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of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia and Moscow's step-by-step political and military integra-

tion of the two regions have hampered any further progress in the bilateral relations between the two countries.

About the Author

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The Public Political Mood in Georgia

By Tsisana Khundadze (CRRC-Georgia)

Abstract

Georgia's population's perception of the government's performance and overall direction of the country's development has fluctuated during the last several years. Individuals appear to be more positive toward the government and the country's future immediately after elections, though these feelings fade over time. Considering that issues related to employment and the economic situation continue to be the top concerns for citizens throughout the years, it appears that individuals are more hopeful for positive change during election periods and become disillusioned after several months. The following article discusses national-level issues that people perceive as salient. It also follows individuals' perceptions of the government's performance and overall assessments of the country's development over time, seeking the link between perceived issues of importance and the assessment of the government's performance.

Introduction

Political life in Georgia stepped into a new phase after the 2012 parliamentary elections when, for the first time in independent Georgia's history, the political power was passed from one party to another through elections. Five years and four national and local elections later, Georgian citizens continue to give the mandate to the party that promised to make the Georgian dream come true. While the ruling party changed in 2012, data shows that individuals' perceptions of the most important national issues has not. What changed is the people's perception of the government's performance and the country's direction. Nationally representative survey data¹ from CRRC-Georgia and NDI-Georgia draw a picture of the dynamics of the public political mood in Georgia. Observed trends in Georgian public opinion resonate with the notion that people in democracies have more positive attitudes toward the government immediately after elections (Ginsberg & Weissberg 1978; Blais & Gelineau 2007).

During the past five years, there were some significant changes in economic and political terms in Georgia. The parliament adopted several pieces of controversial legislation and drafted amendments to the constitution that triggered extensive discussions in political circles (Transparency International-Georgia 2014 / Radio Tavisupleba 2017). Continued and fluctuating devaluation of the national currency has also raised concerns about financial stability in the country since the end of 2014 (Jandieri 2015 / Namchavadze 2015). On the other hand, significant advances occurred in terms of foreign relations. Georgia and the EU signed the association agreement in June 2014, and as of spring 2017, Georgian citizens can enjoy visa-free travel to the EU's Schengen area countries.

Democracy

Individuals' perceptions of Georgia as a democracy have been more or less consistent since the end of 2013, despite many changes in political life. According to data from the CRRC/NDI April 2017 survey, approximately half of the population says that Georgia is a democracy, while 40% think that it is not a democracy. The pic-

¹ The data are available at <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/datasets/> as well as at <https://www.ndi.org/georgia-polls>

ture was slightly different before 2011, when the share of individuals who felt that Georgia was not a democracy was higher than the proportion of the population who stressed that Georgia is a democracy. Public opinion dithered between 2011 and 2013, until finally, at the end of 2013, the majority began to see Georgia as a democracy (See Figure 1 on p. 8).

Even though we cannot say with precision what individuals base their assessment on, we can speculate that they take various indicators of democracy into consideration. For example, when asked about the situation in the country in terms of freedom of speech in June 2017, 51% of the population indicated that the situation in the country is good. Positive opinions were stated by 35% of the population about free and fair elections and protection of human rights, by 32% about the rule of law, by 29% about citizens' participation in public life, by 28% about curbing corruption, and by only 24% about government response to citizen concerns. Thus, for each of these criteria except for freedom of speech, the proportion of individuals who say that the situation is good is around the same as the percentage who say the situation is bad (in the case of freedom of speech, only 18% say the situation in Georgia is bad). Additionally, people's perception of the condition in the country in terms of these criteria has not changed significantly since November 2015.

The Country's Direction

According to the latest CRRC/NDI survey conducted in summer 2017, Georgia was split in three, with one-third of the population thinking that Georgia is going in the right direction, another third thinking that Georgia is going in the wrong direction and another third thinking that Georgia is not changing at all. While it might seem that this composition of public opinion is logical taking into consideration the processes in the country, historical data show that people were more optimistic about the country's direction throughout 2009–2012 (See Figure 2 on p. 9). Before 2014, a larger proportion of Georgia's population thought Georgia was going in the right direction. Throughout 2012, more than 50% of people claimed that the country was going in the right direction; beginning in April 2014, we see increasing trends for citizens who think Georgia is going in the wrong direction.

