

External Forces, Nationalism, and the Stagnation of Democratization in Georgia

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Since the so-called Rose Revolution, Georgia has been a promising testing ground for theories of international influence on democratization. The Georgian government was a collection of young “democrats,” heavily dependent on foreign (most importantly American) political, economic, technical, and moral support. However, Georgia slipped ever backwards in democracy rankings. What went wrong? Is there anything external actors could have done, or could do now, to support Georgian democratization? This paper tries to analyse whether foreign contributions were important for the democratization process in Georgia and why this most likely candidate for democracy promotion backtracked on democracy. It concludes with a discussion of the Barack Obama administration's chances for improving the prospects for Georgian democracy.

Introduction

Georgia has recently become a divisive issue, not only between great powers but also between people of different ideological inclinations. The idiosyncrasy of the Georgian regime under President Mikheil Saakashvili has elicited a great range of emotions, from admiration to outright contempt. Assessment of the regime's performance is equally diverse – some laud Saakashvili's economic performance and state-building efforts while others point to grave mistakes in foreign policy and an excessive concentration of power domestically. An important issue in these debates is an implicit disagreement about what the role of external forces (including Russia, the United States, international and nongovernmental organisations, private funds, and specific personalities) has been in shaping the Georgian government's policies and, ultimately, in producing the policy outcomes we see today.

At first glance, Georgia appears to have been a prime candidate for democratization. Its new political elite clearly fell under the label of “democrats” who enjoyed a “decisive power advantage,” a key criterion for successful democratization according to political scientist Michael McFaul. Moreover, Georgia depended heavily on foreign assistance (mostly Western) thus making conditionality and democracy linkage particularly effective ways of influencing democratic transformation from the outside. Also, Georgia, compared to most of the post-Soviet space, had a uniquely vibrant civil society before the Rose Revolution as well as a relatively free media.

Yet democracy did not take root in Georgia. Quite the contrary, the country slipped back to ten year-old conditions of democratic governance and freedom of speech. Power became increasingly concentrated within the executive branch under President Saakashvili, who also commands an overwhelming majority in parliament. The all-powerful Ministry of Internal Affairs now controls virtually every aspect of government, including the military. Both presidential and parliamentary elections (both in 2008) were marred by irregularities and fraud, more reminiscent of practices under former president Eduard Shevardnadze than of those in the democratic world. Most of the opposition remains marginalised. The majority of the country’s electronic media are either under state control or in the ownership of private individuals who are closely connected to the government.

Why this relative consolidation of authoritarianism happened in the particular case of Georgia is a question that needs to be answered. It is also one that invokes quite a few plausible explanations.

Plausible Explanations for the Backtracking of Democracy

There are a few contingent factors that contributed to the emergence in Georgia of a “super presidency,” probably the single most important reason for the stagnation of democracy. An unchecked concentration of power was legally facilitated from the start when the Georgian constitution was altered in February 2004, merely two months after the Rose Revolution. These constitutional changes paved the way for increasing the powers of the executive at the expense of the legislature.

Despite these swift and dramatic changes, the process of concentrating power did not start immediately after Saakashvili took office in January 2004. There still was some semblance of checks and balances in the government as the president’s influence was nearly matched by, and largely balanced with, that of Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania, once Saakashvili’s mentor and close associate. Zhvania’s tragic and unexpected death a year later, in February 2005, left Saakashvili virtually unmatched in terms of influence and power. His team of able operatives managed to quickly spread control over administrative resources and lucrative private and state enterprises. Massive privatisation of state assets generated revenues for the state budget and also strengthened Saakashvili’s grip on the economy.

We may assume that the concentration of power in Saakashvili’s hands is an historically contingent process, following on the heels of revolutionary events and the absence of an effective opposition. But was the stagnation of democratization a necessary and unavoidable result of such a concentration of power? Admittedly, there is a contrary viewpoint, which argues that a certain level of power concentration was necessary for reforming state institutions and transforming the

economy (colloquially referred to together as “modernisation”), as well as establishing the rule of law. This concentration of power, however, appears to have contributed little to democratization.

External Forces and Georgia’s Democratization

Could Georgia’s path of democratization been different had external actors used the “democracy linkage” to push for further democratization?

There are four basic potential sources of pressure that the Georgian government had to bear in the last few years: Russia, the United States, the European Union, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Most significant of these was Russia’s meddling in Georgia’s internal affairs through the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. I argue, however, that none of these forces have done much to either advance or delay democratization in Georgia.

