

## CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL PROCESS IN GEORGIA

Oleg KARPOVICH

*D.Sc. (Political Science),  
Deputy Director of the Institute for Topical International Problems,  
Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation  
(Moscow, Russian Federation)*

Adelina NOGMOVA

*Ph.D. (Political Science),  
Dean for the Training of Highly Skilled Scientific and Pedagogical Specialists,  
Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation  
(Moscow, Russian Federation)*

Larisa ALEKSANYAN

*Research Associate,  
Department of the Political Science and  
Political Philosophy, Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of  
Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation  
(Moscow, Russian Federation)*

### ABSTRACT

The study of political processes in the Southern Caucasus, one of the most complex and conflict-prone regions of the world, poses a great interest. Post-Soviet transformation of the political regimes of the South Caucasian countries has generally turned out to be rather complicated and painful. The Soviet legacy, the difficulties of adapting Western-style democracy to post-Soviet realities, manifestations of authoritarianism, civil wars, ethnic conflicts and the economic crisis have all left their mark on the nation-building process in the countries of the Southern Caucasus. Each of these states, in turn, has chosen its own path in developing its political system and building its own democratic architecture.

Also important in these geopolitical processes is the role of rivalry along the Russia-the West axis.

Georgia was distinguished among the South Caucasian states by what may have been the most complex state formation process and a difficult transition from socialism to capitalism. This country is still characterized by a weak institutional nature of the political system, elements of authoritarianism and the general instability of democracy. The study of these problematic aspects of Georgia's internal political processes is highly relevant.

This article is devoted to identifying the characteristics of the transformation of the post-Soviet Georgia's political landscape.

*The stages of the country's political development are examined. Particular attention is paid to the study of public administration in Georgia following the 2012 parliamentary elections, with a focus on the polarization of Georgian society. The effectiveness of competition policy within Georgia has been ex-*

*amined. It was revealed that political parties in Georgia are defined not by ideologies and programs, but by their charismatic leaders, which Georgian society so desperately needs. The role of civil society and non-governmental organizations in the country's political processes is also analyzed.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Georgia, political process, public administration, personalization, civil society.*

## *Introduction*

Prior to the 2012 parliamentary elections, the power in post-Soviet Georgia was monolithic,<sup>1</sup> the political regime was authoritarian, and the political elites aimed to maintain their position at all costs. Prior to this period, the political development of Georgia was characterized by the cyclical nature of the crisis, which was expressed in the fact that regime changes in the country took place through coups and revolutions. In the past, only in October 1990 did the opposition and anti-communist coalition Round Table—Free Georgia led by the charismatic leader Zviad Gamsakhurdia come to power in a multi-party election. This event in modern Georgian development can be considered a peaceful revolution, since the people have pressured the authorities to conduct multi-party elections, ultimately leading to the victory of the nationalist forces over the communists. This victory was consolidated in May 1991, when Zviad Gamsakhurdia was elected President of Georgia by a majority of votes.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, he led the process of Georgia's secession from the U.S.S.R., attempting to create a nation-based democratic state, with no regard for the rights of national minorities, including Muslims.

Zviad Gamsakhurdia's domestic policy was based on two concepts: nationalism and democracy. He promoted the ideas of ethnic nationalism in a state with a diverse multinational composition. Democratization of Soviet Georgia had transformed nationalism into authoritarianism, which led to the formation of Zviad Gamsakhurdia's personal regime.<sup>3</sup> During this time, serious problems emerged in the establishment of political institutions, there was a lack of political consensus within the Round Table coalition, and an intense struggle for power ensued among individual forces. The political thinking paradigm based on the "Georgia for Georgians" slogan, Gamsakhurdia's attempt to establish control over the country's political life, as well as serious economic problems caused by the collapse of the U.S.S.R., led to a crisis of Gamsakhurdia's legitimacy and an outbreak of civil war.

In 1992, the new charismatic leader Eduard Shevardnadze came to power through a coup d'état. In August 1995, the country's Constitution was adopted, transforming Georgia into a presidential republic with separation of powers.<sup>4</sup> In the fall of that year, Eduard Shevardnadze was elected presi-

<sup>1</sup> See: I. Kachkachishvili, "Sostoianie postmoderna' vnutrenney politiki Gruzii," in: *Armenia i Gruzia v sovremennykh politicheskikh protsessakh: novyye vyzovy i vozmozhnosti v sfere regionalnoy bezopasnosti*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2015, p. 46.

