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NATION-BUILDING

THE PARADIGM OF POST-SOVIET POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN GEORGIA

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ABSTRACT

The author analyzes the specifics of political leadership in Georgia and what people think about them, as well as the new trends that came to the fore after the 2013 presidential election, the leadership's resources, and the ways the political community "recruits" new members. The author compares the prominent features of the presidencies between 1991 and 2014 to explain the subtleties of political leadership in Georgia.

He also tries to examine why the Constitution is regularly amended to redistribute legal powers between the president and prime minister.

KEYWORDS: ***leader, president, elections, rule, parties, charisma, manager, Georgia.***

Introduction

The paradigm of political leadership distinguishes Georgia from most of the other Soviet successor-states: it is a symbiosis of post-Soviet and European traditions of governance.

The country inherited certain features of political leadership from the Soviet Union, while also being resolved to move away from the Soviet and post-Soviet styles of government.[1]

Today, it seems that Georgian political rhetoric has developed a taste for the term "European-type leader." No one is sure of its exact meaning, however the political elites and society are convinced that it means something positive.

Nevertheless, there are problems that demand amendment of the Constitution of Georgia to redistribute power among the branches of power. So far, the political elites, to say nothing of the public at large, do not know where the president's powers end.

This is best illustrated by the signing of the EU Association Agreement on 27 June, 2014. For several months, the country could not agree on who (the president or the prime minister) should travel to Vilnius to sign the document. The president was prepared to grant the right to the prime minister on this particular occasion, while the prime minister insisted that it was his prerogative as prime minister and that, therefore, the president's condescension was out of place.

After the 2013 presidential election, political leadership in Georgia was divided between the president and the prime minister with no clear delimitation reached so far.

From the very first days of independence, the Georgian political class has been pondering on the best mechanism of political leadership. In 1990, prominent Georgian philosopher Merab Mamardashvili wrote in one of the newspapers: "What components do we have to create a new way of thinking and produce new leaders who will call us to a new future? The old ideas will lead us once again to illusions of castles in the air and the reality of new prisons. We will copy the totalitarian structures and the blind will lead the blind, bowing to equality in obedience."[2]

This was one of the first attempts to identify the type of leadership rather than the form of governance or political system in Georgia. It became clear that in its efforts to arrive at new concepts of political leadership, Georgia would deliberately and consistently move away from the Soviet paradigm.

Leader Georgian-Style

At the earliest stages of Georgian independence, political leadership was associated with the names of Brezhnev, Andropov, and other Soviet leaders and was, therefore, negatively perceived by the nation. On the other hand, historical memory preserved vague ideas about kings and "fathers of the nation."

In 1801, the Georgian kingdom was liquidated and the country was annexed to Russia by force; in these conditions, the so-called fathers of the nation replaced the monarchs in the people's minds. Ilya Chavchavadze, a prominent public figure who never ruled the country and yet was perceived and is still honored as one the nation's leaders with his portraits displayed in practically every functionary's office, is a good case in point.

The concept of kings and fathers of the nation perfectly fits the messianic doctrine of political leadership that can be applied, at least partly, to the current situation in Georgia.

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[1] See: V.J. Bunce, Sh.L. Wolchik, *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Postcommunist Countries,* Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 156, available at [http://books.google.ge/books?id=7KIY4MF6HaEC&pg=PA166&lpg=PA166&dq=Georgian+political+leaders&source=bl&ots=O48B8KFjCX&sig=YabZY3XBX-yRjY1B_bYACEFiPmM&hl=en&sa=X&ei=__V4U4CpBqro7AaC0IGYAw&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=Georgian%20political%20leaders&f=false].

[2] *Tbilisi,* September 1990, available at [http://www.mamardashvili.com/archive/interviews/charmed_by_death.html] (in Georgian).

Russia and certain other post-Soviet countries remain devoted to the "strong hand" tradition, while in Georgia people want a "virtuous" leader who knows the way out of the impasse: a "father of the nation" vested with official powers.

