



# Party Identity as the Basis for Splinter Party Electoral Success

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## Introduction

On June 29, 2021 former Georgian Prime Minister, Giorgi Gakharia held the inaugural congress of the new political party, “For Georgia”, comprised of former members of the Georgian Dream (Civil.ge 2021a). The founder and Secretary of the party, Giorgi Gakharia, originally launched his political career shortly after Georgian Dream came to power in 2013. Until February 2021, he has held various high positions in the Georgian Dream government including: Business Ombudsman, Secretary of the Economic Council, Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development, Minister of Interior, Vice Prime Minister, Secretary of the National Security Council, and the Prime Minister of the country (Gov.ge 2021). Moreover, Giorgi Gakharia twice represented the Georgian Dream party as the number one on the party list, in 2016 (Cesko.ge 2016) and 2020 (Cesko.ge 2020a). The majority of the members of the Political Council of Gakharia’s newly established party are the members of the 10<sup>th</sup> convocation of Parliament (Radio Liberty 2021) as well. Considering the political past of “For Georgia” members, the party could be considered as a splinter party, a party that, “break[s] away from [an] established one” (Bågenholm, 179, 2013).

The entry of Gakharia’s political party into the Georgian political domain has garnered massive public attention. A combination of two factors has contributed to increased public interest in “For Georgia”. One is a public demand for a new political force (Transparency International Georgia 2020), and the second is Gakharia’s approval rating (63%) that is more favourable than all other politicians, including Bidzina Ivanishvili (41%) (IRI 2020), and the positive evaluation with his performance has significantly increased from 21% to 44% according to NDI as well (NDI 2020).

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Considering Gakharia's rating, it is assumed that his party will offer a challenge to the established political parties during the next elections. As the trends of recently held elections illustrate, the political campaign held by ruling party aiming at discrediting the opponents, often largely determines the outcomes of elections. Thus, for the time being, it is impossible to make clear assumptions about the configuration of upcoming elections. Though this policy memorandum aims to examine the opportunities and challenges that splinter parties face; to discuss the electoral success of other splinter parties in Georgia, and based on this information, explore the electoral prospects that newly split party may have.

## **Splinter Parties and their Electoral Prospects**

During the last decades, the electoral success of genuinely new and splinter parties has significantly increased in both consolidated and new democracies (Chiru et al 2020, Bågenholm 2013). Changing social values, the rise of new issues inadequately represented by established parties, and voters' disappointment with the government's performance, are the main factors which contribute to increased public demand for new political parties (Harmel and Robertson 1985, Hauss and Rayside 1978; Hug 2001, Muller-Rommel 2002, Zons 2015, Krouwel and Bosch 2004, Tavits 2006, 2007).

Based on extensive scholarly literature on political parties, it may be assumed that there are several circumstances which condition the electoral success of new parties. Splinter parties, together with genuinely new ones, are especially successful when they occupy a specific ideological or position-based niche. Focusing on issues that deliberately or unintentionally appeared beyond the attention of the established political parties and bringing them to forefront of citizens concerns (Hug 2001, Lucardie 2000, Bågenholm 2013). Green and radical right-wing parties are among those which emphasize their niche positions and accordingly have achieved significant electoral success (Bågenholm 2013). As recent examples in Central and Eastern Europe indicate, the parties which choose anti-corruption policy as their issue became particularly successful (Bågenholm 2013).

While discussing electoral prospects of splinter parties, it is noteworthy to mention that the political past may become a significant challenge for some parties. Due to the political legacy or public perceptions about party members or leaders, it may be difficult for a splinter party to convince voters that they focus on entirely new issues (Sikk 2011). However, when the levels of corruption and administrative inefficiency are high, and existing political parties have squandered the public trust, a splinter party new to the political landscape may find success (Sikk 2011). Recent research results also proved that contextual factors, such as, government instability and frequent cabinet changes (Chiru et al 2020), as well as a dissatisfied electorate (Chiru et al 2020), contribute to the success of splinter parties. In post-communist countries, another contributing factor to splinter party success is a decrease in growth of gross domestic product GDP (Chiru et al 2020).

From an electoral standpoint, the theories concerning the opportunities and challenges of new parties allows us to examine the experiences of previous Georgian splinter parties on one hand, and possible electoral prospects of "For Georgia", on the other.

## Splinter Parties' Experience in Georgia

In Georgia's diverse political landscape, there are three political parties which have entered the political arena as a result of a split from another party. United National Movement (UNM), European Georgia and Girchi. Girchi, is an independent party since 2020 and does not have a lengthy record of participation in elections; therefore, this memo will focus on the experiences of United National Movement and European Georgia as splinter parties.

