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Multi-Party System in Georgia: Peculiarities, Challenges and Perspectives

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The article discusses the formation of party system in Georgia, which started from the late 1980s, when the opportunity for political activities appeared during the period of the Soviet crisis. Many parties were formed at the initial stage of democratization, just like in other countries. Currently the number of registered parties in Georgia is over 230, but the number itself does not automatically indicate the existence of multiparty system. In Georgia, political parties entering Parliament, as a rule, win with great majority, which excludes the necessity for cooperation with other parties. Georgian party system is characterized by the domination of a governing party, which does not have the possibility to represent public interests. Political parties have also appeared to be incapable in view of articulating and aggregating public interests. Despite the superficial impression of stability, the party system lacks representation and competitiveness. Although 2016 pre-election environment created expectations for multiparty parliament and coalitional government formation, instead of the multiparty system we now have the two-party system contours. Moreover, if in the nearest future the parties remaining outside of parliament do not start creating a unified opposition political center, the two-party system will be formed with high probability.

Keywords

Party system, election, political party, political regime, post-Soviet transformation.

Formation of the new political spectrum in Georgia started from the late 1980s, when the opportunity for political activities appeared during the period of the Soviet crisis. Many parties were formed at the initial stage of democratization, just like in other countries.

First multiparty elections in Georgia were held on October 28, 1990. 34 political organizations and election blocks participated in the elections; the number of parties running for elections reached 41 in 1992, and the number was 95 in 1995. Thus, the number of political parties has been increasing from elections to elections.

As of today, the number of registered parties in Georgia is over 230¹, among which up to 20 active political parties. Names of the majority of parties are known only to the staff of the Ministry of Justice. Georgia is not an exception by means of number of political parties; number of registered political parties can be quite high in countries having older and consolidated democracy. Still, it is important that in the case of Georgia, the number of registered parties does not automatically indicate the existence of multiparty system. In multiparty systems, public support is distributed among several parties the way that even the winning party has to create coalition with other parties when forming the government. In Georgia, political parties entering Parliament, as a rule, win with great majority, which excludes the necessity for cooperation with other parties.

Since the 1990s, Georgian political system has permanently been characterized by the presence of dominant governing party and separated opposition unable to unite. Due to the aforementioned, Georgian party system can conditionally be defined as a multiparty system with a dominant party.

Development of the party system has directly been influenced by the existence of the Presidential model of governance.

Strong presidential power opposes the “accountable” party system². An ambitious president, as a politician, tries to subordinate full power under president’s figure therefore creating the “party superior”

¹ <https://napr.gov.ge/p/477> (21.10.2016).

² **Linz J. J.**, Presidential or Parliamentary Democracy: Does it Make a Difference?, 1994, *Kitschelt. H., Post-Communist Systems: Competition, Representation and Inter-Party Cooperation*, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 56.

politician image³. In April 1991, Georgia was established as a presidential republic. 1995 Constitution reflected Shevardnadze's attempt to conduct effective control. Georgia developed in an American style – powerful presidential republic – as the semi-presidential republic was not believed to be an adequate form of governance in 1990s. Based on February 6, 2004 Constitutional amendments, President Saakashvili further empowered presidential governance⁴. Aside from the experience of powerful presidential governance, “Georgia had also the problem related to messiah”⁵, which means that voters have special (excessive) personal confidence in a presidential candidate. Under the conditions of strong presidential governance, elected president's party is in a dominant position, while opposition parties are fragmental and weak⁶.

In one-party dominant presidential systems new players are not given the opportunity to mobilize voters⁷, and are characterized by the existence of alternative political force. During Gamsakhurdia's rule in Georgia, the rivalry between alternative political forces exceeded the frames of electoral competition, and former allies opposed each other

³ **Ames B.**, The Reverse Coattails Effect: Local Party Organization in the 1989 Brazilian Presidential Election, *The American Political Science Review*, 1994, **88**, 1, 95-111. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2944884?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents, (15.12.2014).

⁴ **Matsaberidze M.**, Search for the Georgian Model of Democracy, *Jones S. F., The Making of Modern Georgia, 1918-2012: The First Georgian Republic and Its Successors*, NY, Routledge, 2014, p. 156.

⁵ **De Waal T.**, Georgia's Political Shake up: Enter the Oligarch, *Georgian Journal Research*. 2011, 101–13, <http://www.georgianjournal.ge/component/content/article/9-news/6278-the-national-interest--georgias-political-shake-up-enter-the-oligarch-.html>, (25.02.2015).

⁶ **Schofield N., Gallego M.**, Leadership or Chaos: The Heart and Soul of Politics, Springer, 2011, p. 332.