Georgia abounds in potentially charismatic political leaders who need adequate circumstances to fully reveal their abilities. The opportunities were and are numerous: the country has been moving from one extreme situation to another; political instability, Georgian society living in a state of permanent transition, events of historic dimensions, etc. have become part of the republic's everyday life.

At the turn of the 1990s, a time when the national-liberation movement gradually unfolded, the phenomenon of a charismatic leader conquered the hearts and minds of Georgians, allowing the so-called informal leaders to create a broad following.

Merab Kostava and Zviad Gamsakhurdia, two Georgian political leaders, or rather dissidents of Soviet times, united the people around the idea of independence (after seventy years of communist rule) by the sheer force of their charisma.

Charismatic leaders do not need laws and other legal instruments to achieve their political aims. This should not be taken to mean that leaders in power are not charismatic: Gamsakhurdia, the first president of Georgia had strong charisma.

Leaders of this type are very much needed at times of upheaval when society must be awakened to the coming changes. What happened to Gamsakhurdia is the best confirmation of the above: it is impossible to hold onto power by the sheer strength of charisma alone; time transforms charismatic leaders into common and dull officials.

Georgia's political history teaches us that the country has needed charismatic leaders at all times: suffice it to mention Eduard Shevardnadze, who replaced Gamsakhurdia as president. At first, his chances of a public political career looked slim.

In March 1992, however, the nation believed that he was the right man to cope with the terror, political instability, economic crisis, civilian confrontation, and lost territorial integrity the country was encountering.

Upon his return from Moscow (where he occupied the post of Foreign Minister of the Soviet Union), Shevardnadze was accepted as a charismatic leader. During the first years of his presidency, he went as far as feigning resignation to resolve the conflict with the leader of Mkhedrioni, a militarized movement. This stirred up a spontaneous (or organized) rally of thousands of his supporters who knelt to implore him to regain power for the sake of the country's future: an indulgence on the part of the nation, on the one hand, and a convincing confirmation of his charisma, on the other.

It should be said that charismatic leaders are rarely bothered about economic issues (not infrequently they are referred to as "enemies of the economy") and remain unconcerned about the everyday needs of the common people.

Is the Leader a Messiah, Politician, or Manager?

As the nation gradually accumulated political experience, it gained a clearer idea about leadership. Leaders were no longer perceived as "fathers of the nation" but managers hired by the people to govern the state.

This trend became even more pronounced when the Georgian Dream coalition emerged into the political limelight on the eve of the October 2012 parliamentary elections. It was led by Georgian billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, who was determined to end the epoch of political messiahs and prove that a "good businessman can become a good politician." At the early stage of his political career,

Ivanishvili said in an interview that despite his scanty political experience he, as a good manager, would put together a reliable team.[3]

It should be said, however, that the approach to the state as a big corporation administered by a hired manager might warp the political transformations in Georgia. In fact, the image of an economist who, while filling the top posts in the state hierarchy, prefers to keep away from politics (this fully applies to all of Georgia's prime ministers) was inherited from the Soviet past.

Between 1991 and 2014, prime ministers changed hands fifteen times in Georgia; the absolute majority of them stayed away from politics and were engrossed in economic matters. The frequently changing official name of the post (from prime minister to chairman of the government, chairman of the cabinet of ministers, state minister) followed the Constitutional meandering. Irrespective of the title, however, the man who filled the post was Number Two in the country's political pyramid.

Table 1 offers some information about all the prime ministers of Georgia; information about Irakly Garibashvili and Bidzina Ivanishvili is found in Table 2 that provides information about the Number One leaders.

In Georgia, the president is Number One with wide powers and wide ambitions to remain the country's only political leader.

