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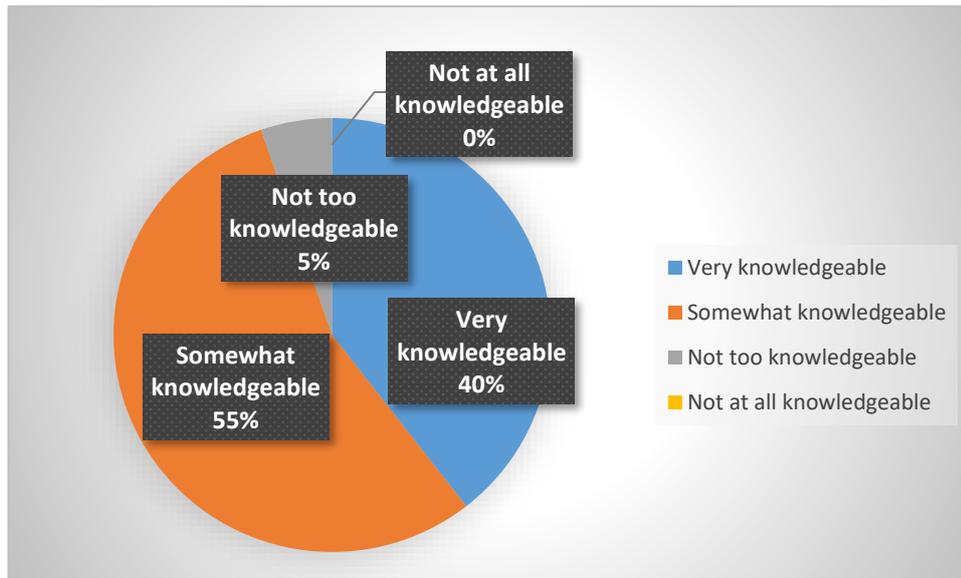
Observers praise Georgia's fight against COVID-19, criticize Orthodox Church

The Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) conducted its eleventh expert poll from March 23 to 25. Forty Georgian and international scholars and political observers answered questions about the recent COVID-19 pandemic and Georgia's resilience against it. The responses positively assessed the measures taken by the Georgian government and healthcare system and identified the non-compliance of the Georgian Orthodox Church and some citizens with quarantine and state of emergency rules as the most serious challenges.

About the respondents

The data provided below refers to a political assessment of the recent developments. The GIP's respondents were observers, scholars and pundits, who focus on political, social and economic developments in Georgia, and the majority of respondents do not have a background in epidemiology or healthcare. Of 40 experts asked, 20 were foreigners and 20 were Georgians. The majority of respondents indicated they are either "fully" or "somewhat" knowledgeable with regard to the COVID-19 outbreak in Georgia and the policy response (Figure 1).

Figure 1: How knowledgeable would you say you are with regard to COVID-19 and the policy response?



Government given rare praise, church displays weakest performance

The survey revealed overall consensus that the Georgian Dream government is working in a highly effective manner to meet the challenges of COVID-19. This is the first time that the government has been praised in expert polls unanimously by the majority of both Georgian and foreign experts (figures 2 and 3). 77% of experts assessed measures taken by the Georgian government against COVID-19 positively, while 20% assessed them neither positively nor negatively. Just one respondent among 40 assessed the measures negatively.

The government also performed well in comparison to other institutions, with experts assessing its performance as second best only to the nation's healthcare system, which itself can be closely associated with the government (figure 3). The media and political opposition also scored relatively well and occupy third and fourth place respectively. The behavior of Georgian citizens during the COVID-19 crisis on the other hand was assessed as rather poor, occupying the second to last place (figure 3).

Finally, the respondents identified the Georgian Orthodox Church as the worst performing institution in the crisis (figure 3). The church occupies last place by a wide margin, and is the only actor that received the lowest assessment (1 point out of 5) by an overwhelming majority of both Georgian and international observers (figure 3). The GIP also asked respondents a separate question about the Georgian orthodox church regarding its decision not to change communion ritual rules (figure 4). Here, too, the

assessment was very negative: 92% of both Georgian and foreign experts assessed the decision as “negative” and 8% as “neither positive nor negative” (figure 4). None of the experts gave a positive assessment (figure 4).

Figure 2: What is your overall assessment of measures taken by the Georgian government against COVID-19?

