

## “DRAMATIC CHANGES IN THE POLITICAL ORDER ARE TYPICALLY NOT THE PROVINCE OF DEMOCRACIES”

### Interview with Dr. Julie A. George\*

*Conducted by Jesse Tatum, Associate Editor of CRIA*

**CRIA:** *Can you summarize the main findings from your book, **The Politics of Ethnic Separatism in Russia and Georgia (2010)**?*



**George:** My book examines separatist politics, looking for explanations for the outbreak of conflict in some post-Soviet autonomous republics and oblasts and not others. It also examines the waxing and waning conditions of conflicts over time, trying to nudge out similarities and differences in experiences to explain stability or absence of stability. So it looked at the politics of Chechnya, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia and their respective relationships with the Russia and Georgia from 1990-2008. (It actually looked at a broader swath of cases to include non-conflictual republics: Achara, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Ingushetia, and Dagestan.) I'm particularly interested in the effects of state weakness and regional wealth on bargaining over autonomy. I started with the argument that state weakness in both Russia and Georgia after the Soviet collapsed created conditions for regional actors – particularly in

the so-called ethnic republics – for bargaining for greater position in the new political environment. In Georgia, this enhanced bargaining position was true for Achara as well as South Ossetia and Abkhazia, even though Achara might not be construed as an "ethnic" region.

I found further that, in part because of the devastation of the Georgian state after the civil war, the bargaining infrastructure between region and center was quite tenuous and therefore was more likely to rest on interpersonal ties and mutually beneficial payoffs of critical actors. While Russia had an elaborated and relatively institutionalized administrative structure for managing ties between region and center, the Georgian structure was much more vulnerable and personalized. So Aslan Abashidze in Achara could use the implication of separatism to his advantage to secure a privileged position

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for Achara as a zone for Georgian Muslims. This sort of politics was quite common throughout the former Soviet Union and is also common in many ethnically diverse democratizing states. In Georgia, autonomy politics got blended with state building and cooptive structures as Shevardnadze sought to stabilize power. Georgia was too weak to create formal institutions to govern those issues, so Shevardnadze used informal means. In Achara, this meant tax breaks and loss of customs revenue for the central government. In South Ossetia, it meant the acceptance of a smuggling zone from Russia into Gori. So, in a way, cooptation – some would say in some cases, corruption, helped construct stability – albeit a short-term and fragile one. But what also happened – in both Russia and Georgia – is that the benefit of these co-optive structures created incentives NOT to reform the system. So the creation of formal institutions with enforcement mechanisms to adjust relationships between center and periphery either never developed or did so in a lopsided way. This weak process was due not only to state weakness but also to disinterest by politically important parties.

The book also looks at how the politics of state-building alters these informal and personalized structures. The presidencies of both Vladimir Putin and Mikheil Saakashvili brought about a renewed vigor in creating formal institutions and attention to resolving territorial conflicts. Their policies and leadership styles have clear differences, but they also have similarities. The outcomes of the policies of both have contributed to a resurgence of violence in Chechnya (Putin) and South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Saakashvili). I say “contributed to”, because those conflicts and their resurgence are due to external pressures as well as internal ones. But individualized bargains like the one that existed between Shevardnadze and Abashidze would have had to be revisited with any change of presidential power in Georgia. Once Shevardnadze resigned and it was clear that Saakashvili would succeed him, few were surprised by Abashidze's exodus to Moscow. An explicit promise of Saakashvili's message during and after the Rose Revolution was that anti-corruption and state-building would attract South Ossetia and Abkhazia back to Georgia; yet the anti-corruption campaign and state-building in Georgia helped destabilize conditions between Tbilisi and Tskhinval(i) and Sukhum(i).