<sup>2</sup> See: G. Nodia, A.P. Scholtbach, *The Political Landscape of Georgia*, The Netherlands, 2006, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> See: V.M. Dolidze, "Gosudarstva—chleny GUAM: postkommunisticheskaya transformatsiia i tsikly politicheskogo razvitiia Gruzii," *Postsovetskie issledovania*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2019, p. 887.

<sup>4</sup> See: *Constitution of Georgia 24/08/1995*, in: Legislative Herald of Georgia, available at [<https://www.refworld.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rwmain/opendocpdf.pdf?docid=548f04404>], 25 June, 2019.

dent, and his party, the Union of Georgian Citizens, won the parliamentary elections. The authoritarian regime of Zviad Gamsakhurdia was transformed into the liberal authoritarianism of Eduard Shevardnadze. He created a political regime that did provide a certain space for civil and political freedoms, but there were no conditions in place for genuine political competition.<sup>5</sup>

In turn, the ruling party was weakly institutionalized, the power was concentrated in the hands of a narrow circle of the political elite and served its interests. Despite the development of civil society institutions, namely, the emergence of independent media and NGOs, the political activity in the Georgian society was low. The country had developed a private sector and, accordingly, private property was proclaimed to be the foundation of society, which led to the deepening of social inequality. Characteristic features of Shevardnadze's regime were corruption and falsification of elections. All of the above-mentioned factors have negatively affected its legitimacy, as a result of which there was a gradual weakening of Shevardnadze's influence. Georgian society found it necessary to look for a new charismatic leader.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the fact that Eduard Shevardnadze and his team have managed to ensure pluralism in the country's political life, the democratic process was still inhibited. According to an annual study by the Freedom House NGO, which assesses the degree of political and civil liberties throughout the world, there was no fair competition for political power in Georgia during this period.<sup>7</sup> It was not coincidental that in 2003 the change of power did not take place via elections, but was carried out unconstitutionally, through a revolution.

The political opposition united around Mikhail Saakashvili, Nino Burjanadze and Zurab Zhvania, who at one time were all active supporters of Shevardnadze's regime. The socially unprotected part of the voters opposed the existing establishment, and Western countries supported the opposition forces financially and through political mechanisms. An important role was played by a network of NGOs and foreign foundations, as well as the media, some of which were controlled by the opposition.<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that the opposition did not have a clear program or an ideology, the key principles of its election platform being the fight against corruption and the "elimination of the Shevardnadze clan."<sup>9</sup>

The falsified results of the 3 November, 2003 parliamentary elections prompted multi-thousand demonstrations.<sup>10</sup> Eduard Shevardnadze was forced to resign by the rallies that followed. Mikhail Saakashvili came to power, and was elected president in 2004 by a majority of electoral votes (95%). In March of the same year, his bloc United National Movement—Democrats won the parliamentary elections. The third stage of the transformation of Georgia's political system began, and Saakashvili's authoritarian regime began to be formed based on the paradigm of the country's modernization. A favorable business climate was established within the country, and tax rates were reduced. Decriminalization of society has also begun at an active pace. Thus, the country demonstrated a certain progress and success in the nation-building process. Saakashvili's actions led to the strengthening of state

<sup>5</sup> See: G. Nodia, A.P. Scholtbach, op. cit., p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> See: S.S. Zhiltsov, "Revolutionary Waves in the Post-Soviet Expanse," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 6 (36), 2005, pp. 7-13.

<sup>7</sup> See: "Georgia: Nations in Transit 2008," Freedom House, available at [<https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2008/Georgia>], 1 August, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> See: V. Dolidze, "The Regime and the 'Revolution' in Post-Soviet Georgia," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 2 (44), 2007, p. 33.

<sup>9</sup> *Georgia: Parliamentary & Presidential Elections 2003-2004*, NORDEM Report 07/2004, p. 4, available at [<http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/UNTC/UNPAN019186.pdf>], 1 August, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> The fact that the 2003 Parliamentary elections in Georgia fell short of a number of OSCE commitments and other international standards for democratic elections was recorded in the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Report (see: *Georgia: Parliamentary Elections, 2 November, 2003*, OBCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Report, Part 1, Warsaw, 2004. P. 1, available at [<https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/22206?download=true>], 1 August, 2019).

institutions, whose stability and democratic character were nonetheless questionable.<sup>11</sup> The country has achieved significant success in the fight against corruption, but this phenomenon has only intensified in the upper echelons of the ruling elite.<sup>12</sup>

As he conducted the reforms, Saakashvili has strengthened his positions. In 2004, on his initiative, the parliament had amended the Constitution, expanding the powers of the president. He received the right to dissolve the parliament under certain conditions, thereby ensuring the dependence of the legislative branch. The President received the authority to appoint ministers, governors and mayors, moreover, the executive branch also dominated the judiciary. Thus, the institution of the president became a powerful body, and the power was concentrated in the hands of Mikhail Saakashvili.

