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Democratization's Vicious Circle or How Georgia Failed to Change

David Aprasidze *

Introduction

Georgia's first peaceful transition of power, through the parliamentary elections in 2012, has been celebrated as an important achievement in the democratization of the country. At the same time, the new government has initiated several high-profile criminal cases against representatives of the former government, including the president and the prime minister, creating solid bases for critical assessment of further prospects for the democratic consolidation of Georgia.¹ The new government has signed an Association Agreement with the EU – an important test to prove Georgia's pro-Western orientation and dismantle speculations about pro-Russian sentiments of the new ruling elite. Nevertheless, how the political change in leadership might impact the external relations of Georgia remains to be seen.

Needless to say, Georgia's first-ever peaceful change of government through elections is an achievement per se. However, did the Georgian change bring the country closer to consolidated democracy? In other words, how functional did the Georgian democracy become in terms of institutions and the environment? The Association Agreement is the relevant mechanism cementing Georgia's orientation towards the European community and thus, towards the free and open society; however, questions remain as to how the new government envisages reconciling the course on Western integration with the declared policy of rapprochement with Russia.

The answers offered in this article are neither euphoric nor pessimistic. The main reason for this is that Georgia did not change much. First, as a result of the cascade of elections from 2012 to 2014, a new dominant political player replaced the ruling party. Second, even though the new government of Georgia no longer implements tough language towards Russia, the new Georgian decision makers continue to pursue the pro-Western foreign policy projects of their predecessors and gradually realize the limits

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¹ Charles H. Fairbanks Jr. and Alexi Gugushvili, "A New Chance for Georgian Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 24:1 (January 2013): 116-127; Charles H. Fairbanks Jr., "Georgian Democracy: Seizing or Losing the Chance?" *Journal of Democracy* 25:1 (January 2014): 154-165.

when attempting to balance between Russia and the West, especially under increasing regional security risks since the annexation of Crimea by Moscow. The news that Georgia has not changed significantly is not as bad as many proponents of democratic and European Georgia might assume. In positive terms, one could call the current situation *continuity* – the continuous modernization and democratization of the country. In the following sections, I will analyze the power transition in Georgia and try to understand the main reason for the limitations of its current stage of democracy. I will also argue that the foreign policy discourse of the new government might have changed, however this did not alter the strategic directions in decision making. Although this is not a primary objective of the article, I will apply the concept of “autonomy from citizens” in order to better depict the new dynamic in the Georgian polity, which, to a certain degree, relativizes the positive balance created by the peaceful transition of power.

New Rulers, Same System

One of the major structural predicaments for democracy consolidation in Georgia is the dominant party system.² The United National Movement (UNM) of Georgia was the dominant party of the country since the Rose Revolution of 2003. The party arose from the coalition of several oppositional groups, which managed to consolidate popular support and push president Shevardnadze and his government to resign, through peaceful demonstrations following the rigged parliamentary elections in 2003.³ The UNM was uncontested ruler of the country for almost nine years. The party enjoyed an overwhelming majority in the national parliament as well as in local councils countrywide.

In 2012, the UNM lost parliamentary elections and had to move into opposition. The opposition coalition called Georgian Dream (GD) was formed around Georgian billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili and won the elections, gained a majority in Parliament and was able to form a government. In 2013, a candidate of the GD defeated UNM in presidential elections. After the victory in the parliamentary elections, the outcome of the presidential elections was predictable. The local elections in 2014 completed the power transfer, where the GD again achieved a nationwide victory and established effective control over every local constituency in Georgia. With the parliamentary elections in 2012, the presidential elections in 2013 and local elections in 2014, the country has passed three tests of democracy by holding free and fair elections. The fact that there was a peaceful transfer of power for the first time since the country gained its independence in 1991

² For an overview of the party system in Georgia see Ghia Nodia and Alvaro P. Scholtbach, eds., *The Political Landscape of Georgia. Political Parties: Achievements, Challenges and Prospects* (Delft, The Netherlands: Eburon, 2006).