UNM and European Georgia broke away from an, "established party", at different periods with different underlying circumstances. UNM was founded by the so called, "young reformers" of the ruling Union of Citizens of Georgia party who disassociated themselves from the party due to dissatisfaction with its activities (Nplg.gov.ge 2021). UNM in turn represented the "established party" from which European Georgia members split in the aftermath of the 2016 Parliamentary elections due to disagreements over the parliamentary boycott, management issues within the party, and the radical populist statements of party leader Mikheil Saakashvili (Civil.ge 2017). After their respective splits, these two parties experienced vastly different electoral results. In the presidential elections held in 2004 after the Rose Revolution, United National Movement Presidential candidate Mikheil Saakashvili obtained 97% of the votes (Civil.ge 2007). Conversely, after it split from UNM, the European Georgia earned only 3.79% of the votes in the 2020 parliamentary elections (Cesko.ge 2020b). While European Georgia was newly established, the party leaders had accumulated significant political experience, considering that, the election results were disappointingly low.

One of the underlying reasons causing this difference may be the parties' political objectives, and to what extent the party identities were in line with these objectives.

The central task of UNM was to remove the Union of Citizens of Georgia from power. From electoral standpoint, the UNM as a splinter party succeeded due to inhabiting what was then, the most concise and advantageous political niche. From the very beginning UNM forged an explicit party identity as an anti-corruption party. The UNM members politicised corruption - the most challenging, yet most neglected concern of citizens, while still members of the government. They started to openly expose corruption and accused President Shevardnadze of complicity in it (civil.ge 2001). "Georgia without corruption" was the main motivational slogan before 2003 elections (World Bank 2012) and became one of the main themes for demonstrators who went to the streets to protest against the rigged elections (World Bank 2012). Overall, anti-corruption rhetoric brought the United National Movement party to victory and to the subsequent change in government.

Similarly, the opposition party European Georgia aimed to change the government, though unlike the United National Movement in 2004, before the 2020 parliamentary elections, the party appeared in a more difficult situation. The political legacy of European Georgia was not associated with the ruling Georgian Dream party, but rather with UNM, the party which lost the 2012 elections to Georgian Dream due to human rights violations. Considering the common political past, voters associated European Georgia with UNM, and it was against this background that European Georgia attempted to form its party identity based on a negative political campaign against UNM. The campaign aimed at forging its image as

completely independent from UNM in the eyes of the voters, who were dissatisfied with the Georgian Dream Government, but, at the same time, did not want UNM to return to power. Considering that prior to the 2020 Parliamentary Elections the main concerns of the public were unemployment and poverty (NDI 2020), the strategy did not lead to electoral success. While European Georgia achieved better results in the 2017 local government elections (coming in third after Georgian Dream and UNM) (Cesko.ge 2017b). Compared to the results of the 2014 local government elections (Cesko.ge 2014), support to Georgian Dream increased (from 50.81% to 55.82%), while votes to Unite National Movement decreased (from 22.84% to 17.05%). It may be assumed that this splinter party not only took votes from the established party, but also obtained votes from the electorate of other opposition parties. This was possibly because even though European Georgia was a splinter party, it was still a new addition to Georgian political reality which was characterised by a shortage of public trust in large political parties.

### **“For Georgia” Party: Opportunities and Challenges**

From an electoral standpoint, “For Georgia”, established by the former Prime Minister as a splinter party of Georgian Dream, may face several challenges and opportunities at the same time.

As the experiences of other Georgian splinter party reveal, one of the crucial challenges for “for Georgia” will be the identity issue as well. Bidzina Ivanishvili has often highlighted the necessity of forming a, “constructive opposition”. Against this backdrop, entry of Gakharia’s party into the political arena coincides with Ivanishvili’s statements related to the appearance of a new opposition force which would have enough power to bring Georgian Dream into the opposition. Moreover, since Giorgi Gakharia’s announcement about his stay in politics, a Facebook page managed by Ivanishvili’s close circles changed its name from “Ivanishvili and Media” to “Gakharia and Media” (ბიზნეს 2021). This creates legitimate grounds to consider “For Georgia” as yet another political project of Bidzina Ivanishvili’s rather than an independent party.