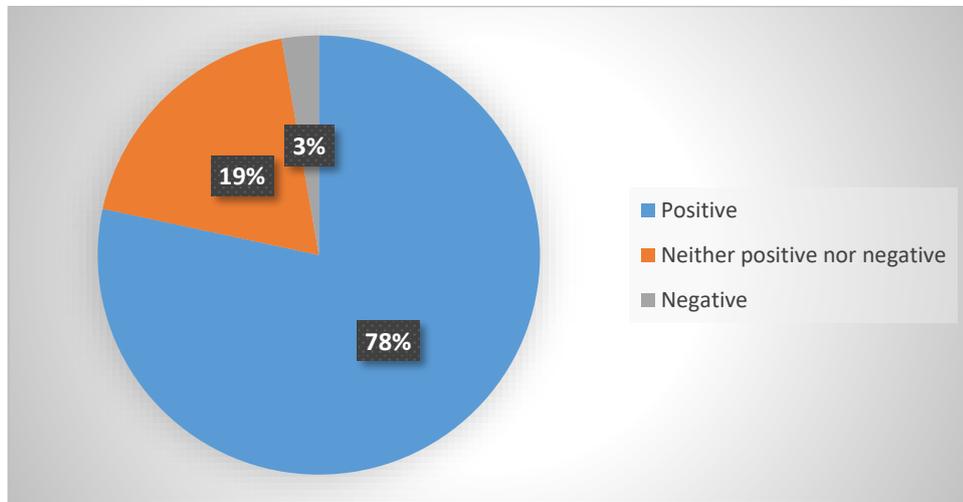


Figure 3: On a scale of 1 (worst) to 5 (best), please assess the performance of the following institutions during the COVID-19 crisis

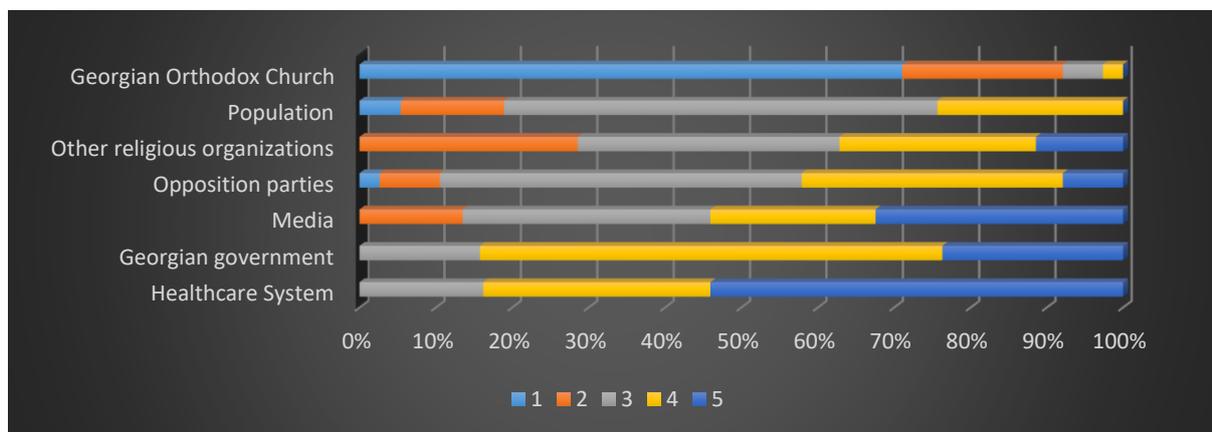
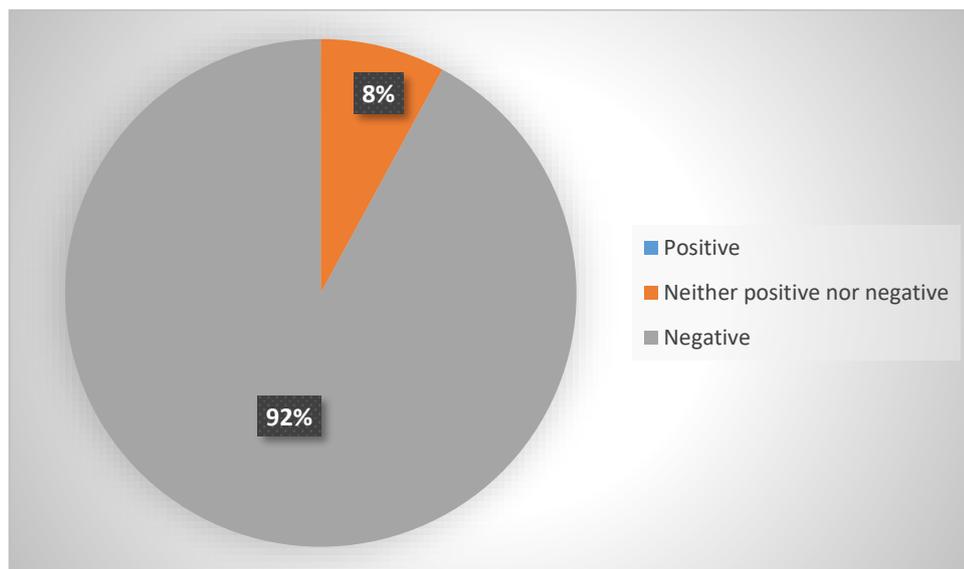