After regaining its independence, Georgia went to the polls six times to elect its president:

(1) On 26 May, 1991, Zviad Gamsakhurdia won with 87.6% of the votes;

(2) On 5 November, 1995, Eduard Shevardnadze won with 77% of the votes;

(3) On 9 April, 2000, Eduard Shevardnadze won again with 82.0% of the votes;

(4) On 4 January, 2004, Mikhail Saakashvili won with 96.0% of the votes;

(5) On 5 January, 2008, Mikhail Saakashvili was victor again with 53.47% of the votes;

(6) On 27 October, 2013, Giorgi Margvelashvili became president with 62.18% of the votes.[4]

All the Georgian leaders, apart from Giorgi Margvelashvili, were drawn toward big politics; the first president of Georgia, for example, went as far as aspiring to become the leader of the Caucasian region.

The second president (former foreign minister of one of the two superpowers—the U.S.S.R.) was determined to remain in world politics and become a world leader; he did not seem bothered that very few knew where to look for his country on the political map of the world.

He never missed a chance (both inside and outside Georgia) to remind everyone that he "had helped to end the Cold War and dismantle the Berlin Wall."

As the third president of Georgia, Mikhail Saakashvili used the country's growing geopolitical significance to boost his own importance, and succeeded. A pet of the West and a key figure in world politics, he travelled far and wide across the world and paid more official and unofficial visits than any head of state before him.

The first three presidents (Gamsakhurdia, Shevardnadze, and Saakashvili) were convinced of their mission to bring prosperity to their country.

"Georgia: choose the path of Christ!" Gamsakhurdia would scream at rallies in 1990, "and let those who take the path of Barabas be damned!"[5]

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[3] TV Interview of B. Ivanishvili to the First Channel of Public TV of Georgia, available at [http://1tv.ge/news-view/42224].

[4] [https://www.president.gov.ge/ge/President/Biography].

[5] [https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/peter-pomerantsev/polyphonic-president]

Table 1

Personal Information about the Leaders of the Georgian Government

Name	Time in Office	Occupation	Educated in	Date of Birth	Academic Degree
Vano Merabishvili	July-October 2012	Mining engineer	Georgia	1968	
Nika Gilauri	2009-2012	Economist, financier	Georgia, Ireland, the U.S.	1976	
Grigol Mgaloblishvili	2008-2009	Orientalist, diplomat	Georgia, Turkey, Italy	1973	
Vladimer Gurgenidze	2007-2008	Business administrator	Georgia, the U.S.	1970	
Zurab Nogaideli	2005-2007	Physicist	Russia	1964	
Zurab Zhvania	2003*-2005	Biologist	Georgia	1963	
Avtandil Jorbenadze	2001-2003	Doctor	Georgia	1951	
Giorgi Arsenishvili	2000-2001	Mathematician	Georgia	1942	D.Sc. (Technology)
Vazha Lortkipanidze	1998-2000	Mathematician	Georgia, Russia	1949	D.Sc. (Demography)
Niko Lekishvili	1995-1998	Engineer	Georgia	1947	
Otar Patsatsia	1993-1995	Engineer	Georgia	1929	Ph.D. (Economics)
Besarion Gugushvili	1991-1992	Orientalist, economist	Georgia	1945	Ph.D. (Economics)
Tengiz Sigua**	1990-1991	Engineer, metallurgist	Georgia	1934	D.Sc. (Technology)

* In 2003, Zhvania was appointed state minister; in 2004, his post was transformed to that of prime minister in accordance with the amended Constitution.

** Sigua was appointed for the second time in 1992, as soon as Gamsakhurdia was deposed.

Saakashvili turned to Shota Rustaveli, world-famous Georgian poet, to describe his mission as "Give beggars property, free the slaves."[6]

Elected prime minister on 1 October, 2012, billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili left the post in November 2013 of his own free will. He formulated the new paradigm of political leadership as uprooting all shoots of political messianism in Georgia.

People with very different political pasts covered different roads before reaching the Georgian political Olympus.

The 2013 election deserves our attention for several reasons.

[6] The Annual Report of Georgian President M. Saakashvili in the Parliament of the Country, 14 February, 2006 [http://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/content/article/1545584.html] (in Georgian).