Amendments to the Constitution, the establishment of a one-party system in the presence of a formally multi-party system, and control over the media have hindered the democratization of Georgia. These factors have intensified after November 2007, when peaceful demonstrations were brutally suppressed in Georgia. At the same time, Saakashvili's legitimacy was on the decline and his popularity was decreasing. This was indicated by the results of the 2008 presidential election, Saakashvili won narrowly with only 53.47% of the vote.<sup>13</sup> Saakashvili's administration was also unable to peacefully resolve conflicts with South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which proclaimed their independence as a result of the 2008 South Ossetian war. On the other hand, the tense Russian-Georgian relations have ultimately worsened, reaching a complete impasse. It was during Saakashvili's rule that the intensification of Russophobia and the restoration of the country's so-called "territorial integrity" became an integral part of domestic political processes. Despite the regressive trends in Georgia's political development, the West supported the authority of Saakashvili, considering him a pro-Western reformer and a pronouncedly anti-Russian politician.

In the wake of the 2012 parliamentary elections, Georgia's political system was shocked by the mass protests caused by the publication of evidence of serious violations and abuse of power by Georgian police and intelligence agencies.<sup>14</sup> Demonstrations have contributed to the victory of the Georgian Dream opposition coalition under the leadership of Bidzina Ivanishvili in the parliamentary elections. The nature of the regime change has proven that, despite the authoritarian regime of Mikhail Saakashvili, the country has achieved quite a bit on the path of nation-building and the development of democracy.

## Public Administration in Georgia after the 2012 Elections

The fourth stage of the transformation of the political landscape of Georgia began in 2012, with the power being transferred to the opposition forces after the parliamentary elections. As a result, the Georgian Dream coalition obtained 85 seats in the parliament, and Saakashvili's party won 65 seats. For the first time in the history of post-communist Georgia, the former ruling party turned into a parliamentary opposition faction. Thus, the ruling coalition and the opposition began to work together in state institutions. Favorable conditions were created for political pluralism and genuine

<sup>11</sup> See: "Georgia: Nations in Transit 2008," Freedom House.

<sup>12</sup> See: S.S. Zhiltsov, "Korruptsiia i politicheskie protsessy v sovremennom mire," *Mirovaya ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia*, Vol. 63, No. 6, 2019, pp. 118-121.

<sup>13</sup> See: "Georgia: Election for President, 5 January, 2008," in: *Election Guide: Democracy Assistance and Election News*, available at [<http://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/2060/>], 1 August, 2019.

<sup>14</sup> See: P. Stronski, A. Vriman, "Nezavisimoy Gruzii dvadtsat piat let: v slozhnom polozhenii," *Moskovskiy tsentri Karnegi*, 1 March, 2018, available at [<https://carnegie.ru/2018/03/01/ru-pub-75652/>], 7 July, 2019.

political competition. In addition, the depersonalization of politics began, since it was precisely “the effect of personalization of politics that challenged the key role of parties in the political process as well as the entire model of party democracy.”<sup>15</sup>

Mikhail Saakashvili continued to exercise his powers until the 2013 presidential election, which was won by the Georgian Dream coalition candidate Giorgi Margvelashvili. With the loss sustained by David Barkadze,<sup>16</sup> the candidate of the United National Movement opposition party, the chance was missed to create a real two-party system that could have a positive effect on the development of democratic Georgia.

Irakliy Garibashvili became the new Prime Minister of Georgia, nominated by Bidzina Ivanishvili himself. Despite the fact that Bidzina Ivanishvili had officially left politics, nevertheless, he continued to be the unofficial leader of the Georgian Dream until his return.

After the presidential election, constitutional amendments (2010-2013), which provided for a reduction of presidential powers and an increased importance of the prime minister’s role, entered into force. These amendments made Georgia a parliamentary republic.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, the lack of a clear separation within the executive branch had a negative impact on the country’s development. This had caused a sharp rivalry between the president, who possessed legitimacy and the prime minister, who possessed a wide range of powers. As a result, Giorgi Margvelashvili and Irakliy Garibashvili, both being representatives of the ruling coalition, began to struggle with each other for power. Their rivalry involved various governmental functions. In addition, Margvelashvili repeatedly used his right of veto in regard to the bills proposed by the Georgian Dream. At the end of 2014, Margvelashvili declared his independent stance in a speech he delivered in the parliament.<sup>18</sup>

Fearing the destabilization of the political system, parliament necessitated “the need for a new constitutional amendment, which would state that the president was to be elected by the parliament rather than by a popular vote.”<sup>19</sup> The lack of transparency in the separation of powers indicated significant problems with political institutions.