Figure 4: How do you assess the decision of the Georgian Orthodox Church not to change the procession and communion rituals amid the COVID-19 crisis?



Non-compliance of citizens remains the biggest challenge

In the last part of questionnaire, the respondents were asked to identify the remaining gaps and most important challenges that weaken Georgia’s resilience against fighting COVID-19.

50% of respondents identified the “non-compliance of citizens” as the main challenge of Georgia’s resilience against COVID-19 (figure 5). This was followed by the “non-compliance of the Georgian-Orthodox Church with the state of emergency rules” (32%). 12% of experts surveyed said the “absence of massive testing” was the key challenge and only 6% picked the ineffectiveness of the Georgian government as the main problem (figure 5).

The GIP also asked experts what next moves and measures should be prioritized by the government. 48% of surveyed respondents did not prioritize one measure alone, but said that the government should invest equally in various measures (figure 6). 23% came out in favor of “launching aggressive testing”, 17% - “acquisition of additional medical infrastructure (ventilators, equipment)” and 9% - “building field hospitals” (figure 6).

Figure 5: In your opinion, what is the main challenge that weakens Georgia's resilience against fighting the COVID-19?

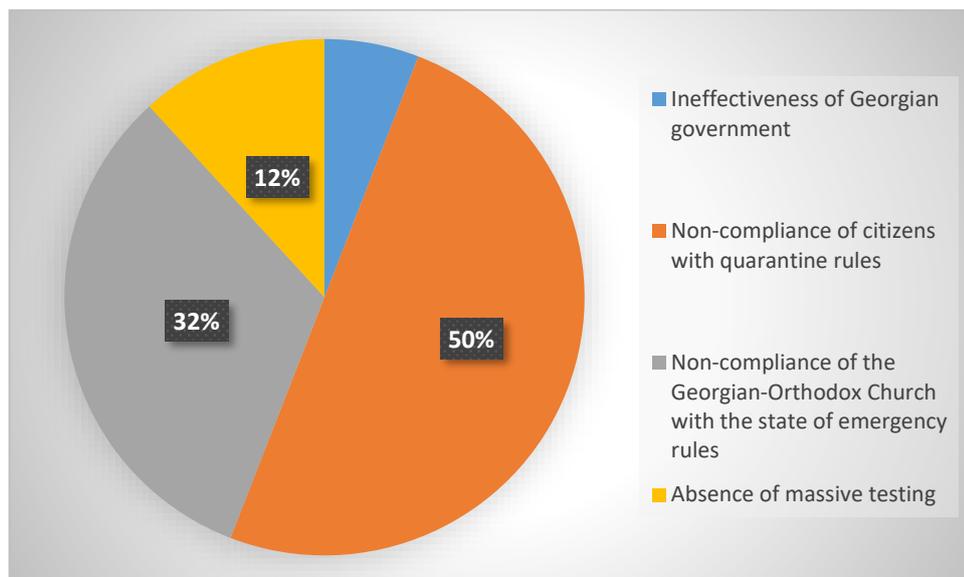
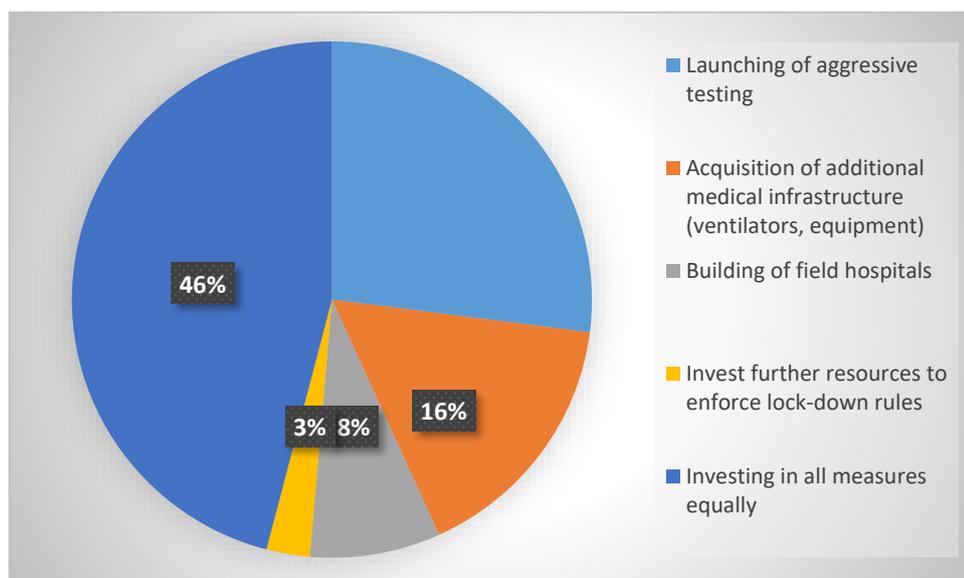