One important fact to consider is that little peaks in positive outlook are apparent shortly after national elections. The share of people who think that Georgia is going in the right direction started decreasing in the middle of 2013, with a sudden increase in November 2013 directly after the elections. The second peak occurred directly after the 2016 parliamentary elec-

tions, following another period of decrease in 2014 and 2015 of the percentage of people with a positive outlook on the country's direction. This indicates that people have a more positive attitude shortly after the elections and that over time, the positivity decreases. It should be stressed that the positive peak was noticeably lower in 2016 compared to 2013.

Most Important National Issues

One thing that has not changed through the years is the list of national issues stressed by the population as being the most important. Employment has always been the number one issue, named by more than fifty percent of the population every time. Poverty, rising prices/inflation, affordable healthcare and territorial integrity have competed for second place throughout the years, with 25–35% of people naming them among the most important issues (See Figure 3 on p. 10). As we can see, four of the top five issues are related to economic situations.

Interestingly, issues related to political life, such as corruption, media independence, the court system, property rights, and human rights, have remained at the bottom of the list, and only a small percentage of individuals name them as important issues. One would expect more of these issues to be considered important based on people's assessment of the situation in the country in terms of democratic development, but data show that economy-related issues are more pressing for most individuals. Moreover, issues such as NATO and EU membership are also named by only approximately 3–5% of people as the most important, even though the support for joining these organizations is high and has been high throughout the years².

The Government's Performance

While people's concerns retain the salience and economic nature through the years, their perception of whether the government is making the changes important to them fluctuates much like the assessment of the country's direction. In April 2017, the Georgian population was divided in two with half pointing out that the Georgian government was making the changes that mattered to them and with the other half disagreeing with such notions (See Figure 4 on p. 11). Historical data show that people's opinion about the government's activities started becoming less positive in 2014, when only 56% said the government was making important changes, compared to November 2013 when 74% said the government was making important changes. In 2016, for the first time since 2010, the percentage

2 See <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/datasets/>, <https://www.ndi.org/georgia-polls>

of people who think that the government is not making important changes actually exceeded the number of people who think that the opposite is true. However, people's perceptions of the changes made by the government improved after the 2016 parliamentary elections. Again, even considering the overall decreasing trend in the share of people who think that the government is making the changes that matter to them, positive changes in attitudes are still apparent shortly after the national elections.

Little insight into what people base their assessment of the government on can be provided when looking at how people assess the performance of different ministries. According to data from the CRRC/NDI April 2016 survey³, the majority of the population rates the performance of different ministries as average or poor. Nevertheless, people note that the Ministry for Labor, Healthcare and Social Affairs and the Ministry of Justice are performing better than other institutions, while the Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development, and Ministry of Finance rank the last on the list with twice as many people thinking they are performing poorly compared to people who think they perform well. This again points to people's dissatisfaction with economy-related issues.

Discussion

The discussed tendencies illustrate that the Georgian public has a more or less clear understanding of where the country stands in terms of democracy and what important issues are. However, people's perceptions of the direction in which the country is headed and whether the government makes relevant changes varies over time, with a more positive outlook directly after the national elections and decreasing enthusiasm after the post-election period passes. Similar tendencies of an increase in positive attitudes after elections has already been examined in other research conducted in the US and Canada. Ginsberg and Weissberg (1978) noted that people had more positive attitudes toward the regime, its leaders and the policy after the elections in 1968 and 1972 in the US. Blais and Gélinau (2007), on the other hand, found that satisfaction with the level of democracy in Canada increased significantly after the elections, although this increase was higher among people who voted for

the winning party. Nevertheless, people who voted for the parties that lost or those who did not participate in the elections also expressed more satisfaction after elections than before elections (Blais & Gélinau 2007).

Possible explanations for the increase in positive attitudes toward the government after elections include the "participation effect," implying that by participating in the elections, citizens' levels of responsibility may increase as they have become a part of the decision-making process. Another possibility is that as a result of socialization in democratic regimes, people are more likely to accept the government elected by the majority even if they have not participated in elections. Another explanation could be related to cognitive dissonance theory, which points to the process of rationalization after making the choice, in this specific case, of voting for a certain political actor (Ginsberg & Weissberg 1978, p. 49). While any or all three of these propositions might be related to how public attitudes are formed after elections, it is important to see the similarities in the trends of the public's political attitudes in Georgia and other democracies. Further research is needed to better understand the post-election change in public opinion in Georgia.

