

DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION IN GEORGIA: POST-ROSE REVOLUTION INTERNAL PRESSURES ON LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

This article analyses Georgia's post-Rose Revolution progress in the process of democratic transition up until the August 2008 war. The focus is on the role that the incumbent administration plays in this process, and on the internal pressures that the leadership currently faces. In the light of some important studies in the democratisation field, this article considers the extent to which President Saakashvili and his government represent a clear change in the political order vis-à-vis his two predecessors. With regard to the crises in November 2007 and August 2008, this period in Georgia's development as a nation will have a profound impact on its population, its neighbouring countries and an area of the world in close proximity to the EU. While Saakashvili has made admirable progress overall, he still retains a surfeit of power detrimental to Georgian democracy.

Keywords: Georgia, Saakashvili, democratic transition, Rose Revolution, leadership

“When the flower of the rose is dried and withered it falls, and another blooms in the lovely garden. The sun is set for us; we are gazing on a dark, moonless night.”¹

Introduction

On 23 November 2003, protesters in Tbilisi's Freedom Square forced their way into the Parliament building to repudiate the illegitimate parliamentary elections held at the beginning of the month. The opposition leader Mikheil Saakashvili of the UNM (United National Movement) was among those who led the charge. They were armed, but not with conventional weapons. Instead, they carried roses and a desire for tangible political change, starting with the then leader of the country, political dinosaur and former Politburo member, President Eduard Shevardnadze. As the non-violent demonstrations reached their peak, Saakashvili forced a rose upon Shevardnadze – who was in the middle of giving a speech to

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¹ From the poem *The Knight in Panther's Skin* by 12th century Georgian poet Shota Rustaveli; p. 7, line 35. (Translated by Marjory Scott Wardrop, London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1912.)

the Parliament – and shouted, “Resign!”² Shevardnadze was forced to step down, and on 4 January 2004, Saakashvili was elected president by an astounding majority (96% of the vote).³

The subsequent four years have seen the dynamic president rapidly embark on a path of reform, including tackling endemic corruption, revamping the economy, and decisively pointing Georgia in the direction of the West. However, while initially appearing to be a resolutely democratic leader in a region where democracy is somewhat lacking, an “authoritarian streak” in Saakashvili’s personality was revealed by the events of the November 2007 protests in Tbilisi.⁴ This time, Georgians protesting against continuing widespread poverty and a lack of viable outlets for opposition parties⁵ were dealt with harshly by Saakashvili’s administration: a police crackdown, a declared two-week state of emergency, and the shutting down of independent media outlets such as *Imedi* TV and the *Kavkasia* channel.⁶

In order to prevent this ominous reversal of fortune, Saakashvili quickly announced that he would hold snap presidential elections, where he was elected with 53.4% of the vote, avoiding a second round. However, he was not able to avoid receiving the same criticism he once made against his predecessors. During the May 2008 parliamentary elections, where Saakashvili’s UNM won 59% of the vote and ensured a constitutional majority, more protests were held in the capital by the opposition. Despite a mainly positive response from international observers, the opposition claimed widespread fraud and intimidation, and was concerned about the margin of victory, which gives Saakashvili control over legislation.⁷ It seems that the following months will be crucial in determining the course Georgia will take in the next few years. The question of whether the incumbent president will be remembered and revered for his initial democratic zeal or whether he will follow the path of his predecessors – which spirals downward into socio-political stagnation, cronyism, and authoritarianism – remains to be answered.

Nevertheless, it is worth considering that only 17 years ago, Georgia was shattered by civil war, ethnic cleansing, and a devastated economy. The capital was in ruins as “rabble-rousing”⁸ and hyper-nationalistic president Zviad Gamsakhurdia hid in the parliament building, seeking shelter from the siege laid to Tbilisi to oust him from power. When Shevardnadze was subsequently invited to take over the presidency he served to stabilise the country to a great extent. However, as Brogan notes, he was a leader who was “born and

² *BBC News*, “How the Rose revolution happened,” May 10, 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4532539.stm> (accessed January 3, 2006).

³ *BBC News*, “Georgia swears in new president,” January 25, 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3426977.stm> (accessed January 3, 2006).