Uncertainty was exacerbated by the situation in the Georgian Dream coalition, which from the very first days of its establishment was not comprised of homogeneous political entities. The unifying factor of the coalition was not ideology, but the so-called negative mobilization “against the regime of Saakashvili.”<sup>20</sup> It is no coincidence that shortly thereafter, in 2014, the Republican Party led by David Ustupashvili and the Free Democrats party led by Irakliy Alasania have both left the coalition. Ex-associates, who had occupied key positions in the party hierarchy, also left the coalition.<sup>21</sup> Despite these changes, Georgian Dream was unable to become a monolithic party and participated in full strength in the 2016 parliamentary elections without a clearly defined ideology. In addition, the ruling party was sharply criticized by its opponents because of unfulfilled promises (increasing the effectiveness of law enforcement agencies, combating corruption, reducing the influence of the Orthodox clergy).

Prior to the 2016 elections, the main opposition force, the United National Movement, in turn, was rather weak and disorganized. The reasons for this condition were mainly related to the process

---

<sup>15</sup> Quoted from: M.A. Kukartseva, “Effekt personalizatsii sovremennoy politiki,” *Vestnik RGGU, Series Filosofiya. Sotsiologiya. Iskusstvovedeniye*, 2017, p. 239.

<sup>16</sup> According to the Georgian Constitution, Mikhail Saakashvili did not have the right to participate in the election, as he had been the country’s president for 2 terms.

<sup>17</sup> See: “Kak menialas Konstitutsiia Gruzii,” *Kommersant*, No. 49, 22 March, 2013, p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> See: *The Speech by the President of Georgia, Mr. Giorgi Margvelashvili*, Parliament of Georgia, 14 November, 2014, available at [<http://www.parliament.ge/en/media/axali-ambebi/the-speech-by-the-president-of-georgia-mr-giorgi-margvelashvili.page>], 5 July, 2019.

<sup>19</sup> B. Chedia, “The Paradigm of Post-Soviet Political Leadership in Georgia,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Volume 15, Issue 3, 2014, p. 140.

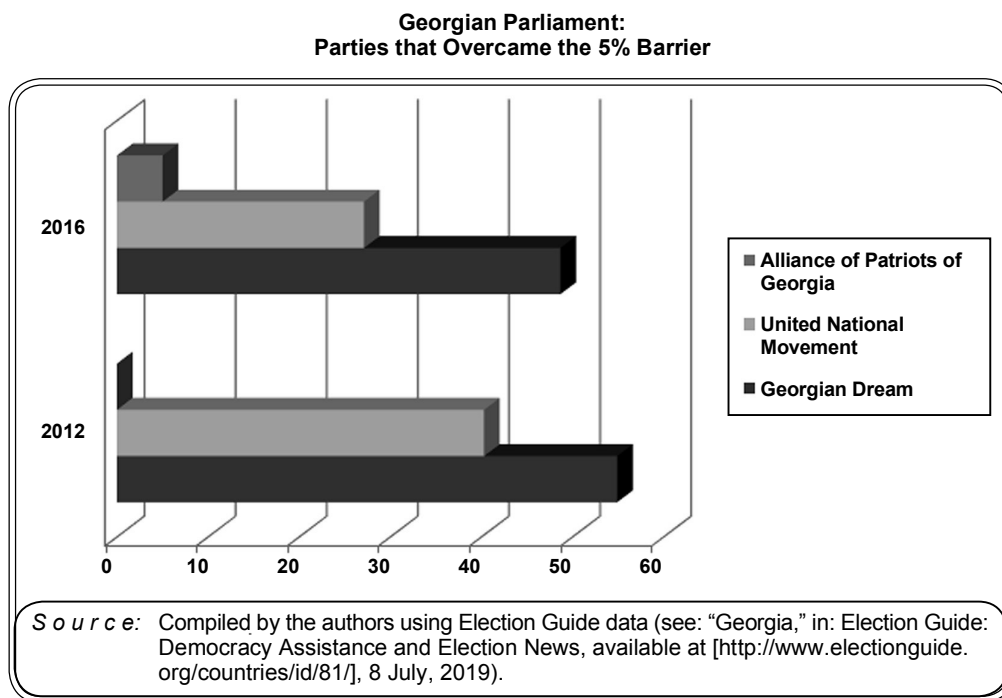
<sup>20</sup> I. Kachkachishvili, op. cit., p. 47.