Conclusion

According to CRRC/NDI survey data, Georgian public opinion is divided on whether the country is developing in the right or wrong direction. While the government has made many changes in the past 5 years, the majority of citizens are not convinced that the government is making changes that matter to them. People keep naming the same economy-related issues as important. The public's assessment of the situation of democracy remains more or less consistent, but the performance assessment tends to fluctuate. Historical data show that people are more positive directly after the elections and that the enthusiasm fades away over time. At the moment, we can only speculate about the causes for such tendencies, but at the same time, we keep in mind that such changes in public political mood have previously been observed in democratic regimes. Further investigation of the phenomena may offer some insight into the Georgian public's political culture.

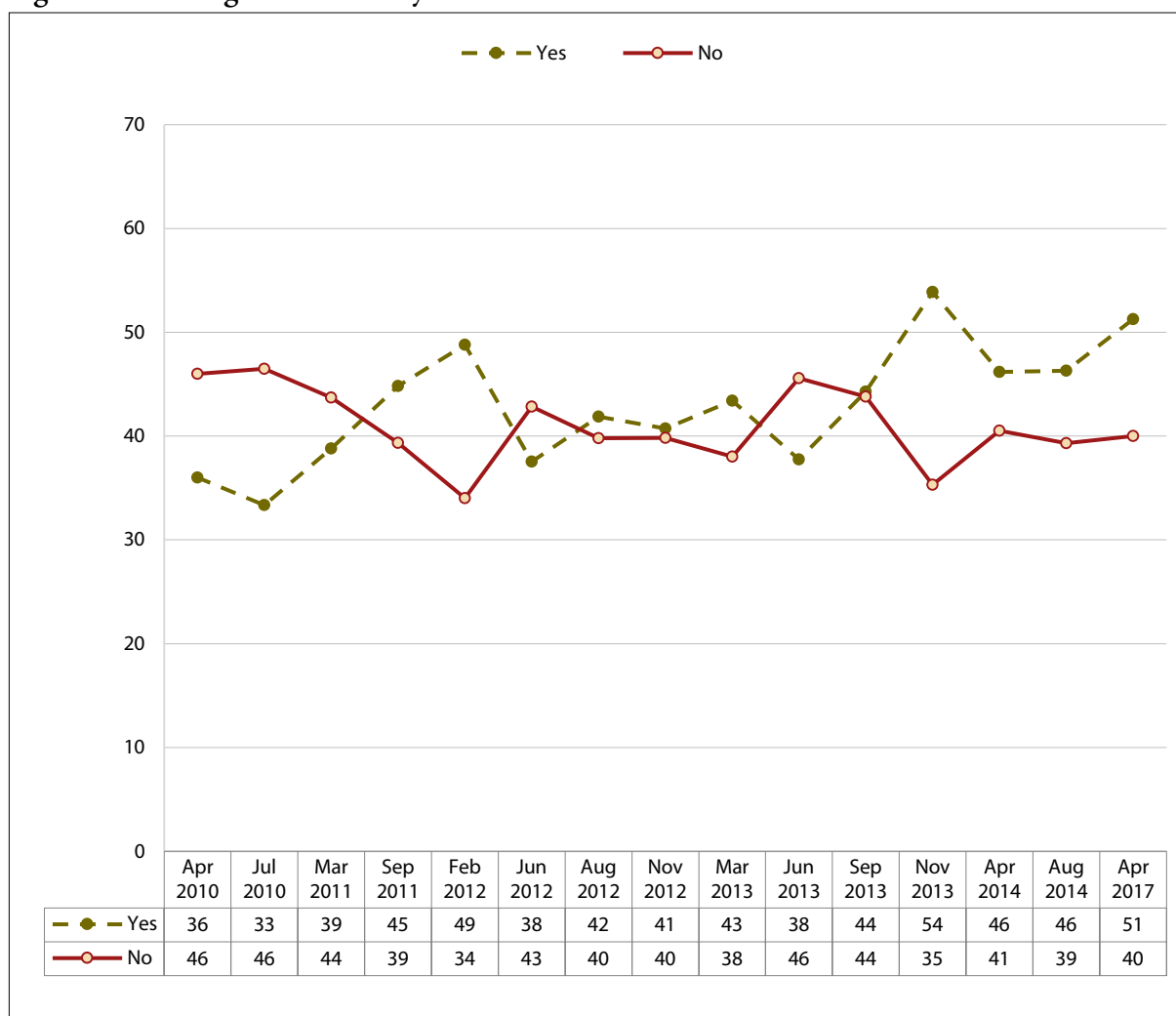
About the Author

Tsisana Khundadze holds a PhD in Psychology from Ivane Javakishvili Tbilisi State University. She is a senior researcher at CRRC-Georgia and an invited lecturer at Tbilisi State University.

