

Development in Adjara: Insights from Batumi

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Abstract

This article gives an overview of public opinion in Batumi based on the 2012 nationally representative survey conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC). It examines people's attitudes toward local and national issues, discusses where people see improvement in their lives and the gaps that remain. The data shows that Batumi residents highly evaluate recent developments and believe that the right changes are being made. While people see a significant improvement in infrastructure, however, there are some key social issues that remain unresolved.

Overview

Those who can remember Adjara a decade ago would agree that the region has undergone a major transformation. It is probably fair to say that Batumi, the capital of the Adjara Autonomous Republic, has become one of the most attractive places on the Black Sea coast.

Like other regions in Georgia, Adjara's development has been on the government agenda for several years now. Publicity highlights the growing developments in Batumi, such as the opening of new hotels, cultural centers, and various events conducted attracting Georgians as well as tourists from abroad.

If we look at the official government statistics, we see extensive economic development in almost every area. There is dynamic growth in private direct investments in Adjara—in 2011 they equaled 149 million USD, out of which 44 million USD was domestic investment and 105 million USD foreign. This is impressive growth compared to 2004 when investment amounted to 50 million USD. Out of 149 million USD, the biggest portion goes to tourism (65 million USD) and construction (47 million USD). This investment is reflected in the level of tourism itself: according to official statistics, the number of tourists to Adjara has increased from 83,000 to 1,319,513 visitors in 2011, with one out of three visitors coming from outside Georgia. In fact, the number of hotels has almost tripled since 2009 (103 hotels in 2009, 278 hotels in 2011) (see Figure 1 and Table 1).

Despite its notable development there remain several challenges in the region. Like the rest of the country, unemployment is the number one issue. According to 2011 official statistics, the unemployment rate in Adjara is approximately 18%. If we take raw numbers, there were 25,200 people unemployed in 2000, which has increased to 32,500 in 2011. Unemployment reached a peak for the last decade at 25% in 2007 and 2008.

When evaluating these numbers, several questions come to mind. What does the local population think of the current situation in their region? Do they see the improvements and if yes, in what field? What are their needs and hopes?

This article will discuss public opinion based on the results of the survey "Public Attitudes in Georgia" conducted by the CRRC in February 2012. The study draws on 3,161 completed face-to-face interviews. The sample size is nationally representative including representative samples of Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Batumi, Poti, Rustavi, Telavi District, other urban and rural areas. The study was done for the National Democratic Institute of International Affairs (NDI) and sponsored by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida).

People's Attitude toward the Current Situation

According to the survey, the majority of the population in Georgia thinks that the country is going in the right direction. The Batumi population has the same attitude toward the direction of national politics as the rest of Georgia: overall more than 60% evaluate the direction positively—9% agree with the statement that Georgia is definitely going in the right direction, while 53% think the Georgia is mainly going in the right direction.

However, there is a difference between the Tbilisi and Batumi populations' assessment of their household situation since January 2008, when the last presidential elections in Georgia took place. In Batumi more people think that their households are better off (38%) than worse off (13%), while in the capital more people say they and their households are worse off (34%) than better off (22%). A big portion of the population in both cities thinks that the life is the same (Batumi 49%, Tbilisi 42%).

The current economic condition of households seems to be better in Batumi: 66% of the population in Batumi evaluate their economic condition as average, 13% as good, 12% as poor and only 2% as very poor. In the capital we get a less favorable distribution—57% describe themselves as average, only 3% as good, and 32% as poor. No one in either Tbilisi or Batumi assessed their current economic condition as "very good" (see Figure 2).

The positive attitude of people in Batumi is also reflected by how they view their future. When answer-

ing the question, “When do you expect your life to change for the better?”—again 19% of the Batumi population says things have already changed for the better, while only 7% in Tbilisi think the same. However, in both cities people are expecting positive changes soon: 38% in Batumi and 42% in Tbilisi think that their life will change for the better in 1 or 5 years. A big portion of the population does not know when to expect their life to change (Batumi 25%; Tbilisi 34%) (see Figure 3).

People’s attitude toward the current government is more positive than negative. This is true for the capital as well, though the Batumi population is more positive than Tbilisi’s: 67% (14% completely agree, 53% somewhat agree) in Batumi believe that the current government is making changes that matter to them, while 53% in Tbilisi state the same (9% completely agree, 44% somewhat agree). We see the same pattern when we talk about the local government: 61% in Batumi versus 44% in Tbilisi agree with the statement that their current local government is making the kind of changes that matter to them. Local governments in Batumi and in Kutaisi enjoy the most positive support across the cities surveyed in Georgia (see Figure 4).

The Most Important National and Local Issues

Jobs rank as the most important national issue in Batumi, as in the rest of Georgia. Indeed, only 39% of the city population consider themselves to be employed. After jobs, territorial integrity is the most important national issue in Batumi (29%). Issues connected with the economic situation, such as rising prices/inflation (26%), wages (25%) and poverty (23%) figure as the most important issues as well.

Regarding local issues, the cost of communal services is at the top of the list: 55% of the Batumi population named it as the most important local issue. Natural gas is the number two issue that remains problematic; although the gasification of the city has already started, 38% named it as an important issue. Transportation costs (27%), water supply (23%) and roads (22%) were also named as being important (see Figure 5).

