

Opinion & Analysis

Crisis goes on while Europe tries to mediate

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Economics / Politics

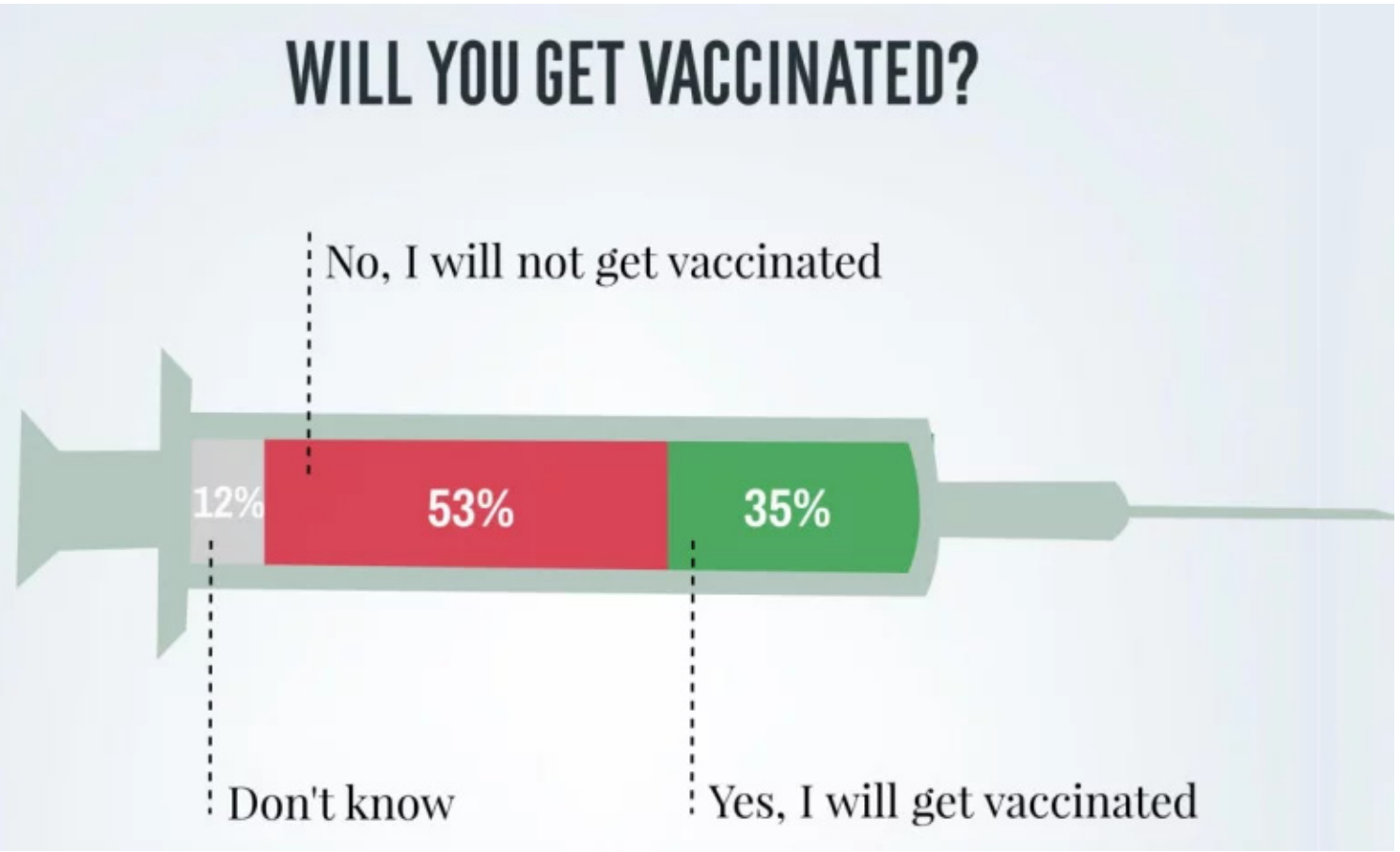
Deputy Interior Minister Sabanadze resigns



Founder of the Civic Movement for People calls for Georgia's Prosecutor General Office to investigate alleged illegal surveillance against her

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NDI poll shows Georgians are sceptical about direction of country's development, COVID-Vaccine



Poll was carried out through nationwide mobile phone interviews (excluding occupied territories) with 2,024 respondents and has an average margin of error +/-1.4%.