3 See <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/datasets/>

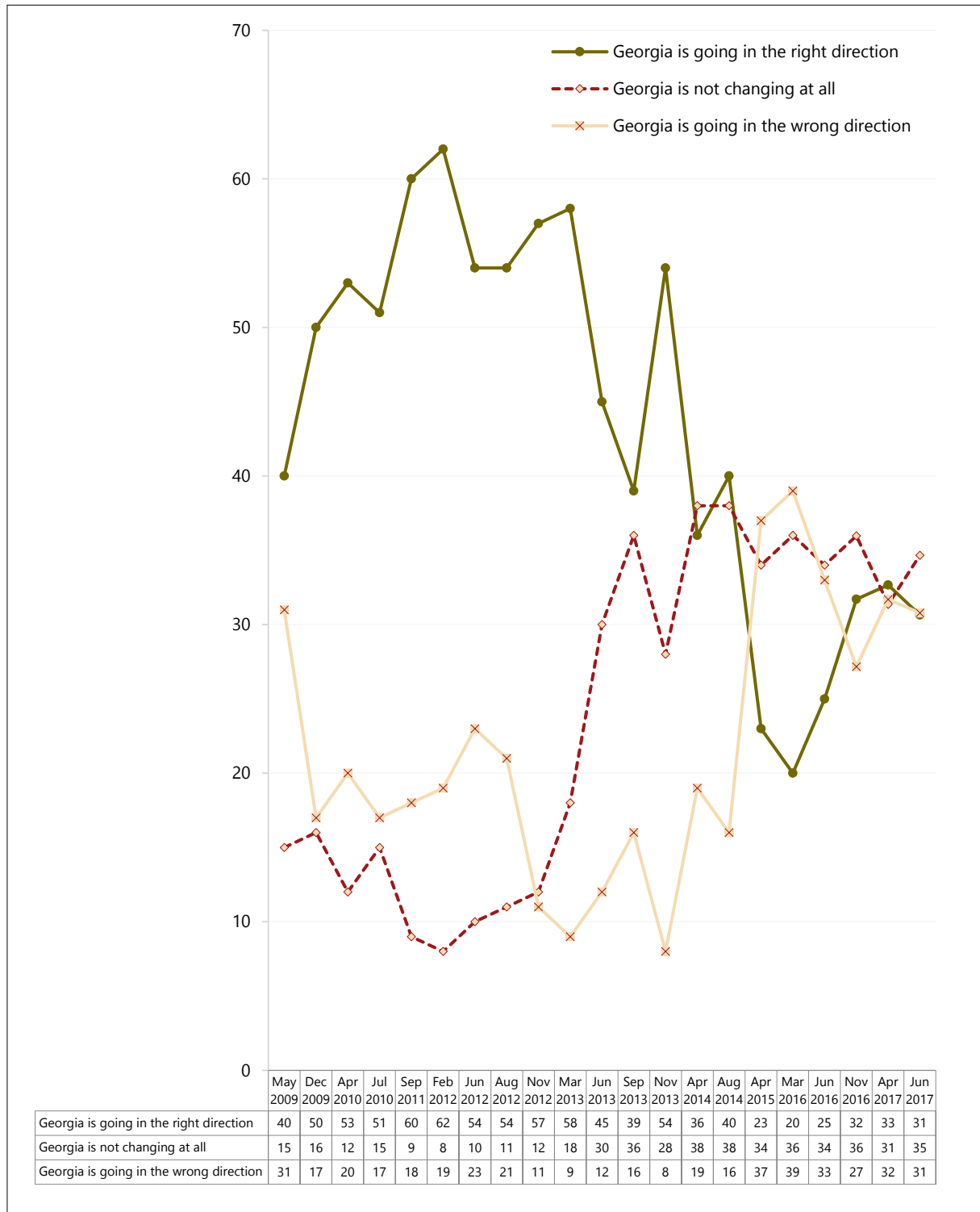
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Figure 1: Is Georgia a Democracy Now?