***CRIA: In an article (2008) you discussed the negative aspects of President Saakashvili's focus on (i) anti-corruption campaigns and (ii) his choice to strengthen the central state at the expense of a more federal-style devolution of power to regional-local levels. Do you see any positive effects as well, or any steps the president should take in the near future?***

**George:** Lately, my focus has been the negative consequences of state policies that are popularly considered beneficial. The West and its allies often applaud and encourage policies of anti-corruption and democratization, but often ignore or disregard some negative outcomes of the politics that come in the short term. For example, the anti-corruption in Georgia had some immediate positive and negative outcomes. For the positive, the traffic police force actually began earning meaningful salaries. The job was no longer a way for someone to collect bribes, but rather to enforce the law. Customs checks were put into place and the government began to collect the millions that they had lost through smuggling and contraband. On the negative side, those living in the border areas who had operated in that illicit but accepted economy lost their livelihoods, which led to some unrest. Georgia's geography meant that this destabilization would be likely where there are clusters of ethnic minorities.

My message in writing is not that anti-corruption programs are not beneficial, but that policy makers should anticipate the destabilization and create innovative programs to address the population's needs, to open doors even as they close others. Moreover, I think that Western countries should be careful and pragmatic in their policy stances toward countries like Georgia because societies that follow the path

that the West encourages will doubtless meet obstacles that they did not expect and that will challenge the further implementation of the long-term programs.

The story of centralization and devolution, particularly for local governance, has been a nuanced one under Saakashvili. On the one hand, the local government legislation did streamline bureaucracies that were riddled with nepotism, redundancy, and corruption. But in the process of streamlining, the government ended the *temi* system, the lowest layer of governance that served single villages or village clusters. Jonathan Wheatley has argued that the *temi* were the most decentralized administrative form in Georgia and also the most meaningfully representative and accountable. So while the 2005 Local Governance law promised devolved power, it actually eradicated the most localized administration in favor of the more political laden *sakrebulo*s [local councils] and *gamgeobas* [local mayors]. On the other hand, the local governance reform also brought about more meaningful power to local governments: taxation rights and oversight over local budgets. This certainly was not the case previously.

**CRIA: On local governance, can you describe the roles of the *gamgebeli* (local mayor, or chief executive) and the *rtsmunebuli* (regional governor, or chairperson) in terms of increasing or limiting citizen participation?**

**George:** The influence and position of the *gamgebeli* and the *rtsmunebuli* vary with the region and the town in which they operate. Moreover, different areas of Georgia are governed quite differently than others. Both positions are appointed, although the *rtsmunebulis* owe their allegiance to the central government (being presidentially appointed), while the *gamgebelis* operate at the behest of the local *sakrebulo*s. So there is some question of accountability, although notably neither of these positions are directly accountable to a voting population (although there is talk of having locally elected *gamgebelis* in addition to Tbilisi). And currently, all of the local governments in Georgia are dominated by the ruling party, which will heighten the president's influence over the *gamgebelis*, even though he (arguably) does not directly select them.

What this means in terms of citizen participation: There's participation and then there's *participation*. What I mean by that: there will be pressure on local leaders to bring out voting numbers during election time, but that local leaders need not dominate all participation in the locality. Given the ruling party dominance at the local level, the electoral mobilization will be robust but also partisan toward the UNM. Some opposition parties have regional strongholds that can change this up a bit, for example the Labor party in Dusheti and the Republicans in Achara, but this strength has not translated into large numbers of actual seats in local *sakrebulo*s.

Other sorts of participation besides voting are more important for increasing accountability of political leaders to the population. Such activity is difficult to muster at the elite level, and it is most effective and unencumbered if it happens not at the behest of the local government actors, but because of civil society at the ground level.

Much hinges on the access of opposition parties. The UNM (United National Movement) has an interest in party dominance in order to secure its position as a winning political party. Other parties have had some traction in the regions, but have not been able to build enough of a constituency support. This might be due to the dominance of the UNM folks (maybe because of a legitimate constituency, although there have also been instances of coercion), but also might be due to a broader gap between

political party leadership and the local populations. Some political parties are very much oriented around personalities based in Tbilisi and do not build comprehensive regional bases. Others are unable to, lacking funds and access. But the lack of winning opposition parties means that the local and regional representatives are going to be more oriented toward the UNM – which will stifle party competition and perhaps citizen participation outside of the ballot box.