BY NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

The poll results released today by the National Democratic Institute (NDI)

and CRRC Georgia find that a year into the coronavirus pandemic, Georgians remain concerned about the state of the economy and healthcare. While the public

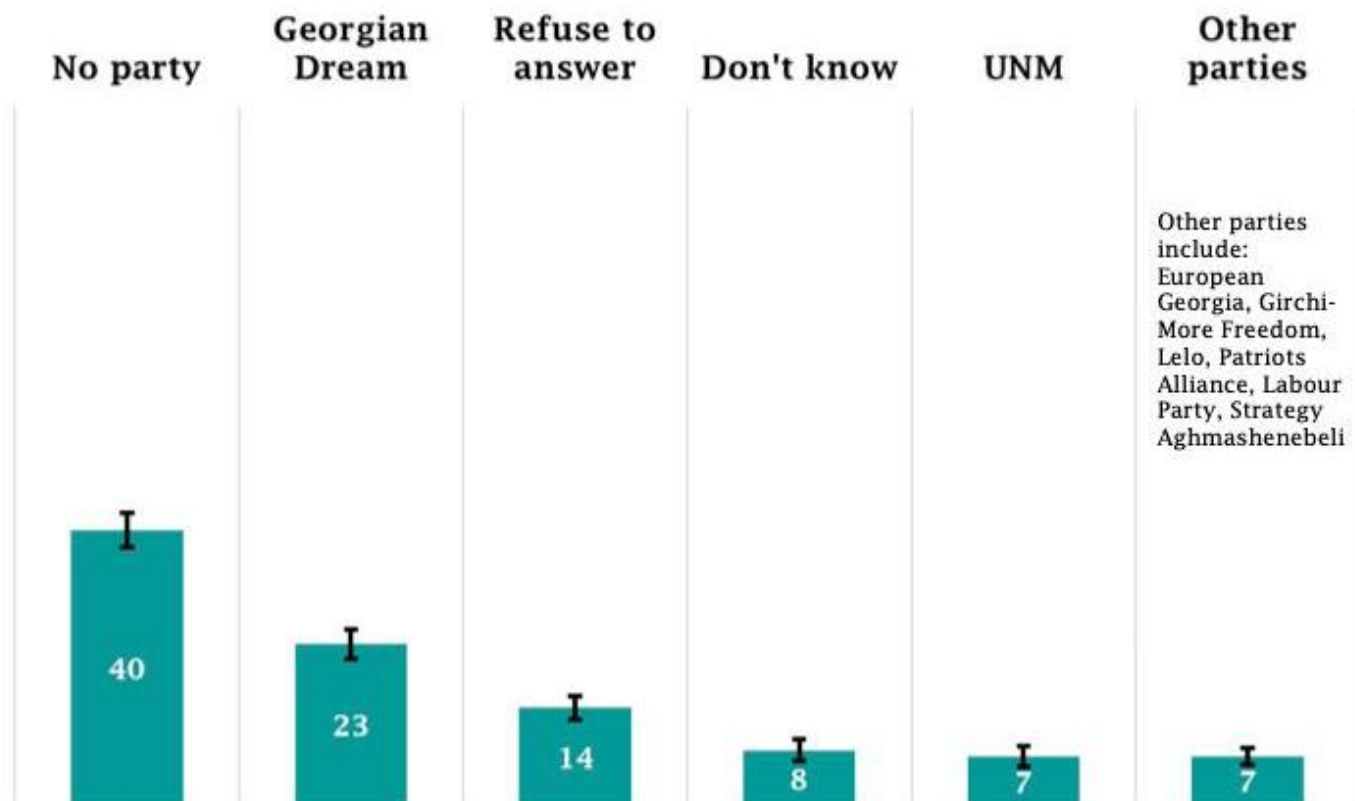
continues to credit the government with managing the pandemic effectively (68%, up from 60% in December 2020), they remain skeptical of forthcoming vaccinations.