<sup>21</sup> See: N. Gegelashvili, “Gruzia posle parlamentskikh vyborov,” *Kavkazskiy khroniki*, No. 1, 2016, p. 72.

of “restorative justice” in regard to the former officials of the United National Movement party for various corrupt activities and abuse of power, as well as to Saakashvili’s<sup>22</sup> low standing among the electorate.

The 2016 parliamentary elections brought clarity to the Georgian political landscape. The ruling party Georgian Dream had won, receiving 48.67% of the general vote, and the United National Movement opposition group retained its position in parliament, receiving 27.11% of the vote.<sup>23</sup> When comparing the results of the parliamentary elections of 2012 and 2016 (see Fig. 1), the ruling party’s lowered rating and the decrease in popularity of the main opposition forces become clear. This has contributed to the fact that the third force, namely, the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (5.01%), also overcame the 5% barrier.

Figure 1



In the second round of elections, Georgian Dream had won in 48 single-member constituencies out of 50. According to the final results, the party received 115 out of 150 parliamentary seats, which allowed to form a constitutional majority.<sup>24</sup> The opposition UNM obtained 27 seats and the Alliance of Patriots had won 6 seats. Once again, the dominance of a single political party with an indistinct program and ideology became apparent.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> See: Mikhail Saakashvili is currently living abroad, and a criminal case has been initiated against him for the alleged abuse of power in 2007.

<sup>23</sup> See: “Georgia: Election for Georgian Parliament.”

<sup>24</sup> See: “‘Gruzinskaya mechta’ zavershila razгром sopernikov,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 1 November, 2016, available at [[http://www.ng.ru/cis/2016-11-01/6\\_6849\\_gruzia.html](http://www.ng.ru/cis/2016-11-01/6_6849_gruzia.html)], 8 July, 2019.

<sup>25</sup> See: S. Markedonov, A. Skakov, “Postsovetskaiia Gruzia: ot turbulentnosti k stabilnosti i predskazuyemosti,” in: *Evolutsiia postsovetskogo prostranstva: proshloe, nastoiashchee, budushchee*, Moscow, 2017, p. 139.

Despite the fact that the victory of Georgian Dream was convincing and unconditional, it did not enjoy extensive support. The reason behind it was the crisis of electorate's confidence in political forces. Only half of all voters (51.63%) had participated in the elections and, given this indicator, it is apparent that only 23.37% of the electorate had voted for the ruling party. This situation, in turn, indicated the weakness of the country's electoral system. The Georgian parliament was basically formed with a lack of legitimacy, which posed a threat to the stability of power in the country.

The reasons for the weakening of the electoral legitimacy of the ruling party were the increase in social inequality associated with devaluation of lari (Georgian monetary unit) to 7%,<sup>26</sup> and unfulfilled promises in the socio-economic and political spheres. Also, public distrust of law enforcement agencies increased. The struggle intensified within Georgian Dream against the backdrop of widespread mistrust.

As a result, in April 2018 Bidzina Ivanishvili returned to high-level politics, taking the post of the party chairman.

At the end of May 2018, rallies began in Georgia because of a highly non-transparent investigation into the deaths of two teenagers.<sup>27</sup> Under the pressure of public demonstrations, the Prosecutor General of Georgia resigned in May and Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili followed in June. In fact, personnel shifts in state bodies of power have become a successful political mechanism of the ruling party in opposition to public activity.

The Georgian opposition, which had previously retained a passive position, was given the opportunity to challenge the ruling majority.<sup>28</sup> The reason for the society's mobilization was the presidential election in October 2018, wherein the United National Movement Party hoped for Saakashvili to return to big politics.

The 2018 presidential election was the turning point in the history of independent Georgia. It was the first time when a candidate supported by the ruling party could not win in the first round. The pro-government candidate Salome Zurbishvili and the candidate of the United National Movement Grigol Vashadze received practically the same share of the vote, 38.64% and 37.44%, respectively.<sup>29</sup> Salome Zurbishvili had only managed to win in the second round of elections with 59.52% of the electorate's votes.

The first round was highly praised by international observers, but the second round was criticized due to the abuse of administrative resources and the lack of conditions for genuine political competition.<sup>30</sup>

These elections were a test both for the government and for the opposition and Georgian society in general. The elections showed discontent among the ruling elites, an increased level of electoral competition, as well as increased political activity in society.