Russia. Moscow continuously tried to provoke the Georgian leadership into open confrontation, which culminated in the Georgian army’s attack against the South Ossetian militia, resulting in open Georgian-Russian hostilities in August 2008. It would be difficult, however, to find a direct logical connection between external pressures generated by Russia and the stagnation of democratization in Georgia. Russians indeed applied economic, political, and military pressure against Georgia and supported the secessionist regimes in Abkhazia and South Ossetia against the central government in Tbilisi. However, these pressures cannot really account for the suppression of opposition in November 2007, excessive concentration of power since 2004, or closure of television companies. The Georgian government might have used Russian pressure as an excuse for hardening its grip on power and decimating opposition, but this pressure could hardly be considered the primary reason for the backsliding of democracy.

United States. Another notable force was the U.S. government, which, throughout the last decade, was Georgia’s main foreign political supporter. The United States provided much needed economic, political, and technical assistance for upgrading Georgia’s system of governance, including its armed forces. Yet, direct U.S. democracy assistance to Georgia decreased under the administration of George W. Bush. It is difficult to argue, however, that this decrease caused the backtracking of Georgian democracy; there were more important domestic factors at play. For instance, under Saakashvili, the government, with many representatives from the nongovernmental sector, learned how to manipulate civil society groups in order to avert their criticism and political pressure.

Paradoxically, however, there could have been a particular streak of U.S. democracy promotion that, in conjunction with the Georgian government’s policies, created permissive conditions for the derailment of democratization. I discuss this particular argument below.

Europe. European influence on processes within Georgia was rather weak. Apart from French president Nicolas Sarkozy’s spectacular mission to rescue the Georgian capital from Russian invasion in August 2008, European influence on Georgia’s democratization processes was slight. The policy of the Brussels bureaucracy remained uncoordinated when it came to the southern tier of the post-Soviet space. Various initiatives that were advanced since the mid-2000s – the European

Neighbourhood policy and, most recently, the Eastern Partnership--either never took off or lacked detail and executive muscle to promote any semblance of democratic change. Separate governments of the leading European states – Germany, France, and Britain – either delegated policymaking to Brussels or remained largely unconcerned, especially after August 2008. Their major task was to avoid Georgia as it was an irritant in their dealings with Moscow. The EU provided technical assistance to Georgia in various sectors of the economy and governance, and funded programmes that aimed to promote democratic reforms. However, European conditionality and democracy support remained marginal for democratization. They could not stop the general backsliding of democracy, especially in conditions of general euphoria about Georgian reforms that permeated both U.S. and, to a lesser degree, European policymakers in the years immediately after the Rose Revolution.

NATO. NATO had a formally endorsed tool of influence over democratization in Georgia. Its two consecutive agreements with Georgia--both the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) from 2004 and Intensified Dialogue from 2007 onwards contained vast provisions that warranted not only specific changes in the military but also wider liberalisation efforts, including democratic change and the advancement of the rule of law. However, NATO representatives' on-site inspections largely approved steps taken by the Georgian government.

From the above analysis, I conclude that the role played by external forces in Georgia's democratization remained somewhat redundant after the Rose Revolution. Russian pressure was an excuse rather than the cause of democratic backsliding, while U.S. and European democracy assistance was too weak or patchy to stop this backsliding. For its part, NATO was too complacent in endorsing Georgia's successes along the path of democratization. Overall, the congratulatory mood towards Saakashvili's reforms of the past several years largely obscured the process of stagnation, if not erosion, of democracy in Georgia. Both the Georgian government and the opposition appealed to international actors only for the sake of their narrow political needs, either to justify their own actions or to discredit the other. There is very scant evidence of any substantial effects of these actors on Georgia's political landscape, let alone their contribution to the promotion of democracy.

Nationalists, Neocons, and Cold Warriors

What then was the most important foreign factor influencing processes in Georgia? I argue that the major imported feature that significantly affected Georgian domestic and foreign policy was the ideological support of American neoconservatives throughout the second half of the 2000s, ever since President Bush visited Tbilisi in May 2005 and pronounced Georgia a "beacon of liberty." The most relevant historically contingent factor was the convergence of the neoconservatives' view of democracy promotion with Georgian nationalists' perception of world politics.

Neoconservatives who worked for the Bush administration transplanted their views on foreign policy from the Ronald Reagan years. For them, the end of the Cold War was not so much an end of an epoch but an interlude on their way to the transformation of the world. This perception of "unfinished business" was complemented by a fervent anti-communism which had been centered on the former Soviet Union.