⁷ **Roberts K., Wibbels E.**, Party Systems and Electoral Volatility in Latin America: A Test of Economic, Institutional, and Structural Explanations, *American Political Science Review*, 1999, **93**, 2, 575-590, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2585575> (05.01.2015); **Philip G.**, The New Populism, Presidentialism and Market-Oriented Reform in Spanish South America, *Government and Opposition*, 1998, **33**, 1, 81-97, http://www.researchgate.net/publication/41114346_The_new_populism_presidentialism_and_market-oriented_reform_in_Spanish_South_America (11.03.2015); **Weyland K.**, Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics, *Comparative Politics*, 2001, **34**, 1, http://www.researchgate.net/publication/263535912_Clarifying_a_Contested_Concept_Populism_in_the_Study_of_Latin_America (12.01.2015).

with arms⁸. 1992 parliamentary elections revealed 24 winning parties, although ensuring of electoral accountability was failed, and at the next elections majority of them did not even take part. During Shevardnadze's rule, opposition was weak and divided⁹. Despite the fact that the Citizens Union of Georgia was opposed by many parties, the force born within the former governing party – the United National Movement – proposed a real alternative to voters¹⁰. Under the conditions of the government formed as a result of the Rose Revolution, weak and marginal opposition did not propose effective alternative¹¹. Ephemeral (unstable, short-term) political blocks, created during election period for winning a process, hamper the electoral accountability and representation in Georgia¹² along with the imposing of responsibility only on a governing party for the ongoing political processes¹³.

In case of Georgia, we can use the term “dominant conditionally”, as in all three cases the coalition of parties – Round Table – Free Georgia, Citizen's Union of Georgia and the United National Movement, answer only to one indicator – winning elections with considerable advantage. The Citizens Union (1995-2003) and the United National Movement (2004-2012) were distinguished by relatively prolonged period of domination. Along with that, a dominant party does not face the risk of vanishing from the political arena, while the Round Table – Free Georgia, as it was before, and the Citizens Union vanished from politics forever. The reason probably was that both of these political

⁸ **Kuzio T.**, *Post-Communist Democratic Revolutions in Comparative Perspective*, D'Anieri P., *Aspects of the Orange Revolution*, Ibidem Press, 2014, p. 168.

⁹ **Wooden A., Stefes Ch.**, *The Politics of Transition in Central Asia and the Caucasus: Enduring Legacies and Emerging Challenges*, US, Routledge, 2009, p. 115.

¹⁰ **Wheatley J.**, *Georgia from National Awakening to Rose Revolution: Delayed Transition in Former Soviet Union*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2005.

¹¹ **Nodia G., Scolt bach A.**, *The Political Landscape of Georgia; Political Parties: Achievements, Challenges and Prospects*, Eburon Uitgeverij B.V., 2006, p. 30.

¹² **Bader M.**, *Making Parties Fit for Democracy: Georgia, Ukraine and the Challenge for Democracy Assistance*, Opleidings Europese Studies, Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2007, p. 8 (18.01.2015).

¹³ **Nodia, G., Scolt bach A.**, *Op.cit.*, p. 111.

powers were defeated not in elections, but were turned over as a result of coup or revolution¹⁴.

Developing democracies are characterized with high electoral instability¹⁵. Electoral instability determines the level of stability and institutionalization of party system. In the systems, which are characterized with high electoral instability, parties have weak programmatic characteristics and citizens find it difficult to identify them. In Georgia, formation of parties serves more the interests of political and economic elite than that of social factors.

One of the main reasons of the instability of parties is that a party is an attractive springboard for careerist conformists. During decades, party stability depended on the preservation of power. The moment a party lost power, party stopped existing¹⁶. Communist Party vanished from the political arena after Georgia regained independence; the fate was the same of the Round Table – Free Georgia during Shevardnadze’s rule, while before that it acted as the dominant political force. The Citizens Union and Agordzineba (Revival), which also used to have quite serious influence and support, vanished after the Rose Revolution¹⁷. From the given viewpoint, the only exception is the United National Movement, which went into opposition after the 2012 parliamentary elections, and still continues its political activities.

Some experts called the 2012 parliamentary elections “electoral revolution”, as for the first time in Georgian history opposition came into power without revolution, and since the defeat of the Communists it was the first time when government was changed within Constitutional frames, as a result of elections. Also historically governing parties used to become part of the State and stopped existing after failure in elections. After the 2012 elections, the former governing party went into opposition, and continued political life and activity, while the Georgian

¹⁴ **Matsaberidze M.**, Op.cit., p. 12.

¹⁵ **Mainwaring Sc., Torcal M.**, Party System Institutionalization and Party System Theory after the Third Wave of Democratization, Handbook of Party Politics, London, Sage, 2005, pp. 204-27.