The 2018 presidential election was the last. According to the new version of the Constitution, in the future the president will be elected by the parliament. New constitutional amendments to ensure the country's transition to a parliamentary governmental system were adopted in 2017 and entered into force after the newly elected president Salome Zurbishvili was sworn in.

---

<sup>26</sup> See: "Consumer "Price Index (inflation)," National Statistics Office of Georgia, available at [<https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/26/cpi-inflation>], 8 July, 2019.

<sup>27</sup> See: "Gruzinskiy bunt," Lenta.ru, 2 June, 2018, available at [<http://www.google.com/amp/s/m.lenta.ru/articles/2018/06/02/georgiriot/amp/>], 9 July, 2019.

<sup>28</sup> See: A. Devyatkov, "Yuzhnyi Kavkaz: Dilemma stabilnosti i peremen," *Globalnyi prognoz RMSD 2019-2024*, available at [<https://russiancouncil.ru/2019-caucasus#2a>], 30 June, 2019.

<sup>29</sup> See: "Georgia: Election for Georgian Parliament," 5 January, 2008, *Election Guide: Democracy Assistance and Election News*, available at [<http://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/2576/>], 30 June 2019.

<sup>30</sup> See: *Georgia: Presidential Election 28 October and 28 November, 2018*, ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report, Warsaw, 2019, p. 1, available at [<https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/412724?download=true>], 30 June, 2019.

According to the new version of the Constitution, the president has turned into a formal figure, merely possessing “the right of veto, of awarding citizenship, of conferring state awards, military and diplomatic ranks and titles, and the appointment of a referendum.”<sup>31</sup> Thus, Georgian Dream concentrated all the power in the hands of the prime minister.

Despite the fact that over the past six years the ruling party has strengthened its position in the country through constitutional amendments, its legitimacy has been weakened. The effectiveness of political institutions remained low.

All of the above-mentioned factors led to the destabilization of the Georgian political system, which took place in June 2019.

The reason for the unrest was the presence of the Russian delegation in the building of the country’s parliament during the plenary session of the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy. The outrage was caused by the fact that the Russian deputy who was leading the session sat in the seat of the chairman of the Parliament. Mass demonstrations began in Tbilisi with slogans of an anti-Russian nature. The protesters began to demand the resignation of the Chairman of the Parliament, the head of the State Security Service and the Minister of the Interior. A demand was also put forward for early parliamentary elections.

The reaction of the nationalist part of society was related to the fact that, despite maintaining a pro-Western political course, Georgian Dream nevertheless acted from a pragmatic position and contributed to the intensification of Georgian-Russian cultural and economic ties. Against this background, rumors circulated in society concerning the secret pro-Russian sympathies of Ivanishvili, who had established his fortune in Russia.<sup>32</sup>

Such allegations are groundless, since all Georgian political forces, including the ruling party, and various social movements are aligned in matters of “restoring territorial integrity” of the country and seeing Russia as an “aggressor.” Georgian political forces differ from each other only in the degree of radicalism on this issue.

Accordingly, the real reason for the demonstrations did not include geopolitical issues or the growing distrust of Georgians towards the Georgian Dream. There was a sharp internal political struggle, and opposition forces sought to overthrow the ruling party. However, the society’s activity gradually subsided thanks to traditional political decision-making methods: some of the officials resigned, and Ivanishvili announced that the parliamentary elections would be organized according to a proportional system with a zero barrier.

As the Georgian political scientist Ghia Nodia rightly notes, and as the development of the processes has shown, *Georgian Dream* can still mobilize some real support around their platform, which would not allow Saakashvili, the main alternative leader, to return.<sup>33</sup> The fragmented state of the United National Movement party and the mixed popularity of M. Saakashvili in the country are the reasons behind it.

The destabilization of Georgian political system is slated to intensify further. It is highly likely that demonstrations and rallies will be integral parts of the political process in Georgia in the medium term.

Also, in Georgian society, the demand for a third force and new faces in politics is bound to grow increasingly more.

---

<sup>31</sup> “Novaya konstitutsiia vstupila v silu,” *GruziaSputnik*, 16 December, 2008, available at [<https://sputnik-georgia.ru/politics/20181216/243509342/Novaya-Konstitutsiya-Gruzii-vstupila-v-silu.html>], 11 July, 2019.