⁴ Robert Parsons, “Georgia: progress interrupted,” *Open Democracy*, November 16, 2007, http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/conflicts/caucasus/progress_needed (accessed April 21, 2008).

⁵ *International Crisis Group*, “Georgia: Sliding Towards Authoritarianism?” Europe Briefing N° 189, December 19, 2007, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=5233&l=1> (accessed April 21, 2008).

⁶ Lasha Tchantouridzé, “On the results of the special presidential elections in Georgia,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus Journal of Social and Political Studies*, vol. 1:49 (2008), http://www.ca-c.org/online/2008/journal_eng/cac-01/01.shtml (accessed July 30, 2008).

⁷ Mikhail Vignansky, “Georgian President Hails Poll Victory,” *IWPR*, http://www.iwpr.net/?p=crs&s=f&o=344751&apc_state=henh (accessed May 22, 2008).

⁸ George Hewitt, “Sakartvelo, roots of turmoil,” *Open Democracy*, November 27, 2003, http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-caucasus/article_1611.jsp (accessed May 19, 2008).

raised under Stalinism and reached top pile under Brezhnev”.⁹ Despite being a respected authority figure and restoring a degree of security and order, Shevardnadze could hardly have been expected – considering his political background and experience – to conjure up democratic and economic reform from the simmering cauldron that was Georgia in the 1990s, especially as he was attempting to negotiate between the communist and the neo-liberal elements within the government.¹⁰ It is significant that Saakashvili (who, in his early 40’s, is relatively young for a high-ranking politician) has surrounded himself with like-minded and youthful technocrats and politicians who, arguably, have a sense of the current modalities of democratisation. They have recently seen it come to pass in other areas of Europe formerly in the sphere of Soviet influence, e.g. the Baltic States and parts of east-central Europe, which can be considered similar to Georgia in terms of society and identity. This ideological divergence from Georgia’s previous post-Soviet leaders is necessary for the stability and progress of the country. According to Ágh, this is the idea of systemic change within the political elite, which must combine the institutional, cultural and personal alteration of political actors.¹¹

At present, the role of leadership in Georgia is as complex and important as it has ever been, therefore, the present work will analyse to what extent post-Soviet leadership currently affects Georgia’s “trajectory of transition”.¹² In particular, the focus will be on the years after the incumbent president Saakashvili took over from Shevardnadze during the Rose Revolution of 2003. The ensuing build-up to the November 2007 crackdown, when Saakashvili declared a state of emergency to quell more mass protests, will subsequently be analysed, since these events led to the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2008. Within this context, the post-revolution internal pressure currently exerted on Saakashvili’s administration by various actors is prominent, particularly in consideration of the August 2008 crisis. These demands clearly challenge the administration’s construction of legitimacy and attainment of stability, the likes of which must be accepted at both domestic and international levels. Finally, it is important to determine the extent to which the new president represents a clear change from the post-Soviet Georgian political elite. The significance of leadership in Georgia’s transition and its implications for democratisation will be assessed in light of political theory and, in particular, of the insights offered by studies in the field of transition studies over the past decade.

Theoretical Framework: Leadership & Democratisation

It is often the case that leadership plays a vital role in the transitional process of a country, whether in terms of Weberian social order and responsibility, or through the myriad top-down transitional theories represented in the field of democratisation scholarship. In the Georgian experience, the leadership of the state has arrived at a crossroads in its contemporary development. Since Georgia gained its independence from the Soviet Union in

⁹ Patrick Brogan, *World Conflicts: Why and Where They are Happening* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992), 391-396.

¹⁰ Christoph H. Stefes, “Governance, the State, and Systemic Corruption: Armenia and Georgia in Comparison,” *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, vol. 2:2 (Spring 2008), http://www.cria-online.org/3_2.html (accessed February 2, 2009).

¹¹ Attila Ágh, “From nomenclatura to clientura,” in *Stabilising Fragile Democracies. Comparing New Party Systems in Southern and Eastern Europe*, eds. G. Pridham & P. Lewis (London: Routledge, 1996), 44.

¹² David Lane, “Trajectories of Transition,” in *The Legacy of State Socialism & the Future of Transformation*, eds. Lane et al. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 3-30.