Source: CRRC/NDI survey 2010–2017

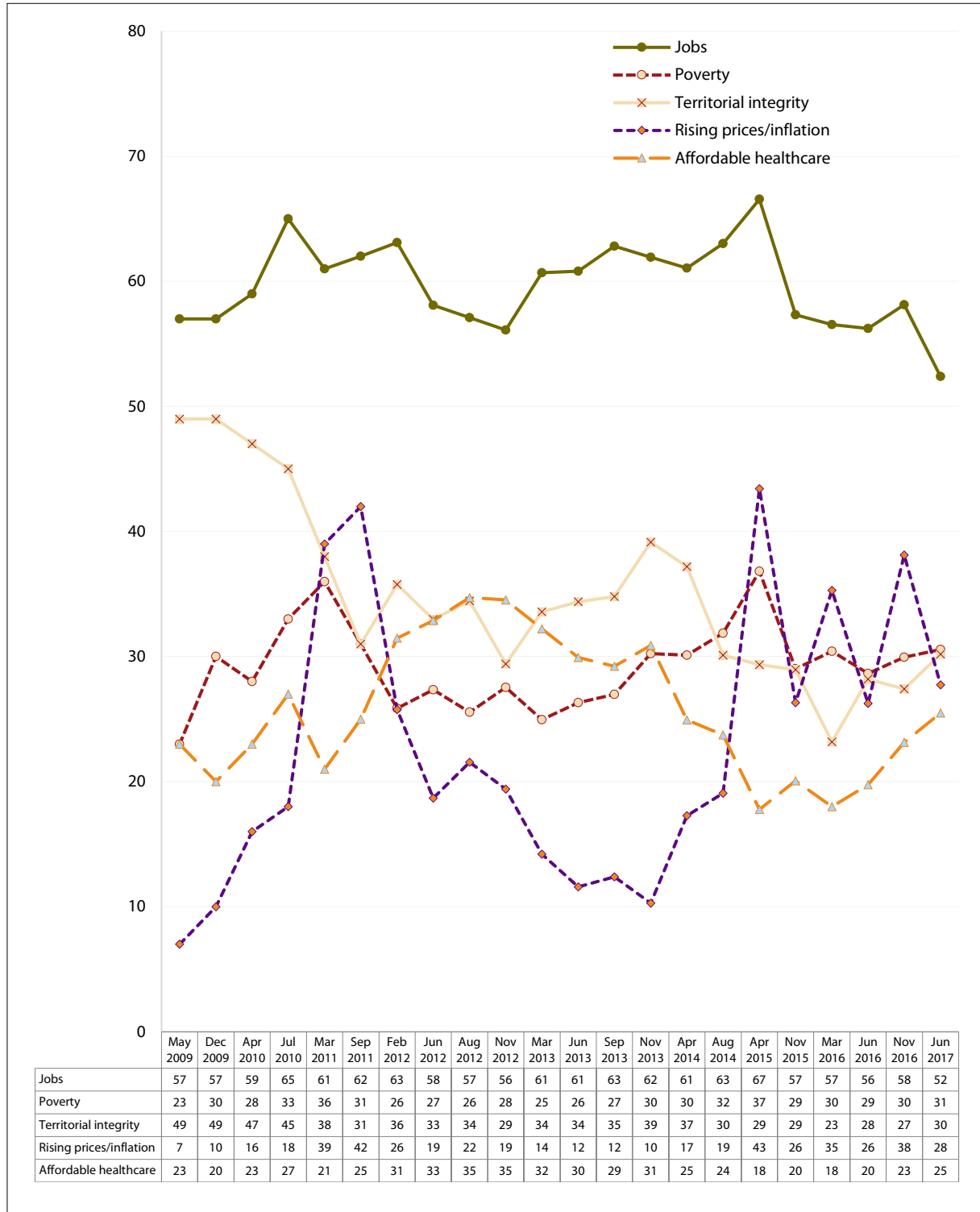
Figure 2: In Which Direction is Georgia Going?



Note: For this question the answer options 1 – Georgia is definitely going in the wrong direction and 2 – Georgia is mainly going in the wrong direction were grouped, as well as options 4 – Georgia is going mainly in the right direction and 5 – Georgia is definitely going in the right direction.