<sup>32</sup> See: G. Nodia, “Georgia: Unexpected Expected Crisis,” 3 DCFTAs Op-ed, No. 20, 2019, available at [[http://www.3dcftas.eu/publications/other/3-dcftas-op-ed-georgia-unexpected-expected-crisis?fbclid=IwAR0s71Cr5Mje\\_0YhhvELXLe-SCXPICy8QiL9dvdQjlg15nEPZOgntP83ZY](http://www.3dcftas.eu/publications/other/3-dcftas-op-ed-georgia-unexpected-expected-crisis?fbclid=IwAR0s71Cr5Mje_0YhhvELXLe-SCXPICy8QiL9dvdQjlg15nEPZOgntP83ZY)], 9 July, 2019.

<sup>33</sup> See: *Ibidem*.



## The Role of Civil Society and Non-Governmental Organizations in Political Processes in Georgia

In every democratic state, the central place is occupied by an active civil society, which is involved in the process of selecting leaders and making political decisions. A high level of consensus between civil society and the political elite is required to strengthen political institutions.<sup>34</sup> A generally active civil society is needed to legitimize the existing political system.<sup>35</sup> In democracies, civil society should be informed, that is, obtain objective information about the electoral process and political parties. In post-Soviet states, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which act as the third sector of the government, are the key civil society institutions that link the state apparatus with society.

After coming to power, Georgian Dream has been paying special attention to strengthening the civil society, which was not particularly effective during the reign of Mikhail Saakashvili. According to Freedom House estimates, in recent years Georgian civil society has become active and strong, and non-governmental organizations have begun to enjoy a significant degree of political freedom.<sup>36</sup> While Georgian Dream was in power, the role of public civic groups in the process of the country's political development has notably increased. Their activity was evident in 2012 in the process of the power transfer from the UNM to the GD, as well as in 2017, 2018, and 2019, when pressure was exerted on the government to comply with democratic norms. In general, NGOs and think tanks are the strongest institutions of Georgian civil society. However, non-governmental organizations face funding problems on a regular basis. Most of their funding comes from Western countries, and in some cases—from the business community and the government. This fact often transforms NGOs into an instrument of Western countries for influencing political processes in Georgia.

The second powerful element of civil society consists of representatives of the cultural sphere and the intelligentsia. However, this element is also very often faced with financing issues, and is therefore influenced by political authorities. The diversity of the Georgian civil society fuels an atmosphere of political polarization,<sup>37</sup> as a result of which certain NGOs become puppets in the hands of the ruling party or the opposition. NGOs must ensure a strong connection between the population and the state apparatus, and ensure that ordinary citizens are informed and involved in the state's political process.

Opinion polls conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC) show the level of effectiveness of NGOs as the link between citizens and the state apparatus of Georgia and the level of people's involvement in the country's political life. According to a CRRC 2017 survey, only 4% of respondents fully trust NGOs, with 19% likely to trust this element of civil society, and 39% of respondents being indifferent to NGOs. Survey data showed that there is a tendency in the society towards an increased distrust of non-governmental organizations (see Fig. 2).

Distrust of NGOs was also confirmed in a 2019 opinion poll conducted by the National Democratic Institute (NDI). According to the obtained data, almost half of Georgian society (43%) believes

<sup>34</sup> See: L. Kakhishvili, "Democratic Consolidation in Georgia: Why Does Consensus Matter?" Georgian Institute of Politics, *Policy Brief*, Issue No. 12, April 2018, p. 2.