³ For details of the Rose Revolution see Jonathan Wheatley, *Georgia from National Awakening to Rose Revolution: Delayed Transition in the Former Soviet Union* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005).

also deserves to be acknowledged. Needless to say, Georgia has a unique position in terms of democratization, compared with other countries in the region.⁴

However, the three elections also illustrated the deep structural problems in Georgia's political landscape. Firstly, the Georgian political system remains under control of a single party, without strong opposition and each person in power tries to augment their influence but not that of the system.⁵ The UNM had no serious competitor until 2012, enabling the party to control the national, regional and local governments uncontested. Since the victory in 2012, the GD has gradually been consolidating its power. Partly under pressure from the GD—which aimed to secure the two-thirds majority in parliament, necessary for constitutional amendments—thirteen Members of Parliament elected through the UNM have left the party fraction. Nevertheless, the UNM could preserve 51 MPs, just enough to keep veto power over new constitutional changes.⁶ The outcome of the parliamentary elections also affected local authorities, although they were formally still controlled by the UNM as a result of the last local elections of 2010, where the UNM gained an overwhelming nationwide majority. Under pressure or voluntarily, representatives in local councils began leaving the UNM party ranks. In Tbilisi alone, the UNM lost twelve of its city councilors to the GD, which gained effective control over the city council one year before local elections. Therefore, an early transfer of power had been taking place since the parliamentary elections.⁷

At the national level, however, the political rivalries had been forced to attempt one year of cohabitation, starting with the parliamentary elections and ending with the presidential ones. The one-year period of cohabitation has shown that the way the institutional framework plays out in a specific political context is decisive. In spite of the polarized relations between the GD and the UNM, this shared leadership has not resulted in political paralysis. Unfortunately, the two parties neither acknowledge this as an achievement, nor did they consider it to be a chance for political cooperation to emerge and formalize.

On the contrary, the following presidential and local elections were accompanied by a policy dubbed “restoration of justice,” under which the new government recognizes misconduct investigations of the previous government. This resulted in initiating several high profile criminal cases, mostly against former officials from the UNM camp. The most prominent cases were Ivane Merabishvili, former prime minister and secretary general of the UNM, who had been envisaged as the UNM's presidential candidate before he was arrested in May, 2013; Giorgi Ugulava – former directly elected mayor of Tbilisi, who was stripped of his powers and later, arrested, even though the government

⁴ Despite this, Georgia still belongs to the group of partly free countries, according to the Freedom House. See <http://www.freedomhouse.org/country/georgia#.U98akfmSw6g>.

⁵ Fairbanks Jr., “Seizing or Losing the Chance.”

⁶ The GD's pressure on MPs has weakened after the constitutional amendment approved in 2010 came into force in November 2013. Currently, the constitutional change requires the approval of 113 Members of Parliament.

⁷ Canan Atilgan and David Aprasidze, “End to an Era: Transfer of Power in Georgia,” *KAS International Reports* 12 (2013): 69-88.

had declared a moratorium on the prosecution of political actors during the local campaign. The “restoration of justice” policy was intensified after the local elections and culminated in issuing the arrest warrant against ex-president Saakashvili in July, 2014. This policy has drawn broad international criticism. The international community demanded of the Georgian government that it issue a swift and objective investigation into the respective cases and set aside politically motivated retribution.⁸

The final step in consolidating power of the GD was the local elections held in June and July 2014. The local elections were mainly free and certainly ground breaking in many ways. Indeed, for the first time in Georgia’s political history, in twenty-one local entities, including Tbilisi, a second round of runoffs had to be conducted in order to determine the winner. It is also worth mentioning that in these elections, people elected city mayors and heads of local administrations directly. Nevertheless, despite all the improvements and considerably improved administration of the process, the outcome of the local elections was not significantly different from previous elections in terms of power distribution. Every local council is now under firm control of the GD – the new dominant party in Georgia and oppositional groups—the UNM still leading force among them—may merely assume the role of critical observer. For instance, more than two-thirds of seats in the Tbilisi City Council are under GD control. In the end, three remarkable elections since 2012 changed the ruling party in Georgia but not the system.

Autonomy from Citizens – Problem of Informal Power

The new dominant party – Georgian Dream, as a coalition, is composed of groups representing diverse ideological spectrums. For instance, the liberals, like⁹ Republican Party cohabit with Georgian conservatives, former bureaucrats and businesspeople from the Shevardnadze era. The major factor that unites these groups is Bidzina Ivanishvili. He has been the binding force since the parliamentary campaign and retains this function even after formally departing from politics in November 2013. Large sections of the population saw Ivanishvili as the new savior, a challenger to the charismatic president Saakashvili in 2012.

After one year in power, while leaving the post of prime minister, Ivanishvili spoke of his intention to control his government from within civil society. In an open letter to the Georgian people, Ivanishvili saw further education and the strengthening of civil society as his new objectives.¹⁰ Since Ivanishvili had officially withdrawn from politics, he no longer had to account for his or governments actions to the Georgian electorate.

