey conducted on behalf of IRI's Center for Survey Research by Dr. Rasa Alisauskiene of Baltic Surveys/ Gallup organisation regards Georgian people's opinion on COVID-19 management throughout the country. As IRI states, a nationwide poll "reveals strong support for the Government's management of

COVID-19, as well as significant concerns about pandemic's economic impact."

According to the research, 41% of the surveyed people are 'very satisfied' with the government's response to the COVID-19, 38% are 'somewhat satisfied', 7% are 'very unsatisfied' and 13% are 'somewhat unsatisfied'. The poll shows that 37% are 'somewhat satisfied' with the Government's effort to address the

economic consequences of COVID-19, while 19% said to be 'very satisfied' and 24% are 'somewhat satisfied'.

The survey found that 37% 'fully' and 32% 'somewhat' approved the Georgian Orthodox Church's decision to hold religious rituals during the COVID-19 pandemic. The decision is 'somewhat' disapproved by 14% and 'fully' disapproved by 8%.

47% of the people who participated in the poll believe that the USA was the most helpful country to Georgia in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. China was named by 6%, the European Union by 4%, Germany and Turkey with 1%.

32% of the Georgian citizens said the current economic situation in their household to be 'somewhat good' and 43% answered 'somewhat bad' on the same question. Only 2% described their economic situation as 'very good'.

According to the latest results of June 2020, more people(36%) think that Georgia is headed in the right direction, in comparison to the data of October 2019 (22%).

46% consider that the most important problem faced by the country is 'Economy-Unemployment', 17% is concerned about 'Economy- the cost of living, high prices' the most. Poverty which was answered by 10% is then followed by 'Economy-other/general' (6%), COVID-19 pandemic (4%), occupied territories (3%), Internal conflicts; Education; Healthcare (2%) and Corruption; Social services/benefits; Agriculture, Current government (1%).

The following statement "I am satisfied with the current state of democracy in Georgia" is 'somewhat' agreed by 41%, 'somewhat' disagreed by 25%, 'strongly' agreed by 14%, and 'strongly' disagreed by 17%.

POLITICS

Epidemiological situation escalates in Mestia, Kazbegi remains open



FULL STORY ON Page 2

ECONOMICS

Khashuri bypass road to be opened later in August



FULL STORY ON Page 3

On the question "If parliamentary elections were held this coming Sunday, for which party would you vote?" Georgian Dream was answered to be their first choice by 33%, United National Movement by 16%, and European Georgia by 5%.

The survey showed that in the list of Georgian public and spiritual figures, Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia the 2nd is 'favorable' for 89% and 'unfavorable' for only 6% of the community. The second place is held by Amiram Gamkrelidze, who is favored by 74% and unfavored by 17%. The PM of Georgia is 'favorable' for 63% and 'unfavorable' for 31%.

72% of the surveyed citizens believe that Russian aggression towards Georgia is still going on. 40% supports further dialogue with Russia, 35% somewhat supports the above and 14% strongly opposes.

According to the poll, 56% 'fully' and 22% 'somewhat' supports the idea of joining NATO. Joining the European Union is fully supported by 64% and somewhat supported by 23%.

The survey was conducted between June 4th and July 2nd, 2020. Data was collected using a stratified multistage probability sampling method through in-person, in-home interviews. The sample consists of 1,500 respondents aged 18 and over and eligible to vote. The data was weighted for age, gender, region, and settlement size. The margin of error is plus or minus 2.5 percent and the response rate was 66 percent. This survey was made possible by the generous support of the American people through the U.S. Agency for International Development.



The findings of the survey come two months ahead of Parliamentary elections in Georgia, scheduled on October 31st, 2020.

Epidemiological situation escalates in Mestia, Kazbegi remains open

BY NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

The Prime Minister of Georgia Giorgi Gakharia held the meeting of the Interagency Coordination Council, assessing the epidemiological situation in Mestia. As the head of the government noted, the Ministry of Internal Affairs ensured the restriction of movement and the enforcement of the restrictions that the government had to impose.

According to the PM, these restrictions cause inconvenience to both locals and visiting tourists, but the health of citizens is of the highest value. He noted that 14 cases of infection have been exposed and 1000 tests have been brought to Svaneti, however, we don't have a complete picture yet. As it was announced on the 11th of August, 4000 tests are planned to be taken in Svaneti.