In the past, Giorgi Gakharia has not sharply opposed Georgian Dream in order to build his own party’s independent identity. Giorgi Gakharia resigned on the 18<sup>th</sup> of February, 2021 following a disagreement with the party team over the arrest of United National Movement party leader Nika Melia (Civil.ge 2021b). Though rumours about his resignation spread beforehand, and it is difficult to state the real reason of his resignation, was it internal team disagreement, or was he attempting to extend his political tenure. Furthermore, the statement by Giorgi Gakharia, “we unite for Georgia but not against anybody” obscures whether he will openly oppose the team of Bidzina Ivanishvili. Additionally, while speaking about corruption practices in the government during the party’s presentation, Gakharia did not mention any specific cases of corruption or name political officials who would make his positions about incompatibility with Georgian Dream more credible in the eyes of prospective voters

Another challenge for the party may be the lack of a specific niche position. The main topics of the party program are security, democracy, and development of the judiciary and

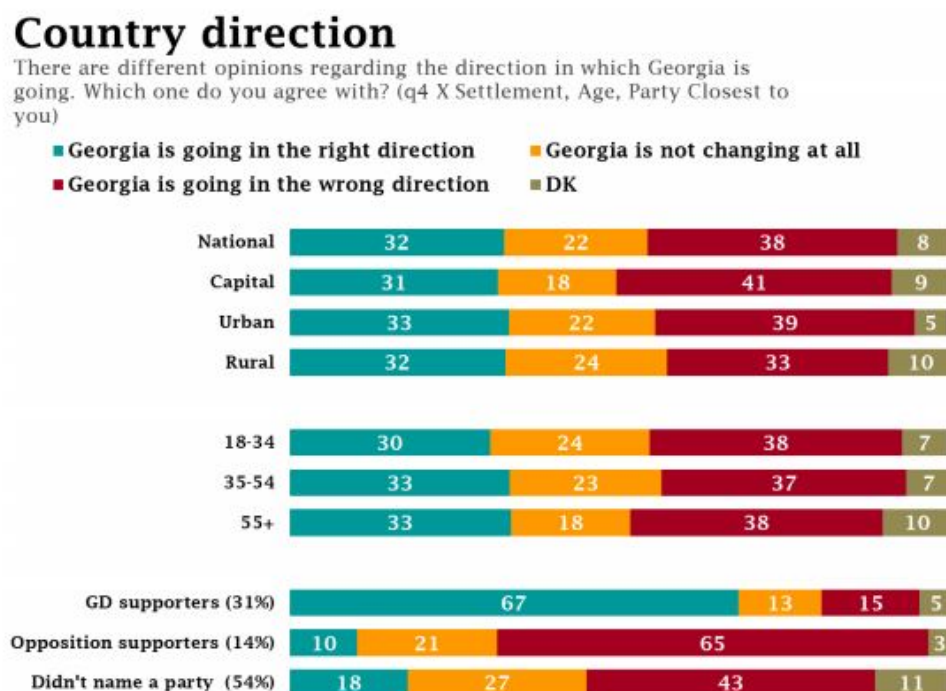
education systems. At the same time, Gakharia linked the spread of poverty in the country to corrupt practices in, “privileged classes” and highlighted the party position to eliminate corruption. The agenda and issues introduced by “For Georgia” replicate other opposition party positions and do not offer anything new to voters in this regard.

Political legacy, and the party leader’s image stemming from said legacy, may become a challenge for “For Georgia” as well. The former Prime Minister and his team were MEPs from Georgian Dream and held senior positions in Georgian Dream government at different times. Due to their political past, voters may find the members of the splinter party responsible for the previous lack of success in advancing democracy, security, the judiciary, the education system or the fight against corruption. Moreover, the events of the 20<sup>th</sup> of June, 2019 significantly damaged Giorgi Gakharia’s image, while at the same time, his name is associated with the delay in construction of the Anaklia port.

Because of these challenges it is not likely that Gakharia’s party will mount a significant challenge during the scheduled elections. The vague identity of the party, the moral burdens of a heavy political legacy, and the image of the party leader and mainstream political program do not generate favourable circumstances for attracting voters looking for alternatives to the political status quo.

However, a combination of existing economic problems in the country and the novelty of a new party on political scene may create opportunities as well and, “For Georgia” may persuade a certain part of voting demographic to join them. According to an NDI poll, the number of citizens who consider that the country is developing in the wrong direction has been increasing since 2019, the numbers include “Georgian Dream” voters as well (Figure 1).