1991, its leadership has at different times appeared as: fervently nationalistic;¹³ a quasi-continuation of the former communist regime; progressively neo-liberal; and often as a hybrid of the three. In many instances, Georgian leaders sought to sever the link to communist rule – an ideological separation from Soviet-style leadership. Only by such a break with history can change and progress be manifest, as the nation defines itself and sets upon a course towards the future.

In Georgia, as in other post-Soviet republics, divergence from former communist party rule has in part developed with the leadership's attitude towards democracy. Huntington distinguishes three distinct groups of post-communist leaders: first, the "standpatters", or those leaders who are primarily concerned with keeping the old communist order and system alive; second, the "liberal reformers", such as Shevardnadze, who are not averse to restructuring the political system, but only with a degree of caution; and third, the "democratic reformers", or those leaders that demand total divergence from the communist past, such as Saakashvili.¹⁴ This classification of groups of leaders must be supported by the three separate strategies that these said leaders pursue, as defined by Ishiyama and Bozóki, which are: the "leftist-retreat", the "nationalist-patriotic", and the "pragmatic reformist".¹⁵ The first strategy shuns the West and the market economy in order to preserve Marxist-Leninist ideology, which would include the standpatters and many liberal reformers. The second, nationalist-patriotic, is perhaps the most dangerous strategy, which ultimately replaces communism with nationalism. The chauvinist Gamsakhurdia administration was a clear example of this strategy. Finally, the third, pragmatic reformist, seeks democratic transformation through modernisation and complete divergence with the old guard. Within this framework, only a democratic reformer with a pragmatic reformist strategy can completely break with communism, in terms of ideology, institutions, and reform. Other leaders and strategies often lead to the given problems of stagnation and authoritarianism.

In terms of post-Soviet leadership, Suny defines a number of characteristics and patterns that explain its intricate complexity. In the context of working to achieve legitimate authority and consensus, political elites are at the forefront of any top-down transitional regime change in the political culture of a country.¹⁶ In short, Suny's analysis inevitably leaves room for Weberian thought in terms of legitimacy and how it may lead to political stability. Moreover, Lane indicates that the transition process, in the case of most post-Soviet republics, develops along the lines of a "path-dependent" approach. In this specific approach, the political culture of the former communist party rule is institutionally "embedded" in the political leadership, civil society, and population of the respective republics.¹⁷ This approach is the opposite of the idea of starting from a "clean slate" at the beginning of a regime change. Norms, ideas, concepts, and styles of leadership, and the manner in which the public interact with and view their leaders, cannot be removed, ignored, or forgotten instantly. Furthermore, Lane stresses that it is in these instances that political actors must "facilitate" or lead the transition process

¹³ Ronald G. Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1994), 318.

¹⁴ John T. Ishiyama, "Introduction and Theoretical Framework," in *Communist Successor Parties in Post-Communist Politics*, ed. Ishiyama (New York: Nova Science, 1999), 5-6.

¹⁵ John T. Ishiyama & András Bozóki, "Adaptation and Change: Characterizing the Survival Strategies of the Communist Successor Parties," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, vol. 17:3 (September 2001): 32-51.

¹⁶ Ronald G. Suny, "Elite transformation in Late Soviet and Post-Soviet Transcaucasia, or What Happens when the Ruling Class can't Rule," in *Patterns in Post-Soviet Leadership*, eds. Colton & Tucker (Boulder, CO & Oxford: Westview, 1995), 141-142.

¹⁷ Lane, "Trajectories," 6 & 9.

if it is to be successful. Thus, if a regime shift towards democracy is to come from above (elite-driven), then the leadership of a country must fully commit to establishing a bond of legitimacy with civil society, the population in general, and within its own ranks. To do so requires the political actors to achieve a degree of consensus, with respect to reform, unity, and party solidarity.¹⁸