Amidst the ongoing political crisis, Georgians are looking to their elected leaders to prioritize policies that address their pressing concerns. As in previous months, the state of the country's economy and the impact of Covid-19 remain at the forefront of citizens' concerns. A quarter of the population reports either losing their job (13%) or experiencing salary/income reduction (12%) since the start of the pandemic, while a plurality said they remain unemployed. Georgians in the retail, construction, transport, and restaurant sectors were most affected by the pandemic. The public is split when assessing the government's economic response to the pandemic; 50% assess the government's economic plan as effective and half of those who received financial assistance report it as being sufficient.

As Georgia begins to roll out its vaccination plan, the public remains skeptical. Less than half (42%) of Georgians believe that the government's vaccination plan is effective. Only 35% would choose to receive a vaccine, if given the option right now; 53% said they would not. Vaccine hesitancy is highest among women and individuals under 55. Among those who are hesitant, the main reasons are concerns about the quality of the vaccine (48%) and the belief that they can overcome the pandemic without vaccination (20%). Georgians, who say they get their news on Covid-19 primarily from television (60%) and internet (35%), look to medical professionals (74%) and the Georgian National Center for Disease Control (NCDC) (68%) for trustworthy information.

Party support

Which political party is closest to you? (q15)



The survey was fielded by the Caucasus Resource Research Centers (CRRC) for NDI between February 17 and 24, 2021 with the financial assistance of the UK Aid.

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Crisis goes on while Europe tries to mediate

BY MALKHAZ MATSABERIDZE

In the last week, the Council of Europe and the European Union tried to solve the delayed political crisis in Georgia. Negotiations were conducted in Georgia, trying to conduct a special representative of the Council of Europe and Brussels, where Prime Minister of Georgia Irakli Gharibashvili was present. But despite the great effort and commitment of European friends, the agreement between the Georgian authorities and the opposition was quite difficult.

European friends' efforts are highly appreciated and important for several reasons. First of all, it was made clear what a significant partner Georgia is considered and how they are trying to overcome the crisis in the country. If the tenth of such attention and support Georgia could enjoy years ago, the Democratic Republic of Georgia, perhaps the Soviet Russia would fail to conquer it. Secondly, if not for the West's attention to Georgia, such negotiations between the government and the opposition, would not take place. Negotiations have played a certain massive role in the political situation in Georgia. Third, European politicians had to familiarize themselves with the difficult situation in Georgia.

Negotiations are underway in a private mode. Negotiations are discussing around five paragraphs, agreement with the statements of opposition representatives should be in connection with all these points and can not move forward with any other paragraphs.



The main requirements of the opposition in the boycott mode-release of political prisoners and appointment of extraordinary parliamentary elections is categorically unacceptable for Georgian Dream. They exclude the existence of political prisoners, and deny the opposition's allegations of falsification of the 2020 parliamentary election. The opposing bloc demands early elections or even a plebiscite to decide whether people want early

elections or not. Prime Minister Garibashvili said that until 2024, before the parliamentary elections, parliamentary elections would not be held in Georgia. In this regard, "Georgian Dream" was very pleasant to the statements made by European politicians that the 2020 parliamentary elections were free and competitive. The opposition in this boycott mode and European friends were criticized for such statements. Georgian Dream excludes snap elections but the opposition does not explain this request from the agenda. The

2020 parliamentary elections are not simply fraudulent, but this fraud has changed the winner of the elections. Georgian Dream continued to rule for the third term, while the opposition in the boycott mode lost the elections. The leader of the opposition party Nika Melia, the leader of the opposition party deserved negative assessment from our European friends. According to the leaders of Georgian Dream's Prime Minister Gharibashvili, the release of Melia is for the Court to decide, which sounds charming to the western friends.

The opposition's entering parliament would be perceived as their defeat, and the government's reaction would also probably be mocking and insulting. Without deciding on the issue of early elections, the opposition is not going to enter the Parliament. The opposition also expects the US to involve the Georgian political crisis and hopes that it will make it possible to find a way out.

(Translated from Georgian by Mariam Mchedlidze)

friends.

European friends consider the way out of the crisis is for the opposition to enter parliament. In their opinion, it will be important for stability, democracy, pluralism and dialogue on electoral reform or judicial reform. All this is true in the European democratic parliaments, but it is doubtful that the entry of the opposition in Georgia's parliament leads to democracy in Georgia. it will be important for stability, democracy, pluralism and dialogue on electoral reform or judicial reform. All this is true in the European democratic parliaments, but it is doubtful that the entry of the opposition in Georgia's parliament leads to democracy in Georgia.