Although drug addiction is the most important issue for 5%, it was named by 53% as one of the issues that has changed for the better since 2008. Indeed, over the course of one year, there was a 15% decline in the number of mentions of drug addiction as one of the most important issues; previously, in a March 2011 survey, drug addiction was much more prominent, with 20% of the Batumi population saying it was the most important issue. That was a higher number than in any other city, including the capital.

Drug addiction is one of the five issues that people consider to have undergone a positive change. As the most improved issue, the majority of the population (84%) named roads. Gas is mentioned by 63%, the sewage system by 61% and trash collection by 57%.

There were four issues named that remain the same: water supply (46%), quantity of kindergartens (54%), availability of local medical services (53%), and prices of kindergartens (32%).

Cost to households figured large among the issues that are seen as worse, especially emergency service costs (51%), cost of communal services (49%) and transportation costs (48%). Few consider that agricultural production (which in fact is falling) has improved (15%). In fact, the popular perception is that this issue has also either worsened (27%) or stayed the same (35%). (see Figure 6)

Although many challenges remain, Batumi is the only city in Georgia where people think that the gas situation and sewage system have significantly improved. According to the data, roads, trash collection and drug addiction issues are perceived to have improved nationwide. Thus, Batumi has seen positive change in more local issues than other Georgian cities.

Reforms that Matter

CRRC tried to find out what the most important political reforms are according to people in Batumi and which reforms are expected to be achieved in the next six months. Despite the fact that there are plenty of new hospitals being opened in various locations in Georgia, including Adjara, people still consider that the most important reform needed is in the healthcare system (mentioned by 41%). However, only 19% think that healthcare reform will be achieved. Surprisingly or not, electoral reform is the number two most important political reform named with 37%, and a quarter of the population believe that this reform is expected to be achieved. Tax reform (34%) is the third with agricultural (25%) and education reforms (24%) following on the list (see Figure 7).

Surprisingly, the least importance is given to media, property rights and business environment reform and few believe that these reforms are expected to be achieved in the next six months.

Conclusion

To summarize, many citizens of Batumi see what has happened as a success story. They believe that the national and local governments make decisions that matter to them, and agree that Georgia is going in the right direction. As the data show, Batumi has seen more positive change compared to other cities in the country. The larger investments into infrastructure seem to have

led to improvements that are acknowledged by the citizens. The main positive changes are in infrastructure;

however, unemployment, healthcare reform and other social issues remain unresolved.

The results of the survey “Public Attitudes in Georgia” can be found at the following website: <http://www.ndi.org/node/18677>

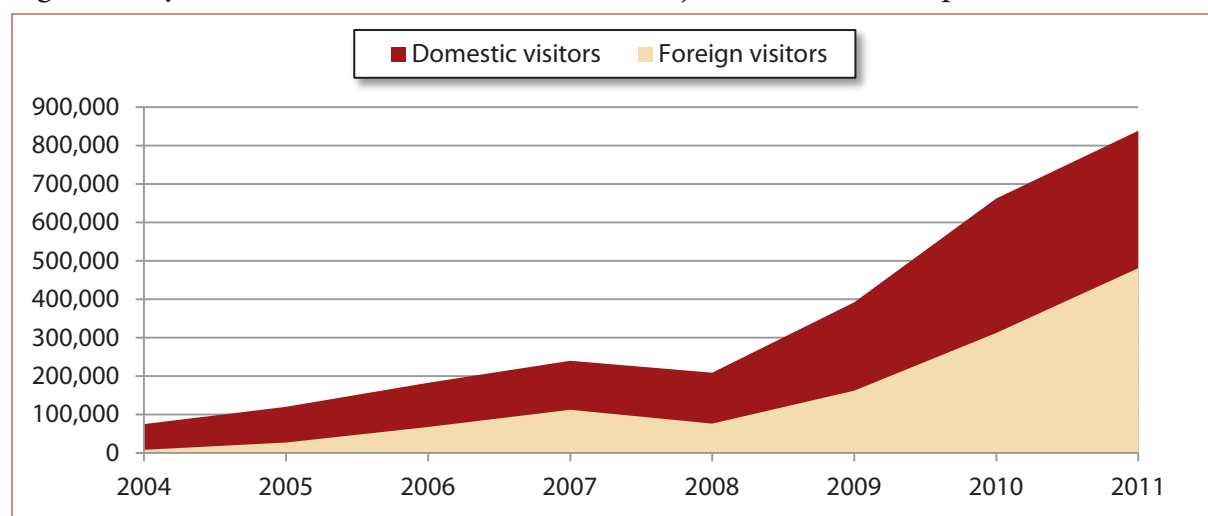
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FIGURES

Batumi Residents’ Opinions on their Situation and Attitudes Towards Local Politics

Figure 1: Dynamics in the Number of Visitors to Adjara Autonomous Republic (2004–2011)



Source: Department of Tourism and Resorts of the Adjara Autonomous Republic

Table 1: Dynamics in the Number of Visitors to Adjara Autonomous Republic (2004-2011)

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Total number of visitors	83,000	147,000	250,000	352,085	285,000	554,150	974,563	1,319,513
Domestic visitors	75,000	120,000	182,523	239,786	208,782	392,091	662,288	838,661
Foreign visitors	8,000	27,000	67,477	112,299	76,218	162,059	312,275	480,852

Source: Department of Tourism and Resorts of the Adjara Autonomous Republic