In 2010, President Saakashvili initiated several Constitutional amendments (which pushed the president into the shadow of the prime minister) to be enforced after 2013, which changed the country's political structure.

Before the 2013 election, the president was figure Number One, while the prime minister (or, sometimes, the speaker of the parliament) was Number Two in the country's political hierarchy.

After the election, it became clear that the president elect was a symbol rather than a real leader. Real power belonged to Prime Minister Irakly Garibashvili confirmed by the parliament. (I would like to point out that the source of legitimacy of both institutions of power remained the same.)

At the parliamentary elections, people voted for the Georgian Dream coalition and, consequently, for Bidzina Ivanishvili (who was closely associated with it in the peoples' minds), who became prime minister. He retired after the presidential election leaving the post to Garibashvili, who had no votes behind him and, therefore, much weaker legitimacy.

This made another bout of Constitutional amendments inevitable: in future, the president, like the prime minister today, was to be elected by the parliament rather than by popular vote.

Indeed, a clash between the president's weaker powers and stronger legitimacy might cause tension between him and the prime minister and hence political instability.

The ruling party harmonized its choice of presidential candidate with the new Constitution; the functions and powers demanded a non-political figure to avoid disagreements over the division of power between him and the prime minister.

Giorgi Margvelashvili, the founding father and rector of a small yet prestigious university in Georgia,[7] for many years remained an expert frequently seen on the TV screens and one of the favorites of the press who was very critical about President Saakashvili.

He has no political ambitions, nor has he ever demonstrated the qualities of a leader, even though he was one of those who shaped public opinion through the media. *After the 2012 parliamentary elections, he was appointed Minister for Science and Education*.

It was his "non-political background" that earned him nomination as presidential candidate.

Fully aware that his chances of winning the race on his own were slim, he leaned on the popular support of the new ruling party, a novelty in the Georgian political tradition within which charismatic leaders rallied people around their parties and not vice versa.

It should be said in all justice that the Georgian Dream coalition and Giorgi Margvelashvili relied on the money and prestige of Bidzina Ivanishvili.

An analysis of the 2013 presidential election suggests that Georgia has acquired an institution of informal political leadership. In the 1980s, there were informal leaders who could lead the masses; today, informal leadership means state governance.

To sum up: the 2013 presidential election created two parallel axes of state governance: informal represented by Ivanishvili and bureaucratic represented by Garibashvili and Margvelashvili.

Resources of Political Leadership

Eduard Shevardnadze was the only professional politician; all the other presidents had practically no political experience, with the exception of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, whose experience of political communication proved inadequate, which explains his fairly shaky power. It can be said that he was a truly national leader with no time to adjust to the presidency.

[7] [https://www.president.gov.ge/ge/President/Biography].

Gamsakhurdia, Shevardnadze, and Saakashvili came to power by different routes, yet all of them were "political animals" to borrow the term from Aristotle. The political force that came to power after the October 2013 election has no political leaders.

The Constitutional amendments that made Georgia a parliamentary republic have probably diminished the political importance of the Number One leader.

The people and the media lost their bearings in the face of the "two leaders" model.

Political leadership Georgian-style was very much affected by the dramatic change of generations in power. Mikhail Saakashvili, who became president at 35, preferred the younger generation in the highest posts and was frequently accused of relying on inexperienced people.

He, however, remained convinced that the state should rid itself of the bureaucracy of the old regime. Speaking about the Maidan in Kiev, he pointed out: "Ukraine should trust the new generation. The old state machine should be pushed aside to make room for new people aged 25-30 in all the state structures. Young people should be given a chance to build their state."[8]

Fifty-six-year old Ivanishvili was brought to power by the October 2012 election; for a while he ruled the country alongside Saakashvili, who remained president and head of state until the 2013 presidential election when the post of prime minister went to 31-year-old Garibashvili. In so doing, he upstaged Saakashvili, who for a long time boasted that he was the world's youngest head of state.

The institution of political leadership had to undergo abrupt modernization after Shevardnadze's departure, when an entire generation was eradicated from the political scene, a situation unknown in other post-Soviet countries.