Source: CRRC/NDI survey 2009–2017

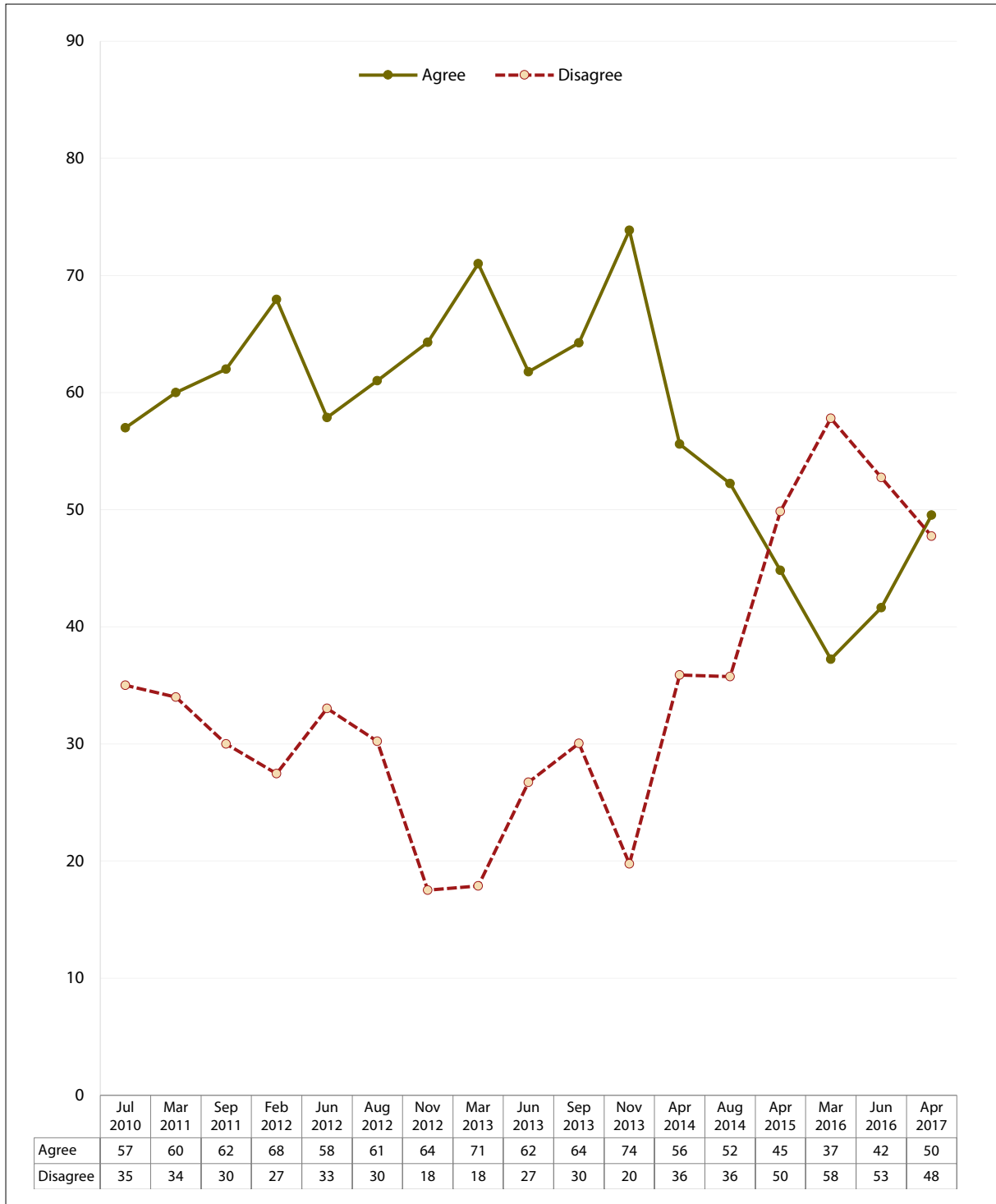
Figure 3: Most Important National Issues



Note: The figure shows the percentages of the issues that were mentioned. The question allowed accepting up to three answers.

Source: CRRC/NDI survey 2009–2017

Figure 4: Current Government Is Making Changes That Matter to You



Note: For this question 4-point scale was recoded into 2 point scale (options 1 – completely disagree and 2 – somewhat disagree were grouped, as well as, options 3 – somewhat agree and 4 – completely agree).

Source: CRRC/NDI survey 2010–2017