Leaders of the Georgian Dream party divide the opposing bloc into "destructive" and "constructive" parts. They usually refer as "destructive" to those related to UNM in one way or another.

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"While the country continues to endure a political crisis, it is important to demonstrate that the fundamental needs of the public are being met," said Alan Gillam, NDI Country Director. "Ensuring a smooth rollout of the vaccine and making use of trusted medical professionals to provide the public with accurate information will be critical to the government's effort to deliver crucial services and safeguard public health."

Georgia received the first 43,200 doses of AstraZeneca vaccine on March 13, while the vaccination of health workers started on March 15 throughout

NDI poll shows, Georgians are sceptical about direction of country's development, COVID-Vaccine

the country. Another batch of vaccines is supposed to arrive today from Pfizer. Starting March 25, people over 65 years of age will be allowed to register for the Covid-19 vaccination in the country.

Looking ahead, Georgians want their elected representatives to prioritize their concerns. During the upcoming year, the public wants to see the Georgian parliament focused on the economy, healthcare, and education. They expect parties to address issues of inclusion, starting within their own ranks: a majority of Georgians also want to see more women in parliament; approximately half favor

equal representation. These priorities are consistent across political affiliation. However, Georgians remain skeptical of the parliament's willingness to actually address their concerns. A majority does not believe parliament will take into account opinions of people like them (54 %) and believes that MPs will only serve their own interests (55 %). The lack of faith in parliament likely contributes to low interest in engagement with the institution. When asked about the preferred form of communication, a plurality (39 %) said they don't want to be engaged with the parliament.

Out of 2,024 participants who

completed the survey between February 17-24, only 22% of the respondents believe that the country is going in the right direction, while the majority (44%) are dissatisfied with the direction Georgia is headed in. Moreover, an overwhelming majority of survey participants claimed that have not been involved in the work of parliament over the last 4 years.

The recent findings show that the majority of respondents do not see any of the existing parties as being close to them (40%), while 19% choose the ruling Georgian Dream party. 14% refused to answer, 8% could not identify one, 7% named the op-

position United National Movement party, and another 7% named other parties European Georgia, Girchi-More Freedom, Lelo, Patriots Alliance, Labour Party, and Strategy Aghmashenebeli.

For comparison, in December 2020, 31% considered the Georgian Dream shares their views, while the National Movement got 5% of 'votes'. Note that this survey was held the week when former PM Giorgi Gakharia resigned (February 18), citing the inability to agree in the ruling party regarding the issue of imprisoning UNM head Nika Melia, who was arrested on 23rd of February.

Weather

Wednesday, March 24

Day Light Rain

High: 16°C

Night Light Rain

Low: 4°C

Thursday, March 25

Day Partly Cloudy

High: 13°C

Night Light Rain

Low: 3°C

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Deputy Interior Minister Sabanadze resigns



First Deputy Interior Minister resigned, citing the need for 'thorough and impartial investigation,' following the controversial TV stories.

By NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

Kakhaber Sabanadze Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs of Georgia Vakhtang Gomelauri announced his resignation on March 23. Sabanadze connects the resignation with the controversial materials about him aired by TV channels Mtavari Arkhi and TV Pirveli and speaks about the necessity of starting a thorough investigation.

The information was spread on his Facebook page, which was created a few hours before the post was made. However, the Ministry of Internal Affairs confirms his resignation and the authenticity of the post.

"The above mentioned facts need to be studied, a comprehensive and impartial investigation

must be conducted to establish the truth. Therefore, in order to ensure confidence in the investigation process, I resign! I think this will be a precedent for all officials to act with a high standard of responsibility in case of questions," reads the post.

Last Saturday and Sunday, TV Pirveli and Mtavari Arkhi prepared the materials in which Sabanadze was featured. According to TV Pirveli, their source provided them with the recordings, which prove that the disruption of the 2019 rally and damage of the equipment happened on Sabanadze's instructions. Similar information was spread by the Mtavari Arkhi based on a specific person's claims. Ivane Gulashvili, allegedly a former intelligence officer,

revealed controversial orders he received from then Deputy Interior Minister Sabanadze during June 20 unrest in 2019, and exposed high-ranking officials of conducting covert surveillance. TV Pirveli's story on the other hand, also touched upon Sabanadze, close to then newly-elected PM Gakharia (2019) and alleged he was being spied on by other security officers. The channel said Gulashvili was imprisoned, among others, for having disclosed confidential files.