The young generation brought their values to the summits of power; these people changed the post-Soviet style of leadership, the ethics of governance, and even the way the new political leaders looked and behaved.

These young men had no previous organizational and bureaucratic experience; in Georgia, bureaucracy, an important element of state governance, was associated with the Soviet Union and should, therefore, be avoided in the new state.

The new people at the top, who replaced Saakashvili, accepted his tradition of appointing young people to the highest posts. It seems that the nation is convinced that inexperienced leaders make effective state governors.

For many years, it was and still is preferred that the Georgian political leaders have a so-called Western education (going back to the time before the Rose Revolution): Eduard Shevardnadze with his Soviet bureaucratic experience preferred people educated in the West.

Irakly Garibashvili and Giorgi Margvelashvili are no exception: the former graduated from the International Relations Department of Pantheon-Sorbonne University also known as Paris I[9]; the latter studied sociology at Central European University (CEU); both know foreign languages. The first President of Georgia Zviad Gamsakhurdia knew several foreign languages, while Shevardnadze spoke only Georgian and Russian. Mikhail Saakashvili is fluent in several foreign languages (English, French, Russian, and Ukrainian).

Bidzina Ivanishvili's very limited knowledge of foreign languages made it much harder for him to establish informal contacts with foreign colleagues.

The president's party affiliation is another pain in the neck for the Georgian political establishment: the initial (1995) version of the Constitution of Georgia said: "The President of Georgia shall not have the right to hold any other position" (Art 72). The term "other" remained unspecified, which caused violent disagreements among the parties.

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[8] [http://podrobnosti.ua/podrobnosti/2014/06/01/978624.html], 1 June, 2014.

[9] [http://www.government.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=202].

Table 2

Formal Information about the Leaders of the Georgian Government

Name	Period in Power	Occupation	Educated in	Age*	Place of Birth	Religious Opinions	Political Opinions	Party Affiliation	Languages	Academic Degree
Z. Gamsakhurdia	1991-1992	Literary critic	Georgia	52	Capital	Christian Orthodox	Conservative	"Round Table"	English, German, Russian, Spanish, French	D.Sc. (Philology)
E. Shevardnadze***	1995-2003**	Teacher	Georgia	67	Provinces	Atheist (Christian Orthodox by birth)	Vague (former communist)	Union of the Citizens of Georgia	Russian	—
N. Burjanadze[5]	2003-2004	Lawyer	Georgia, Russia	39	Provinces	Christian Orthodox	Vague	United Democrats (when acting president)	English, Russian	Ph.D. (Law)
M. Saakashvili	2004-2013	Lawyer	Ukraine, the U.S.	35	Capital	Atheist (Orthodox Christian by birth)	Liberal	National Movement	English, Russian, Ukrainian, French	—
B. Ivanishvili	2012-2013	Engineer-economist	Georgia, Russia	56	Provinces	Atheist (Christian Orthodox by birth)	Vague	Georgian Dream	Russian	Ph.D. (Economics)
G. Margvelashvili	2013-present	Philosopher	Georgia, Czech Republic	44	Capital	Christian Orthodox	Vague	Non-party	English, Russian	D.Sc. (Philosophy)
I. Garibashvili	2013-present	International relations expert	Georgia, France	31	Provinces	Christian Orthodox	Social Democrat	Georgian Dream	English, Russian, French	—

* Age at the moment of coming into office.

** In 1995, Shevardnadze was elected president; before that he held the post of head of state, introduced by the State Council when President Gamsakhurdia was deposed.

*** Between 23 November, 2003 and 25 January, 2004, temporarily performed the duties of president as parliament chairman.

In the past, the opposition used this Constitutional provision to demand President Shevardnadze's retirement from the post of chairman of the Union of Citizens of Georgia. The same happened to Saakashvili after the Rose Revolution when his right to remain the leader of his United National Movement was doubted.