"Without effective management of virus risks there will be no economic recovery," Gakharia said.

According to the head of the government, 919 citizens were transferred from Svaneti to the quarantine zones yesterday. The PM called on the relevant agencies to ensure the efficiency of the management of quarantine areas.

"As of today, we have 7700 people in quarantine areas and even though the relevant agencies, the Ministry of Economy and the Tourism Agency are doing their best, the situation here is already quite tense," the PM stressed.

He also noted that due to the principle of reciprocity, Georgia has opened the borders of several countries, as of today, 1,520 applications have already been received and more than 751 tourists are in the country at the moment.

As for the number of business visitors, according to the PM, their number exceeded 4,000 during this period.

"This does not mean that all these people are in Georgia now. However, for the economy not to cool down and for economic activities to intensify gradually, the direction of business visitors is



► PM says if not for the government's prompt response, we would have witnessed the virus outbreak in Mestia.



► In Georgia, a total of 1,278 people were confirmed with the coronavirus, with 1,058 recoveries, and 17 deaths. 16 of the infected are in critical condition.

extremely important," Gakharia said. He also said that 54,205 drivers of international shipments were tested, of which 788 were confirmed to be infected.

"A new cluster is being formed, which is related to the Larsi customs," Amiran Gamkrelidze, the head of the National Center for Disease Control, told journalists in Mestia municipality.

According to Gamkrelidze, 5 cases of coronavirus have been confirmed at the Larsi customs checkpoint. Under the leadership of Khatuna Zakhshvili, Head of the Department of Communicable Diseases of the National Center for Disease Control, the Larsi customs cluster contacts are being actively investigated.

Gakharia also commented on the Kazbegi cluster, saying in Kazbegi, as well as at the Larsi

checkpoint, the epidemiological situation is fully under control and "there are some rumors in various media outlets that the government is also going to impose restrictions in Kazbegi, but there is no risk."

"I want everyone to know that if such a situation is created in several parts of the country, it will be impossible to prevent the disease," said Paata Imnadze, Deputy Director of the National Center for Disease Control after the meeting of the Coordination Council.

He said the resource would not be enough if such surveys were to be needed simultaneously in individual municipalities.

Imnadze also called on citizens and businesses to follow all necessary regulations. There are already 30 confirmed cases from Lanjeri, he emphasized, 5 of which are family members and relatives who went to Tbilisi, the rest of the cases are confirmed in Svaneti itself.

According to Imnadze, the confirmed cases of infection in Kazbegi district did not have many contacts and at this stage, a study has been launched in the villages of Kazbegi.

To the question - will there be a need to tighten measures in Kazbegi district, the deputy head of the NCDC answers: "The difference in Kazbegi district is that it is a high-risk, professional group, these are our border guards who are in contact with the units and dozens of cases that enter the country daily," he explained, adding that there are more than 110 infected trailer drivers in the country and many citizens are returning from Russia and among them, there are quite a lot of infected and all these people will pass these guards, hence they have a professional risk.

EU HELPS GEORGIA, MOLDOVA AND UKRAINE WITH MACRO-FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE TO LIMIT ECONOMIC FALLOUT OF PANDEMIC

On 11 August, the European Commission signed memoranda of understanding (MoU) on macro-financial assistance (MFA) programmes with eight partners in the EU Neighbourhood. The agreements are part of the €3 billion MFA package for ten enlargement and neighbourhood partners, aimed to help them limit the economic fallout of the coronavirus pandemic.

Among the eight countries are also three Eastern partner countries: Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. According to the EU, agreeing and signing the MoUs is an important step towards the first disbursement under the programme, which depends on fulfilling political conditions.

For Georgia, the policy conditions for its €150 million MFA programme relate to strengthen-

ing public finance management, improving governance, sector reforms, and labour market policies.

For Moldova, the policy conditions for its €100 million MFA programme relate to strengthening public finance management, good governance and fight against corruption, and improving the business environment. For Ukraine, the policy conditions for its €1.2 billion MFA programme are more compre-

hensive and relate to strengthening public finance management, governance and the rule of law, reform of the judiciary, competition in the gas market, improving the business climate and governance of state-owned enterprises.

MFA is part of the EU's wider engagement with neighbouring and enlargement countries and is intended as an exceptional EU crisis response instrument.