The Prosecutor's Office of Georgia said yesterday that it started a probe into recently-aired stories. According to the Prosecutor's Office, a criminal investigation has been launched under Article 158, involving vio-

lating the secrecy of private communication, and Article 333, involving exceeding official powers.

After the two stories aired, the Public Defender of Georgia, as well as the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA), a key local watchdog, condemned the practice of illegal encroachment on private life by the Georgian authorities and called for a timely and effective reaction to the allegations.

Prior to his appointment as First Deputy Interior Minister in November 2017, Sabanadze briefly served as the Deputy Head of the Counter Terrorist Center of the State Security Service in the same year. Between 2015 and 2017, he was the Deputy Head of the state secu-

riety department of the State Security Service. Earlier, he held various high-ranking posts in the Georgian Foreign Intelligence Special Service, in the Interior Ministry, and the Defense Ministry.

Corruption scandals related to him and the new redistribution of spheres of influence are named as the reasons for the dismissal of the influential Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs. Irakli Kadagidze, a former high-ranking official of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, is waiting for a staff purge in the police and does not rule out that Sabanadze's staff will also leave their positions.

The opposition is considering the Gakharia-Gomelauri controversy as the first version.

Recall that back in January, the media had been spreading information that there was a confrontation between Gomelauri and then PM Gakharia, who plans to re-enter politics soon. The Interior Minister then commented that information was incorrect. He said the ongoing changes in his system were the result of rotation and not confrontation. Journalists also asked him about the possible release of Sabanadze - on this question Gomelauri answered that Sabanadze was more of 'his staff', since they had worked together for 5 years and he was happy to be appointed in the police force.



"Gakharia and I are friends and there's no such thing as 'his people' and 'my people'," Gomelauri announced back in January.

Founder of the Civic Movement for People calls for Georgia's Prosecutor General Office to investigate alleged illegal surveillance against her

By VERONIKA MALINBOYM

Founder of the civic movement for People and the former government official Anna Dolidze stated on her Twitter page that a day prior, an opposition minded Mtavari Arkhi TV Channel released an "alarming" interview with a former employee of the State Security Service. In this interview, the currently detained Vano Gulashvili confesses to allegedly damaging the projector of the opposition during the June 20 rallies, as well as illegally installing several surveillance devices in the homes of some of the Georgia's top-ranking officials, including Anna Dolidze, upon the request of the former Deputy Interior Minister Kakhaber Sabanadze. Dolidze stated that she is deeply concerned by the news, and called for the Ombudswoman of Georgia to hold an immediate investigation into the fact of possible illegal surveillance against her:

"Alarming news: Yesterday

TV Mtavari published a testimony by a former security services employee stating that he had installed video surveillance in my apartment and had recorded "private character" materials. This can't pass uninvestigated. I ask for your support in this matter", Dolidze said in her post.

Georgian Ombudswoman, Nino Lomjaria held a meeting with the US Ambassador to Georgia Kelly Degnan today. Following the meeting, the US Embassy released a statement in which it condemned the "politicized attacks" on the General Prosecutor's Office:

"I was very sorry to hear that there have been some attacks against the PDO. That kind of hate speech is toxic language, especially against an office that is serving the public in such an important way and trying to help every person in Georgia have their human rights respected. The Public Defender's Office also plays such an important role in holding public offi-

cially accountable, and that is again something that Georgia needs to do more of: more accountability, more transparency and less hate speech and vicious attacks against others. Again it was a very informative and useful meeting", Ambassador Kelly

Degnan said in a statement.

The Deputy Minister of Interior Kakhaber Sabanadze resigned amidst the release of Vano Gulashvili's testimony. On his Facebook page, Sabanadze said that during the years of his service to the country, he "always

strictly adhered to the rule of law, which is and always has been his main priority", and that his decision to resign was motivated solely by the fact that he wanted the investigation into the alleged crimes listed in Gulashvili's testimony to be trusted.



Anna Dolidze