Finally, on 6 February, 2004, Art 72 was specified (amendment No. 3272) with "except for a party position" to legalize the previous practice.

On 15 May, 2010, the Constitution was amended once more: after the 2013 election, the president elect was expected to leave all party posts. There is no similar restriction relating to the prime minister, therefore, what is not banned is permitted. This means that the amended Constitution that came into force after the 2013 election pushed the country into a previously unknown situation: a non-party president and the chairman of a political party as prime minister.

It should be said that throughout its independent development, the fact that the head of state was the leader of the ruling party caused a lot of political problems. The election campaigns serve as the best confirmation.

For example, the Central Election Commission fined the people working in the office of Prime Minister Garibashvili because the building was used to hold a meeting of the political council of the ruling party.[10]

In Georgia, each newly elected political leader opens a new page in the country's history, which begins on the date he comes to power; this is confirmed by the fact that each of them finds a new office for his administration.

Zviad Gamsakhurdia shared the building with the parliament; Eduard Shevardnadze used the building earlier occupied by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Georgia, while Mikhail Saakashvili built a new palace. Even before his election, Giorgi Margvelashvili announced that he would not move into the palace. After several months in office, he changed his mind and moved into the palace despite the opposition of the Georgian Dream.

One more thing: as soon as the president elect comes to power, the biographies, reports, and other materials related to his predecessor are removed from the official website of the president of Georgia.

Table 2 above offers basic information about some of the Georgian political leaders.

Conclusion

As soon as the Georgians elected their first president in 1991, their concerns about his unlimited power grew and became more pronounced. Post-Soviet Georgia has tried all forms of governance: it has been a presidential, parliamentary-presidential, and parliamentary republic; the president being Number One leader in the first two republics.

After the 2013 presidential election, the republic tried on the parliamentary model. The few months that have elapsed since its introduction have shown that the people find it hard to accept a president with no real powers and no leadership talents.

According to a public opinion poll carried out by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) in November 2013, the new president's approval rating was 72%; several months later it dropped to 46%.[11]

On 14-17 April, 2014, the *Kviris palitra* newspaper organized a sociological poll on the subject "An Ambitious Politician." One of the questions that gathered 485 responses was: Who is the most ambitious Georgian politician? The readers pointed to Saakashvili as the most ambitious and to Margvelashvili as the least ambitious politician.

[10] [http://www.electionsportal.ge/geo/incident/3839].

[11] [http://www.apsny.ge/2014/pol/1399916608.php?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=facebook].

Zviad Gamsakhurdia, a nationalist when seen from abroad, was a national leader for the Georgians. Quite a few of them are still proud to be called Zviadists.

Eduard Shevardnadze, a cunning and inventive politician, was "the Fox" for his compatriots.

To emphasize his sacral mission as president of Georgia, Mikhail Saakashvili took his oath as president elect at the burial site of David IV the Builder (Georgian: Davit Agmashenebeli), the mightiest of the Georgian kings of the 12th century. Throughout his presidency, he copied Gamsakhurdia and Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the contemporary Turkish state. His Georgian supporters are still called "Mishists" (when president he was affectionately called Misho).

Giorgi Margvelashvili has not yet demonstrated any specific habits.

The very specific paradigm of political leadership in Georgia and the disagreements over its essence and nature show that, as distinct from many other Soviet successor-states, Georgia has never been afraid of experimenting when looking for the best efficient model of governance. None of the presidents has been like any other; each of them has had his own style of state governance. All of them—either with a large enthusiastic following or passively (as the present president of Georgia)—have their places in the country's political history.

The above suggests that in Georgia no, even the strongest, political leader can remain in power indefinitely: people easily tire of the old and want to see new faces.[12]

This means that sooner or later, every Georgian leaders loses his political capital; it can be said that after 1991 Georgia has accumulated enough experience of a true understanding of political leadership.

In Georgia, society is forcing the government to move away from the post-Soviet and embrace the European paradigm of political leadership.

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[12] See: V.J. Bunce, Sh.L. Wolchik, op. cit.