⁸ Naftali Bendavid, “Georgia Charges Against Former President Put EU in Delicate Spot,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 30 July 2014, <http://blogs.wsj.com/brussels/2014/07/30/georgia-charges-against-former-president-put-eu-in-delicate-spot/?KEYWORDS=Georgia+country> (accessed 4 August 2014).

⁹ Another liberal party of the former Defense Minister Irakli Alasania left the coalition in November 2014.

¹⁰ Ivanishvili’s open letter to the public is available in an unofficial translation: “PM on His Intended Pre-Term Resignation,” *Civil Georgia*, 2 September 2013, <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=26408> (accessed 3 August 2014).

Without holding public office, he would not be subject to any formal restrictions and accounts. On the other hand, Ivanishvili has a free hand in keeping the government under his control by informal means. Thus, power is relocated to the informal sphere, outside institutional frameworks, which makes it difficult to oversee and control.

The concept of “autonomy from citizens” might be helpful to understand structural risks for Georgian democracy. This concept derives from the broader concept of *rentier state* and is mainly used to depict developmental problems of resource-rich countries.¹¹ Autonomy from citizens is a situation, where “the state apparatus, and the people who control it, have a ‘guaranteed’ source of income that makes them independent of their citizens (potential taxpayers).”¹² Under such system, the democratic control of citizens over state actions is not structurally embedded or guaranteed. The autonomous ruler can buy the necessary loyalty (politicians, intellectuals or security forces) from his autonomous revenue. Georgia is neither a resource-rich country nor is the state independent of its taxpayers. However, the Georgian case shows an interesting phenomenon, worth investigating further. In Georgia’s current political system the major political actor enjoys financial autonomy, both from the state and the citizens. Ivanishvili’s fortune, which was estimated at \$5.2 billion in 2014, originates mostly from Russia, and therefore has never been linked to the Georgian state and Georgian taxpayers.¹³ At the same time, it constitutes almost 30 percent of Georgia’s GDP.¹⁴ In other words, Ivanishvili is financially capable of building an “autonomous power” that is independent of the state and of the citizens of Georgia.

The relative degree of state autonomy as well as functional capabilities of the state to produce political outcomes is directly linked to the issue of democracy consolidation. On the one hand, an extremely autonomous state can ignore citizens and their demands. On the other hand, state dependence on dominant political interests may end up in their priorities prevailing.¹⁵

Therefore, in case of Georgia, the question remains: How can the horizontal and vertical separation of power and the transparency and accountability of those in power be institutionally guaranteed in a system, in which political power is controlled by one dominant actor?

¹¹ See Mick Moore, “Revenues, State Formation, and the Quality of Governance in Developing Countries,” *International Political Science Review* 25:3 (July 2004): 297-319; Andrew Rosser, “The Political Economy of the Resource Curse: A Literature Survey,” Working paper No. 268 (Brighton: Institute of Developments Studies, April 2006).

¹² Moore, “Revenues,” 306.

¹³ “Bidzina Ivanishvili,” *The World’s Billionaires*, *Forbes*, 2014, <http://forbes.com/profile/bidzina-ivanishvili> (accessed 3 August 2014).

¹⁴ Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Georgia, National Statistics Office of Georgia, http://geostat.ge/index.php?action=page&p_id=119&lang=eng (accessed 4 August 2014).

¹⁵ Evelyne Huber, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and John D. Stephens, “The Paradoxes of Contemporary Democracy: Formal, Participatory, and Social Dimensions,” *Comparative Politics* 29:3 (April 1997): 323-342.

Implications for Foreign Policy – Continuity by Doing

Last but not least, continuity in Georgian government is important to the country's foreign policy. Georgia's Western orientation is not solely the legacy of Saakashvili's government. Under President Shevardnadze, a Western course had already come to dominate Georgian foreign policy. Georgia participated in various regional economic projects, including the construction of oil and gas pipelines, with their geopolitical implications and Tbilisi officially announced its interest in European and Atlantic integration. Under the Saakashvili government, the western orientation became more established and was formalized in security and foreign policy concepts. Georgia made joining NATO one of its objectives and participated in peacekeeping operations lead by the alliance. Georgia's foreign policy was clearly defined and communicated to the internal and external audience with equal clarity.¹⁶ At the same time, the Georgian government presented its Western foreign policy as incompatible with Russian interests in Georgia and the region.