¹⁶ Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI), 2014, p. 15, http://www.bti-project.org/uploads/tx_itao_download/BTI_2014_Georgia.pdf, (13.02.2015).

¹⁷ **Nodia G., Scolt bach A.**, Op.cit., p. 105.

Dream Coalition continued the tradition of managing government with majority. Bidzina Ivanishvili's factor became decisive in the given process, around who the main opposition coalition was formed. The change of power would not probably be possible without him.

Of course it was the great precedent in the process of creating democratic political traditions in Georgia. For preserving and continuing the aforementioned tendency, it was very important to ensure the democratic conduction of 2016 parliamentary elections. Although 2016 pre-election environment created expectations for multiparty parliament and coalitional government formation, polarization was again strengthened in the conclusive phase of the election campaign, which influenced the attitudes of voters. Thus, instead of the multiparty system we now have the two-party system contours, and if in the nearest future the parties remaining outside of parliament do not start creating a unified opposition political center, the two-party system will be formed with high probability¹⁸.

October 8 elections further developed Georgian democracy. The defeat of traditional parties and the empowerment of non-liberal groups provoked active discussions. Some explained it by political apathy, some – by antidemocratic tendency empowerment, and some – by victory of money over politics¹⁹. Still, it is a fact that “qualified subjects” which remained outside of the parliament, failed to adequately evaluate the resource capabilities of the two main parties, and were not able to consolidate their resources in a unified platform. For example, if the Free Democrats and the Republics had united in a block, they would by all means have overcome the election barrier. Other parties also had resources for cooperation.

The main reason for the electoral “drama” of the Republicans and the Free Democrats are the unequal ambitions of the leaderships of these

¹⁸Valerian Gorgiladze – Ivanishvili will try to form such political system, which will be able to function without him, but system will keep loyalty to him. <http://www.interpressnews.ge/ge/interviu/402309-valerian-gorgiladze-ivanishvili-sheecdeba-isethi-politikuri-sistemis-sheqmnas-romelic-mis-gareshe-avtonomiurad-ifunqcionirebs-kholo-sistema-mis-mimarth-loialobas-sheinarchunebs.html>, (20.10.2016).

¹⁹The 8 October's Lessons for Politicians and Us. Levan Tsutskiridze, 19 October, 2016, <https://levantsutskiridze.com/> (21.10.2016).

parties. Those ambitions have not allowed these subjects to form a unified platform, and this has been reflected in the results of elections.

In this regard, the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia does not change the existing reality. Local success of the given political union is tied to marginal trend, which is situational, and further confirms that the society is tired from other marginal parties, such as, for example the Labor Party.

In the party system there were number of satellite parties, which acted as opposition parties, although they were loyal to existing regime and blocked any appearance of opponents undesired by the government team²⁰. During a pre-election period, such satellite parties are oriented at weakening of opposition forces by taking away their votes²¹. Such a strategy promotes preliminary determination of elections and prolongs the period of being a governing team in power²². Such a situation in the whole post-Soviet area is defined as “virtual politics”²³.

Georgian party system is characterized by the domination of a governing party, which does not have the possibility to represent public interests. Political parties have also appeared to be incapable in view of articulating and aggregating public interests. The party system has failed to play the role of mediator between the society and the State. Despite the superficial impression of stability, the party system lacks representation and competitiveness. “Presentation of public interests-based program by parties is just a curtain, used for convincing population that allegedly the party cares about them”²⁴. Ideological incapability, for its part, reasons the tendency of party system to collapse and vanish, which will remain unchanged during the nearest future²⁵. Georgia is among those rare

²⁰ **Bader M.**, *Against all Odds; Aiding Political Parties in Georgia and Ukraine*, Amsterdam University Press, 2010, p. 90.

²¹ **Bader M.**, *Op.cit.*, p. 98.

²² **Bader M.**, *Op.cit.*, p. 85.

²³ **Wilson A.**, *Virtual Politics Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2005.

²⁴ **Wheatley J.**, *Georgia from National Awakening to Rose Revolution: Delayed Transition in Former Soviet Union*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2005, p. 158.

²⁵ Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2008 – Georgia Country Report*, Gutersloh, Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2007, p. 2 and 10.

exceptional countries, in which a politician may have support from $\frac{3}{4}$ of voters, but can be dismissed from post after a short period of time²⁶.