Regarding the current situation in Georgia, President Saakashvili came to power for a number of reasons, one of which is his charismatic personality. This is often a prerequisite for any leader who hopes to ultimately establish legitimate authority. In terms of the combination of legitimacy and authority in leadership, Weber wrote “[the] leadership of rational thinking politicians should prevail over the politics of the streets and the instincts of the moment”.¹⁹ Weber also alludes to a sort of “taking of power” by a charismatic leader, who draws a following rather than being produced by it.²⁰ If such a leader can then sustain the sway they hold over their following, and if that following is large enough to represent the majority of the population, and if, in the vein of Western democratic ideals, that leader is elected in a free and fair manner, then perhaps a great degree of legitimacy is achieved. Nevertheless, with this legitimacy comes responsibility (as Weber would be quick to point out), and it must be remembered that Saakashvili’s predecessors were, to a certain extent, charismatic and calculating as well. In the end, however, they flouted this responsibility and abused their surfeit of power, or what Fish calls “superexecutivism”.²¹ He explains that this is a trend whereby the executive branch of government (the president in Georgia’s case) accumulates too much political power and begins to disregard their responsibility to respect the norms of democracy. With the harsh November crackdown, claims of vote-rigging and other abuses of power, Saakashvili is now no longer immune to the pitfalls of superexecutivism that befell his predecessors, nor the “heat of the moment” politics that the frustrated population brings to the streets. Political legitimacy and the trust of the population rely upon Saakashvili’s ability to prove he is committed to total systemic democratic change in the fundamental institutions of governance.

Furthermore, concerning regime change, Pridham and Lewis highlight two main theoretical approaches in this area: firstly, the functionalist approach which stresses, among various determinants, economic development, cultural patterns, and modernisation; and secondly, the genetic approach, which chiefly emphasises political determinants – i.e. the choices made and the strategies pursued by political actors in power.²² Both approaches carry some considerable weight in the overall democratisation process, and the amalgamation of all determinants – both economic and political, as well as those of the government and the population – is what ultimately drives, or derails, progress towards democratic reform. As far as the interaction between leaders and their constituencies is concerned, Schumpeter wrote that the population in any given democracy is merely free to choose who leads them, thereby giving the elected leaders total control for initiating change – i.e. the “genetic” model of change.²³ Nevertheless, while elites are indeed duly chosen and given a great amount of

¹⁸ Lane, “Trajectories,” 4; Suny, “Elite Transformation,” 160.

¹⁹ David Beetham, *Max Weber and the Theory of Modern Politics* (Cambridge: Polity, 1985), 244.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 256-258.

²¹ M. Steven Fish, “When More is Less: Superexecutive Power and Political Underdevelopment in Russia,” in *Russia in the New Century: Stability or Disorder?* eds. Bonnell & Breslauer (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2001), 15.

²² Geoffrey Pridham & Paul Lewis, “Stabilising fragile democracies and party system development,” in *Stabilising Fragile Democracies*, op. cit., 4.

²³ Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London: Routledge, 1994), 284-285.

power, the “politics of the streets” are omnipresent in any free or partly free country, and failure to tactfully and fairly negotiate them determines the course a political career takes. This ongoing dynamic relationship between the strategies of the “top” and the demands of the “bottom”, or those in power and their relevant populations, respectively, is what ultimately decides the route democracy will run.

In comparing separate groups of democratisation theories, Pridham and Ágh explicate that those in what is known as the “genetic” theory group imply an elite-driven, “top-down” process. In addition, however, they define an “interactive” theory group, which is based on Kirchheimer’s hypothesis that socio-economic circumstances present at the beginning of a regime’s emergence heavily influence its decision-making and the trajectory upon which it chooses to embark.²⁴ This is important since change is not always initiated and directed from above in a top-down manner. There is also an element of “bottom-up” pressure, whereby individuals outside of the ruling class or large segments of the population place demands on the country’s leadership. Hence, within the given theoretical framework, Pridham and Ágh also add the aspect of the dynamic relationship between the state and society, with all of its inherent pressures, and explain that multiple transformations must take place within the context of the overarching democratisation process.²⁵

Consequently, this becomes a triple-layered process, which can be briefly explained as follows: first, the phase of “transition”, whereby a new regime replaces the old and seeks to build authority and legitimacy; second, the “consolidation” phase where the values and procedures of democracy become socio-politically embedded and replace the norms of the former regime; and third, “transformation”, which is the point when the regime is considered to be an established, fully-functioning democracy.²⁶ In short, even though the setting for each newly independent country was in some instances similar throughout the former USSR, it nevertheless differed enough to make the process a highly intricate one. The subsequent leadership in each republic – Georgia included – faced a complex situation requiring a unique response. In constructing a legitimate regime, breaking with embedded cultural norms, and establishing a bond with the public, political transition requires an interactive model of change to account for the myriad difficulties inherent in such a process.