Since taking office, the new GD government announced, that it would stay true to the course set by its predecessor governments and will seek further integration of Georgia both into the EU and NATO. In March 2013, parliament also adopted a bipartisan foreign policy resolution and confirmed Georgia's Euro-Atlantic course. According to the resolution, Georgia will not become a member of any regional organization whose members do not acknowledge its territorial integrity. Obviously, those organizations include the Russia-dominated CIS and the Eurasian Union.¹⁷ Most notably, Georgia signed an Association Agreement with the EU in June 2014. This agreement is an important achievement of the government as well as a guarantee for Georgia's further democratization and European integration.

Alongside the European and Atlantic integration policy, the new government announced its policy of reestablishing relations with Russia.¹⁸ Shortly after taking the office as prime minister, Ivanishvili appointed Mr. Zurab Abashidze as his special representative in negotiations with Russia. Abashidze was Georgia's former ambassador to Moscow under Shevardnadze's administration. Ivanishvili's new government was very careful when criticizing Russia and its president Putin. The new, reconciliatory rhetoric of the government is the major noticeable difference in comparison to harsh anti-Russian style of their predecessors.

However, structural limitations of the Russian-Georgian rapprochement became visible very soon. The government—through its semi-formal talks with Russian counterparts—was successful in persuading Russia to lift the 2006 embargo on wine and mineral water. Bilateral talks were mostly aimed at humanitarian concerns; however, at the

¹⁶ Atilgan and Aprasidze, "End to an Era."

¹⁷ "Parliament Adopts Bipartisan Resolution on Foreign Policy," *Civil Georgia* (7 March 2013), <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=25828> (accessed 3 August 2014).

¹⁸ Russia and Georgia fought a five-day war over South Ossetia in 2008. Russia recognized the independence of two breakaway regions of Georgia: Abkhazia and South Ossetia. There have been no diplomatic relations between Russia and Georgia since the war.

same time Russia has caused further escalations. Russian troops controlling breakaway territories in Georgia have strengthened their presence and in South Ossetia they marked a de facto border with barbed wire, in several places, cutting right through Georgian villages. After Georgia had signed the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU, Moscow announced its plans to suspend the Free Trade Agreement with Georgia, which had been in force since 1994. With this decision, Russia has undermined the only achievement in Russian-Georgian relations since 2012 – lifting the embargo on Georgian commodities.

It is no secret that the Georgian government cannot influence the decision-making in the Kremlin. Nevertheless, the new government of Georgia needed time to fully realize this limitation. Similarly, it was naive to believe that improvement of Georgian-Russian relations was feasible without political concessions towards Moscow. Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations are not conceivable alongside the country's normalization with Russia. Under current circumstances, these two vectors of foreign policy are mutually exclusive. The new Georgian government needs to recognize the failure of its Russian policy. There is a need for clear and direct communication to domestic and international audiences about foreign policy goals and objectives. This is especially important in light of the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, where the first signs of new geopolitical confrontation are visible.

Conclusions

With three subsequent elections from 2012 to 2014, an era of almost ten years since the Rose Revolution came to an end. Georgia passed a significant test of democracy by conducting free elections and especially passing power to opposition peacefully, for first time in its history. The international community has acknowledged this achievement but it should also take it into account in light of the Georgia's integration aspirations with European and Euro-Atlantic communities.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge existing structural limitations for the democratic consolidation in Georgia and take on new challenges, which may affect the further trajectory of Georgian democracy. The dominant type of political landscape is one of the major problems for competition and cooperation to be developed and formalized in Georgian government. Peaceful transfer of power through elections enabled actors to exercise one year of cohabitation. Nevertheless, the government considered this period to be a predicament for its governance and never as a chance for political cooperation to emerge. At the same time, and particularly after local elections, the government intensified its "restoring of justice" policy, initiating criminal cases against representatives of the former government. After winning three elections, the new dominant party consolidated its power and is in effective control of national, regional as well as local policy making. The peaceful transfer of power did not lead to a division of power among major political actors but replaced one dominant player with another. Furthermore, the de facto leader's "financial autonomy" from the state and from the society may undermine the institutional guarantees of civic control and accountability.

Georgia remains an important and promising case of democratization and Europeanization in the region. Despite the fact that the new government initially caused certain confusions about foreign policy objectives, it later confirmed the country's commitment to the Western course. While there are still structural problems in its political system, important prerequisites for further democratic consolidation have endured. Most importantly, the peaceful transition of power has established a precedent, paving a path for further strengthening the party landscape and creating a culture of political cooperation.

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