According to the results of the first round of 2016 parliamentary elections, the party “Georgian Dream-Democratic Georgia” won 44 by 48.62% support under the proportional system and 23 seats by majority system, there was 50% barrier for the candidates to be elected by majority election system in the 50 electoral districts due to which the second round was scheduled for October 30 in the mentioned districts. Reminding the vicious practice of experience gained by a constitutional majority and appealing the possible dangers failed to affect the election results and the candidates of the party “Georgian Dream-Democratic Georgia” won in 48 from 50 electoral districts and lost only in two districts: Khashuri (“Topadze-Industrialists”) and Mtatsminda (Independent Candidate) districts.²⁷ Accordingly, the Managing Power traditionally gained the constitutional majority (115 seats) at the expense of majority system. Based upon the results of final election, the tradition of Government Leadership by constitutional majority still continues. The election results led to some turbulence in the political spectrum (in both parliamentary and non-parliamentary opposition), that affected the political condition that was the subject of a separate study. The Managing Power elected by constitutional majority does not hurry to make amendments in the election system. Accordingly, it is still unclear what kind of electoral system will be composed of Parliament in 2020.

The main barrier for the formation of multiparty system lies in the interdependence of parties. Namely, frequent change of the electoral system hampers the formation of political organizations as of viable organizations and their evolution. During discussions of the gaps in the electoral system we permanently hear that the system is unable to ensure equal representation of the political will of voters in Parliament and even in the conditions of inadequate support of voters, thanks to the majority, electoral system makes the probability of having Constitutional majority

²⁶ **Jaward P.**, *Elections and Treatment of the Opposition in Post-Soviet Georgia, Presidents, Oligarchs and Bureaucrats: Frames of Rule in the Post-Soviet Space*, (ed). Stewart S., Routledge, 2012, p. 35.

²⁷ The final report of the Central Election Commission, <http://cesko.ge/res/docs/20161116144542%E1%83%9D%E1%83%A5%E1%83%9B%E1%83%98.pdf>, (15.11.2016).

possible. “Under such conditions political organizations are being “born” quickly and just quickly “die.” Right due to that, along with the other topics it is necessary to achieve consensus on creating one type of electoral system, which will work during a prolonged period of time, in order for political parties to have possibility for evolution and for voters to have the chance of making the desired and strategic choice”²⁸.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that regardless of a variety of parties registered in Georgia, since 1990 constant characteristic of political system of Georgia is ruling party in dominant position and dismembered opposition unable to unite.

In its turn, the existence of presidential ruling model and particular (exaggerated) personal confidence of electorate towards the candidate of presidency had direct influence upon the formation of “dominant” party system. However, since 2012-2013, after 2010 constitutional amendments fully entered in force, according to which the president was denied the right of party belonging, the vector of electorate’s confidence removed towards the prime-minister and unofficial leaders.

The strength of the ruling party was also stipulated and is currently conditioned by a series of satellite parties existent in party system. The opposition was able to gain authority only by means of rebellion or revolution, and as soon as the ruling party lost authority it ceased to exist. Since defeat of the Communists, it was for the first time in 2012 parliamentary elections that the change of power was committed by means of democratic elections in constitutional frames, after which former ruling party “United National Movement” moved to opposition,

²⁸ **Tsutskiridze L.**, The Formation Problems of the Georgian Political System, April 2, 2008, <https://levantsutskiridze.com/category/%E1%83%A1%E1%83%90%E1%83%A5%E1%83%90%E1%83%A0%E1%83%97%E1%83%95%E1%83%94%E1%83%9A%E1%83%9D%E1%83%A1%E1%83%9E%E1%83%9D%E1%83%9A%E1%83%98%E1%83%A2%E1%83%98%E1%83%99%E1%83%A3%E1%83%A0%E1%83%98-%E1%83%A1/>, (19.10.2016).

while the tradition of majority rule was continued by the coalition “Georgian Dream” (“Kartuli Otsneba”). In the context of keeping the mentioned tendency, parliamentary elections of 2016 were of importance. They gave hope for the multiparty parliament and coalition government formation, though instead of multiparty system we got two-party system outlines. However, after the elections, due to the processes taking place in political arena, the possibility of two-party system formation was under doubt and the vector was again towards multiparty system.

The main reason of weakness of opposition is exaggerated ambitions of leaderships of these parties and the inability to estimate resource abilities of each other. All these shorten the possibility of united platform formation, which in its turn influences election results.

During decades, stability of party depended on preservation of authority. Formation of parties more than social factors act in the service of political and economical elite. Ideological weakness stipulates the inclination of party system to dissolution and annihilation of parties.

On the formation of party system an important role is attached to electoral system, which cannot provide balanced representation of political will of electorate in high body of legislative power and in conditions of inappropriate support of electorate on behalf of majority system it makes possible to get constitutional majority.

That’s why it is important to create electoral system of one type, which will work in prolonged period of time, thus giving opportunity of evolution to the parties and possibility of strategic choice to electorate.