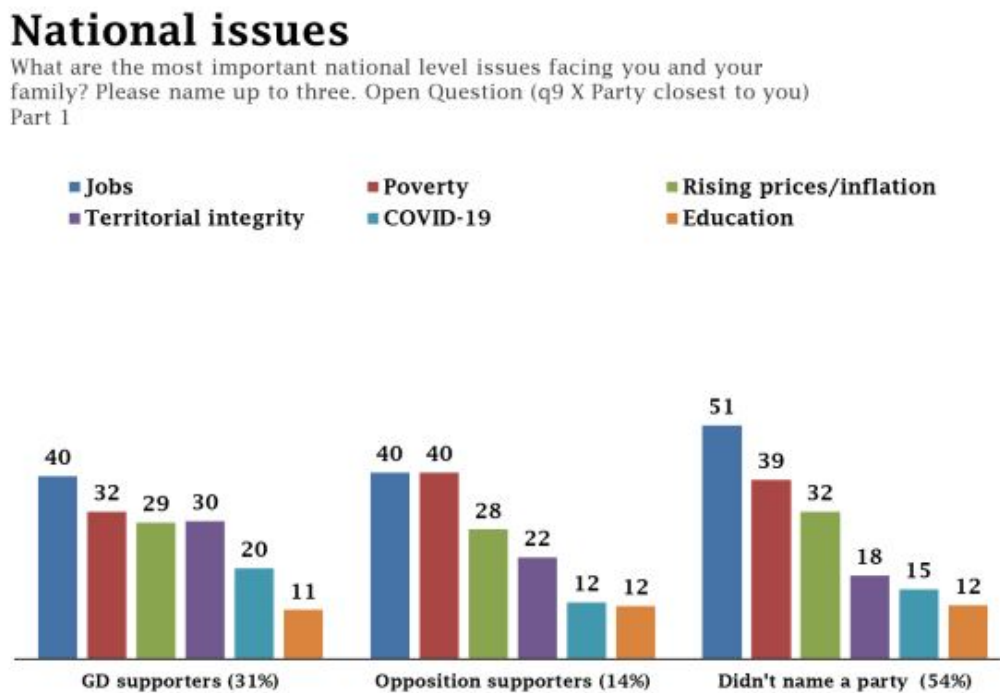
**Figure 1. Country Direction**



**Source:** National Democratic Institute (NDI). Available: [https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia\\_December%202020%20Poll\\_ENG\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_December%202020%20Poll_ENG_FINAL.pdf)

The same poll reveals that the slow pace of economic development and persistent poverty are of equal priority for supporters of opposition parties and the Georgian Dream (Figure 2).

*Figure 2. National Issues*



*Source: National Democratic Institute (NDI). available:*

[https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia\\_December%202020%20Poll\\_ENG\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_December%202020%20Poll_ENG_FINAL.pdf)

As the data reveals, it is likely that Giorgi Gakharia will garner support from voters who are supporters of Georgian Dream in terms of ideology, but are dissatisfied with the outcomes of governance.

At the same time, as the history of elections consistently demonstrates in Georgia, an electorate exhausted by two-party politics gives opportunities to small parties. It is worth mentioning that Giorgi Gakharia has prioritised the resolution of political polarization and internal confrontation as part of his party program, this will likely persuade the unaffiliated voters exhausted from long term political polarization.

Considering the likelihood of persuading Georgian Dream voters, Gakharia's party may turn into a challenge for the Georgian Dream with local government elections scheduled for later in 2021. In accordance with the proposal of Charles Michel, if Georgian Dream obtains less than 43% of the votes in the upcoming elections, snap parliamentary elections should be held in Georgia (EEAS 2021). Statements by Bidzina Ivanishvili and leaders of the ruling party highlight the concerns of Georgian Dream that Gakharia's political party may make them lose their loyal voters (Civil.ge 2021c).

## Conclusion

The experience of splinter parties discussed in the memorandum shows that in order to achieve electoral success, splinter parties should form their independent party identity and synchronise it with their main political objectives. If the goal of forming Giorgi Gakharia's splinter party is to remove other large opposition parties from the political arena and establish itself as an alternative force, in accordance with Bidzina Ivanishvili's plan, the current political climate does not favour this. A combination of factors such as, political legacy, the party leader's image, and policy positions of mainstream political parties, make it less likely to have a revolutionary breakthrough in traditional choices of Georgian opposition voters and have them align with "For Georgia". If, "For Georgia" intends to position itself as a capable opposition power, it should distance itself from the Georgian Dream by addressing the most problematic issues at hand. While the number of splinter parties in the country is too small to argue fiercely about explanatory factors leading to electoral success based on their experience, the coming election may demonstrate which other factors impact upon the success or failure of splinter parties like "For Georgia".

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