Figure 6: Considering the limited financial and material resources, which steps should the Georgian government prioritize to deal with spread of COVID-19?



Suggestions and recommendations

In the second part of the survey, the GIP asked respondents to think about key challenges and provide specific recommendations to the Georgian government and civil society about how to tackle the COVID-19 crisis. Table 1 shows the aggregated data

from 76 responses to two questions: “What are the main challenges in terms of fighting COVID-19 in Georgia? How would you deal with them?” and, “What would you recommend the Georgian government do to deal with the COVID-19 crisis? What additional measures should it take?” The number one challenge identified by the majority of experts was the non-compliance of citizens with the state of emergency rules. Accordingly, the main recommendation was to strictly enforce the state of emergency rules (24 mentions). The second most frequently mentioned recommendation was to ensure compliance of the Georgian Orthodox Church with the state of emergency rules (15 mentions), which was closely followed by two other recommendations: to devise a sound economic crisis plan and improve the public information campaign, especially in the minority regions (14 mentions) (table 1). Other recommendations included, among others, to increase social benefits and financial assistance for the population and small businesses (9 mentions), to introduce aggressive testing (7 mentions), to create additional infrastructure/produce equipment (3 mentions), and to encourage corporate responsibility amongst private businesses (3 mentions).

Table 1: Recommendations to the government¹

Recommendation	Number of mentions
Strictly enforce compliance of citizens with the quarantine and state of emergency rules	24
Ensure compliance of the Georgian Orthodox Church with state of emergency rules	15
Devise an economic crisis plan	14
Improve the public information campaign (including in the minority regions)	14
Social benefits and financial assistance for the population and small businesses	9
Introduce aggressive testing	7
Create additional infrastructure/produce equipment	3
Encourage corporate responsibility amongst private businesses	3
Take care of stray dogs in Tbilisi	1

¹ Aggregated data from 76 responses to the two questions: “What are the main challenges in terms of fighting COVID-19 in Georgia? How would you deal with them?” What would you recommend the Georgian government do to deal with the COVID-19 crisis? What additional measures should it take?

Improve local governance	1
Ensure return of Georgians from abroad	1

Finally, the GIP also asked respondents about the role of civil society and think tanks in helping Georgia fight COVID-19. Respondents noted civil society organizations and think tanks can use their networks to support and supply rural areas, minority regions and vulnerable population groups with information; work against hate speech; conduct information campaigns and educational activities to increase awareness and understanding of the dangers and risks to public health and the economy; continue their watchdog activities and monitor government activity to prevent corruption in times of crisis; work against fake news and disinformation propaganda related to COVID-19, and; help the general population boost e-participation, e-learning, and IT skills.

Think-tanks could additionally assess policies, but also the level of knowledge and preparedness of the population and policy makers. They can offer economy boosting solutions as well as prepare and offer online content such as interactive educational activities, research findings, presentations and other online tools.



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Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) is a Tbilisi-based non-profit, non-partisan, research and analysis organization. GIP works to strengthen the organizational backbone of democratic institutions and promote good governance and development through policy research and advocacy in Georgia.

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Tel: +995 599 99 02 12

Email: info@gip.ge

www.gip.ge