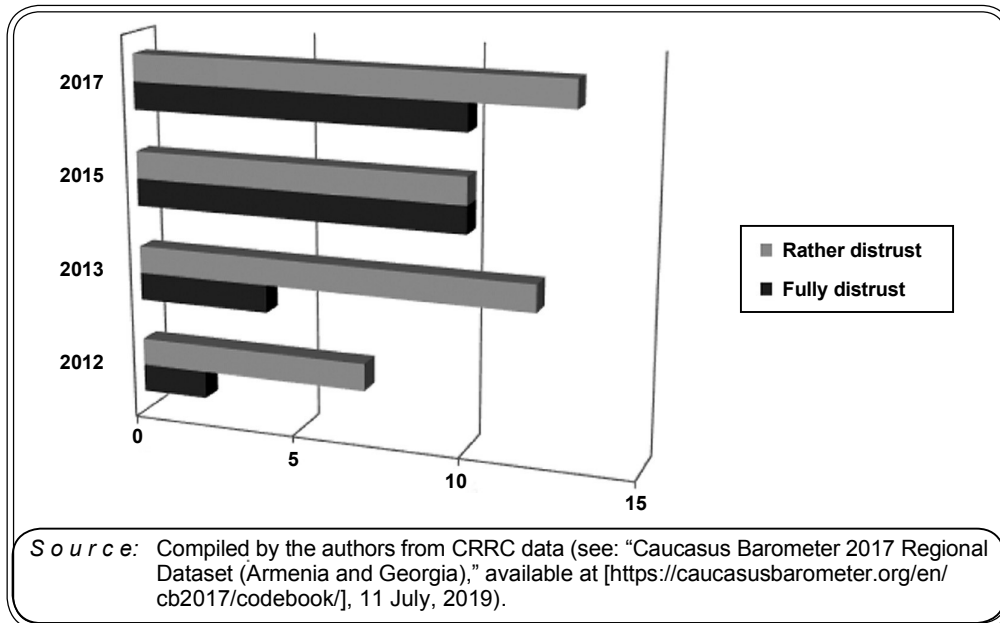
<sup>35</sup> See: A.V. Dyatlov, P.V. Sazhin, "Grazhdanskoye obshchestvo," *Gumanitarnye, sotsialno-ekonomicheskie i obshchestvennyye nauki*, 2015, p. 67.

<sup>36</sup> See: "Georgia: Country Profile," *Nations in Transit 2018*, Freedom House, available at [<https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2018/Georgia>], 12 July, 2019.

<sup>37</sup> See: "Georgia: Country Profile," *Nations in Transit 2017*, Freedom House, available at [<https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2017/Georgia>], 12 July, 2019.

Figure 2

**Social Survey Data  
that Demonstrates the Tendency towards Increased Distrust of NGOs  
in Georgia (2012-2017) (%)**



that NGOs are dividing the society.<sup>38</sup> These data indicate that the social effectiveness of NGOs is not high. According to the surveys, the population considers the election to be the principal means of participation in political processes in Georgia, rather than participation in rallies, non-governmental organizations, movements, etc.

However, the recent parliamentary and presidential elections, in turn, showed that almost half of the electorate did not participate in the elections. These factors have led to the conclusion that political nihilism is widespread in the Georgian society. Political parties, public administration institutions, and officials enjoy a low level of public confidence. For example, according to a 2017 survey, only 2% fully trust political parties.

This situation is also associated with the policies of the ruling party, which had concentrated power in its hands, without establishing the conditions for openness and transparency of the political system. It did not contribute to building a consensus between the government and civil society. There is also a lack of effectiveness of those NGOs that focus on promoting Western values in the country, do not inform society about political processes, and do not contribute to its active participation in political decision-making. A primarily indifferent attitude to political processes is common among the Georgian population.

According to a CRRG survey in 2017, only 9% of respondents stated that they were periodically interested in political processes, and 36% of the respondents said they were not interested in politics at all.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> See: "NDI: Public Attitudes in Georgia," April 2019, available at [<https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/na2019ge/codebook/>], 11 July, 2019.

<sup>39</sup> See: "Caucasus Barometer 2017 Regional Dataset (Armenia and Georgia)."

Notably, despite the passive political role of the Georgian society, in recent years, youth has become progressively more involved in political life. Increasingly, youth speaks at rallies, demonstrations, various movements, promoting their specific interests. The 2018 presidential and parliamentary elections, recent demonstrations, and especially large-scale rallies in June 2019 indicate a growing political activity of civil society.

## *Conclusion*

After the collapse of the U.S.S.R., Georgia went through a rather complicated and controversial path of nation-building and development of democracy. Prior to the 2012 parliamentary elections, the negative factors in the democratization of Georgia included authoritarian regimes, a high level of personalization of political life, the typical dominance of one party, weak institutionalism, and the lack of democratic consensus between the government and civil society. At the same time, during the reign of Mikhail Saakashvili, Georgia has made significant progress on the way to strengthening state institutions, decriminalizing society, and the anti-corruption struggle; conditions were also created for economic development.

After the 2012 parliamentary elections, Georgia has switched to a hybrid government regime, combining authoritarian and democratic institutions and practices. Georgian Dream, the ruling party, has not been able to create a real multi-party system and conditions for political competition in the six years in power.

Moreover, the ruling elite aimed to concentrate all power in their hands at all costs, developing authoritarian tendencies within the country. In turn, the opposition forces were disorganized and could not provide serious competition.

Amendments to the Constitution, which have been introduced in recent years, have strengthened the position of the ruling party, while creating a deficit of “popular” legitimacy.

This factor leads to the destabilization of the political system of the country, creating a threat of crisis.

---