SATURDAY AUGUST 13

Day  Rain
High: 30°C

Night  Clear skies
Low: 19°C

FRIDAY AUGUST 14

Day  Sunny
High: 30°C

Night  Clear skies
Low: 18°C

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Khashuri bypass road to be opened later in August

BY NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

The construction of the Khashuri bypass road, which is part of the East-West Expressway (E60) as part of the Zemo Osiauri-Chumateteli project, is nearing completion. According to the Roads Department, in the second half of August, Khashuri will have a four-lane cement-concrete bypass road.

The construction of the Khashuri bypass road was to be completed by July 31, according to the contract, however, due to the circumstances created by the Coronavirus pandemic, the contractor was scheduled to complete the deadline in October this year. Considering the importance of the Khashuri bypass road for the comfortable and safe movement of vehicles from east to west, at the end of August, 11.5 km section of a 4-lane road will be opened, while the remaining 1.5 km will be temporarily 2-lane. The construction of 2 additional lanes on the remaining 1.5 km of road will be completed in October and all 13 km of Khashuri bypass road will have 4 lanes.

The Khashuri bypass road starts at the last section of Agara-Zemo Osiauri and joins the existing road at the new junction in Surami. A 420-meter bridge was built on this section, which is distinguished by the highest piers in Georgia.

Khashuri bypass road is part of Zemo Osiauri-Chumateteli road and after the completion of both sections, the road will reach the Rikoti pass tunnel. This way, one will bypass Khashuri, Surami, and Chumateteli. Within the framework of the project, a total of 4-lane cement-concrete roads, 21 bridges, 5 tunnels, reinforced concrete underground



► The construction of the Khashuri bypass road, which is part of the East-West Expressway (E60) as part of the Upper Osiauri-Chumateteli project, is nearing completion.

exits, water pipes, and drainage systems will be built. As for the construction of a 6.4 km road in the second section of the Upper Sauri-Chumateteli road, the tender-selection process is currently underway.

Zemo Osiauri-Chumateteli section is an integral part of the main transit highway of the country and the commissioning of this section will increase the

capacity of the expressway, the level of traffic safety and reduce the travel time.

More infrastructure projects are underway in Georgia. City Hall starts rehabilitation of Tbilisi Dendrological Park. The state procurement has been announced for the preparation of the design works for the rehabilitation of the park near the Tbilisi Sea, costing €830 000. According to

the Mayor of Tbilisi, Kakha Kaladze, a large-scale hydrological survey of the Tbilisi Sea Basin and the surrounding area was carried out. He said the study had never been done before. The research aims to determine the sanitary protection zones of the Tbilisi Sea.

According to the documentation, Tbilisi Dendrological Park is located near the Tbilisi Sea. The

total area of the park is 163 ha, of which 93.3 ha are covered by forest. As a result of the project, the attractiveness of the dendrological park for the population and tourists of Tbilisi should be increased, however, the existing natural landscape should be preserved and developed as much as possible. “10 infrastructural facilities are being designed on the territory of the Dendrological Park,” the document reads.

Tbilisi City Hall will restore the ropeway of Mziuri Park. Relevant state procurement has already been announced. Tbilisi City Hall intends to spend €720 000 for the reconstruction-rehabilitation works of the cableway station located in Mziuri Park. Receipt of bids in the state tender ends on August 26th.

The works aim to acquire a new life from the former cableway station and transform it into a cultural-educational institution. The supplier will be given a conceptual (reconstruction-adaptation) project prepared by the initiative group, from which the complete design documentation should be derived and should include structural reinforcement works of the building, facade arrangement works, interior repair works, water supply arrangement and cooling works.

“The design process should be carried out with the constant involvement of the initiative group and the final project should be agreed in writing with the initiative group before the submission,” the documentation reads.



► Large-scale hydrological survey of the Tbilisi Sea basin and the surrounding area was carried out.

Interview with UK Ambassador McKenzie Smith

Mr. Justin McKenzie Smith, now the former UK Ambassador to Georgia has left Georgia as his term came to close. *The Messenger* reached out to the Ambassador just before he left.

-Hello, firstly, I would like to express The Messenger's gratitude for this interview. I've had the opportunity to look at your impressive background, but I also wanted to give you a chance to tell us about your experience over the many years that you've been a diplomat.