**CRIA:** *Can you summarize the current standing of the minorities in Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli vis-à-vis the central government, especially concerning political rights at local and national levels? What kind of roles do Yerevan and Baku play with regard to these regions in Georgia?*

**George:** There are multiple layers of relationship between the government and the Armenians in Javakheti and the Azerbaijanis in Kvemo Kartli. One is legislative. Another is executive. There are also inter-elite ties that are not transparent and that are difficult to measure accurately.

In terms of the legislature, the number of ethnic minorities in the Georgian parliament has declined from 1992 to 2010. However, where the representation used to be somewhat diversified (Russians, Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Ossetians), all are now either Azerbaijani or Armenian. This representation is not proportional to the 7 percent and 6 percent that those groups have, respectively, in the Georgian population. What that means is that while minority representation has declined in Georgia, that representation has flattened to two particular groups. This emphasis on Armenian and Azerbaijani interests could increase the standing of those groups, but perhaps to the detriment of others.

There have been complaints from some civil society groups, however, about the minority representatives in the legislatures. The criticism is that those minorities elected (all from the ruling party in the 2008 elections) rarely attend sessions and almost never speak. So while there might technically be minority representatives, the amount of minority *representation* that enters into the public policy dialogue at the legislative seems negligible. (The civil society actors who raised these concerns speculated that linguistic difficulties might contribute to the problems here.)

At the executive level, though, the Ministry of Civil Reintegration has added administrative offices in both Kvemo Kartli and Samkhe-Javakheti, staffed by ethnic Azerbaijanis and Armenians. Interestingly, these officials are impressively proficient linguistically, speaking their native languages as well as Georgian, Russian, and often English. This executive action increases the linkages between the central government and the minority areas; it also centralizes that relationship.

There is also a multilayered international interest in these two regions, which will influence Georgian policy. One is from the Armenia and Azerbaijan themselves, and also from Western states and international NGO's. In terms of Azerbaijan and Armenia, I think that both countries have adjusted their foreign policies to pursue interests vis-à-vis Saakashvili. The Armenian policy must be nimble – their trade interests need the Georgian border with Russia. They are allied with Russia, but also rely on Georgia. Interestingly, whatever support for Javakheti separatist groups that existed in the 1990s seems to have waned. Azerbaijan's policy was once quite overt, with suggestions for voting alternatives for Georgia's Azerbaijani community. I understand that policy has been less pronounced in recent elections. In terms of the West, it seems the international community has discovered these areas, particularly Javakheti. The U.S.-funded Millennium Challenge has devoted its only regional-specific program to Javakheti.

***CRIA: Do you think the May 2010 mayoral elections in Tbilisi will signal any significant change in the political order?***

**George:** Contested elections are important for transitioning states. I think the May 2010 elections will tell us a great deal about the future trajectory of Irakli Alasnia, whether he wins or not. I think they will tell us a great deal about Georgia and its electoral system, particularly if they are held fairly and openly.

As to bringing about "significant change in the political order," I have a difficult time with this question. Dramatic changes in political order are typically not the province of democracies. By design, democracies bring incremental change. Georgia is a country that has experienced periods of incredible upheaval, followed by stagnation/stability, followed by upheaval. Events like the Rose Revolution, the November 2007 crackdown, and the 2008 war draw attention and scrutiny. I have some optimism about Georgian democracy: the population seems to prefer elections as a mechanism of choosing leaders and holding them accountable. I think that the tradition of electoral politics is gelling in Georgia, and that is an incremental development that few remark upon. But the conduct of campaigning, the role of civil society, popular participation – these are things to watch as well. I think the campaign and election-day conduct will speak much more about the political order than the outcome will.