This restricted version of the “Reaganite” vision of the world neatly coincided with the traditional worldview of Georgian nationalists. The West’s view of the Rose Revolution as a “democratic” revolution was nurtured by analogy to the East European “velvet” revolutions of the late 1980s. However, the worldview of the Georgian “revolutionaries” reflected the aspirations of the Georgian nationalists of the 1980s rather than those of their East European “colleagues.”

This particular worldview on international affairs, which has been part of Georgian identity ever since the eve of Georgia’s independence, rested on the following four major assumptions: first, Georgia was a strategically important country, regardless of the current configuration of world politics; second, Russia’s meddling in Caucasian affairs was illegitimate and, thus, unacceptable; third, Russia and the West, especially the United States, would always be at loggerheads over Georgia and the broader post-Soviet space; and fourth, no matter how things appeared at a given historical moment, the West, as a monolith, was destined to prevail in its struggle against Russia. These assumptions about Georgia’s importance, Russia’s negative role, and the power of the West partly stem from the Georgian elite’s enthusiastic appreciation of U.S. power in the late 1980s. This basic Cold War-type picture of world politics has stuck and been constantly reproduced in Georgia’s domestic debates about foreign affairs ever since independence.

Moreover, the above frozen picture of world affairs perfectly suited the aspirations and hopes of Georgian nationalists, who rhetorically embraced the United States (and with it American values, including democracy) from early on. Democracy and nationalism have never been incompatible concepts for Georgian public politicians or its academic community. Their compatibility neatly stems from the heritage of nineteenth century Georgian liberal nationalists, most notably Ilia Chavchavadze. In the early 1990s, Georgian political philosopher, and later, member of Saakashvili’s cabinet, Ghia Nodia, argued that nationalism could indeed be conducive to democracy.

Under Saakashvili, the nexus between a particular understanding of democracy and Georgian nationalism was complemented by an idiosyncratic self-perception of the ruling group. Saakashvili’s close circle of potentates came to equate democracy with their own survival, giving birth to the rather curious case of a nascent totalitarian worldview based on a rhetorical embrace of liberal democracy.

Nationalism has had a detrimental effect on the promotion of democracy in Georgia. Under the cover of pro-democracy (or, more accurately, of a rather nebulous “pro-Western”) rhetoric, the government tightened its grip on power. This process occurred against the background of a total consensus on foreign policy. Except for marginal groups, no major political party, at least until late 2009, openly challenged the government’s narrative of the need for national consolidation in the face of Russian aggression. The official description of Russia’s aggressive behaviour was getting gloomier over time. The Orwellian “big brother” rhetoric, justified or not, further restricted the limits of political pluralism. It must be pointed out that this nationalist rhetoric has not been the sole cause of increased authoritarian tendencies. However, it certainly was one of the conditioning factors which led to the stagnation of Georgian democracy. The rhetorical collusion of the Georgian government’s and American neoconservatives’ viewpoints provided an aura of foreign approval of

legitimacy for Saakashvili's restrictive policies, conducted in the name of the national cause.

Conclusion: What are the Chances for Obama to Promote Democracy in Georgia?

Given a context of declining U.S. political and economic resources, "resetting" of relations with Russia, and the stagnation of projects related to Caspian energy, it is highly unlikely that the Obama administration can come up with a comprehensive democratization plan for the post-Soviet space, or even the southern tier of the former Soviet Union, including Georgia. Taken separately, Georgia cannot represent a case that is important enough to attract significant and exclusive political support from the U.S. government. Georgia has no instruments of influence over U.S. domestic politics, no substantial material resources, and a strategic significance that is insufficient for it to be considered an irreplaceable partner. Georgia only makes sense in a regional context, and there is no discernable U.S. policy toward the region yet.

Historically, democratization efforts and rhetoric always accompanied a larger U.S. agenda towards the region. In the early 1990s, it was the stabilisation and security of the former Soviet republics; later in the same decade, democratization went hand in hand with the promotion of U.S. economic and business interests, especially in matters of Caspian energy; and in the early 2000s, the ultimate demands of anti-terrorist war efforts and broader U.S. security interests prompted Washington's political support for democracy promotion.

So far, the Obama administration has not come up with a comprehensible strategy for the post-Soviet space, even less so for various parts of it. Democracy promotion has to wait until any semblance of such a policy is put into place. Time is passing, however, and just following the tide may contribute to the further worsening of democracy standards in the region.

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