Thank you for the invitation! I have enjoyed reading The Messenger throughout my four years in Georgia. The newspaper is a part of Georgian history

It has been exciting to see how fast UK-Georgia links are growing, in education, business, sport, culture, tourism and many other directions. The pandemic has inevitably slowed the pace of growth. However, it has also shown how deep the roots of this friendship are. This makes me certain that contacts will soon start to grow again, as vigorously as ever.

Online contacts continue between the governments and we

change is another urgent challenge and I am pleased the UK and Georgia are discussing preparations for the COP26 climate summit taking place in Glasgow, Scotland in November 2021.

Of course, there are many other priorities for our future cooperation. It will be for my friend, Ambassador Sophie Katsarava in London, and my successor as British Ambassador, Mark Clayton, to say more about those.



H.E. Justin McKenzie Smith, Ambassador of Britain to Georgia

-Looking back at your career years spent in Georgia (since August 2016), what would you remember as the biggest achievement in terms of the relations of the two countries?

I am lucky to have been involved in many wonderful initiatives between our two countries. I will never forget launching Learning Hubs with the British Council, giving young people in places such as Tkviavi, Tsalka and Lentekhi the chance to develop their English skills. I am proud of the cooperation and trust between our Armed Forces. Bringing David The Builder's coin to the Georgian National Museum as part of our "UK Season in Georgia" in 2019 was unforgettable. However, in terms of lasting impact, I hope the new UK-Georgia Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Agreement will provide a framework to make relations even stronger in years to come.

-Upcoming parliamentary elections in Georgia that are to be held in fall of this year are under massive spotlight and observation. What are your expectations for the process, given the March 8th Agreement?

The constitutional changes agreed in June are a historic achievement. I congratulate the Georgian people on their determination to pursue a fair and representative democratic system. I hope elections this autumn will be calm, transparent and in line with the international standards we all aspire to.

I particularly hope Georgia will see more women candidates taking part in the elections and entering Parliament. In 2020, Georgia's political leaders can give voters the opportunity to choose a Parliament that is more representative of all voices in society.

-You have said that attempts of foreign interference are a real challenge in Georgia as well as in the United Kingdom and the United States and other European countries. What is your advice and vision against it in upcoming elections?

Attempts at interference are a reality of modern democracy. Sharing experience among democratic partners is a crucial part of our defence. British and Georgian experts are working

closely to build cyber resilience.

After observing three elections in Georgia, I would also say we should not underestimate the strength of our "natural defences". No doubt attempts were made to interfere in those elections as well. However, the results were assessed to be a fair reflection of voters' preferences. I know how much Georgia's people have given for the right to exercise their democratic choice – and how hard they will resist any attempt to take it away from them again.

-Lastly, it will be interesting for our readers to know what was your favourite thing about living and working in Georgia?

I have been lucky to travel to many parts of this beautiful country, although there are still many places I hope to visit or return to one day. I have loved the chance to learn about Georgia's culture, language, history and people's hopes for the future. In truth, anywhere I am sitting at a table with friends, fresh bread, Georgian food and qvevri wine, I am happy.

(By Natalia Kochiashvili)



and today remains a reliable source of English-language information about many different aspects of the country. It was also a real pleasure to get to know the former Editor-in-Chief, the late Zaza Gachechiladze, and to welcome him many times to the British Embassy.

My diplomatic career has taken me to Russia, the United Nations, Mexico and now Georgia. In every place, it is the people I have met and worked with who have made the most lasting impression on me. This is certainly true in Georgia. The talent, creativity and energy of the many young people I have met leave me optimistic that Georgia's future is in very good hands.

-Thank you for your kind words! Our next question is how would you assess the development of the UK-Georgia relations? What are your expectations for Wardrop Strategic Dialogue 2020, the final round of which is to be held in September?

are preparing for the next Wardrop Strategic Dialogue in September. One agenda item will be our shared experiences of Covid-19. Georgia's pandemic response has been genuinely admired in the UK and I am pleased we have been able to support these efforts in a number of ways. Trade links are another priority. During the pandemic, we have received a steady stream of enquiries from British companies interested in doing business in Georgia.

-How do you picture the cooperation of two countries in the post-epidemic era and what should be priority fields in the future, given the COVID-19 crisis and the global situation?

The pandemic reminds us that international cooperation is vital in addressing the challenges we face. The UK and Georgia are working together on this. For example, I was delighted Prime Minister Gakharia took part in the UK-hosted Global Vaccines Summit in June. Climate