The Transitional Process: Georgia’s Current Status

It would appear that Georgia is in the consolidation phase of the democratisation process for a number of reasons. Even at this stage, a degree of vulnerability exists in terms of progression to the next phase versus regression to the former one. This is because the consolidation stage is a tenuous mixture of enacting progressive measures and preserving what has recently been attained. Moreover, it is the lengthiest and most difficult stage in the process since, as Berglund notes, the consolidated internalisation of democratic norms and procedures must take effect in Linz and Stepan’s five different arenas: civil society, political society, economic society, rule of law, and state bureaucracy. The cyclical and systemic relationship between these arenas must be interactive and reinforcing, thus enabling

²⁴ Pridham, “Comparative Reflections on Democratisation in East-Central Europe,” in *Prospects for Democratic Consolidation in East-Central Europe*, eds. Pridham & Ágh (Manchester Univ. Press, 2001), 7-8.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁶ Pridham & Lewis, “Stabilising fragile democracies,” 2-4.

progression within the consolidation stage.²⁷ In this complex web of interactivity, Wheatley explains that transition in Georgia has stalled because the leadership has morphed into a “hybrid regime”, and divergence with the recent past and democratic reform remains elusive.²⁸ Since 2004, Saakashvili has reverted to some of the old tricks of his predecessors, which, as Wheatley states, is due to four main reasons: first, a surfeit of power concentrated in the executive branch (Saakashvili’s exclusive network); second, power achieved either through close ties with the president or through charisma, rather than a legitimate agenda; third, a weak and fragmented party system that creates fierce competition between candidates who may often resort to rigging the vote; and finally, in conjunction with the third reason, a lack of respect for constitutional and electoral law.²⁹ The amalgamation of these trends perpetuates the given idea of superexecutivism, as well as “political underdevelopment”.³⁰ Common to most post-Soviet regimes, this is arguably a problem for the highly charismatic and outspoken Saakashvili, who has surrounded himself with fellow reform-minded politicians and revelled in his initial post-revolutionary mandate; while the opposition basically remains weakened by fragmentation and infighting, and while Western institutions remain somewhat ambiguous about reform and election results. In terms of responsibility towards Georgia’s population and building consensus between political actors, the abuse of power proves to be a tiresome trend and is perhaps the most divisive issue. Since Saakashvili’s first presidential and parliamentary elections in 2004, Georgia is still, as Cheterian writes, a “single party republic”.³¹ Consequently, the internal politics of Georgia will be examined hereafter within this context.

Internal Influence on Leadership

According to Rondeli, the Soviet legacy “plays a double role” in the process of transition, which also reflects Lane’s path-dependent approach. First of all, it is a question of the length of time since the collapse of the USSR; in short, seventeen years can be perceived as being both a long and a short amount of time. Georgia was a part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, and the collapse, Rondeli points out, severed many established and integral economic and political ties.³² As a result, seventeen years is arguably a relatively short amount of time when compared with two centuries of rule by Saint Petersburg and Moscow. On the other hand, in terms of running a state, i.e. offering citizens a modicum of security and prosperity, the post-Soviet Georgian leadership has proven itself inept, “embedded” with detrimental traits from the former regime. This can also be attributed to the idea that, as explained by Goldman, central rule from Moscow deteriorated, leaving governments in the respective republics with an increased amount of responsibility, but with none of the requisite

²⁷ Sten Berglund et al., “Foundations of Change,” in *The Handbook of Political Change in Eastern Europe*, eds. Berglund et al. (Cheltenham: Elgar, 1998), 9.

²⁸ Jonathan Wheatley, “Georgia’s democratic stalemate,” *Open Democracy*, April 14, 2008, http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/democracy_power/caucasus_fractures/georgia_democratic_stalemate (accessed May 7, 2008).

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Fish, “When More is Less,” 15.

³¹ Vicken Cheterian, «Révolutions en trompe-l’oeil à l’Est» [Revolutionary Aftershocks in the East], *Le Monde diplomatique*, October 2005, <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2005/10/CHETERIAN/12816> (accessed June 6, 2008).

³² Alexander Rondeli, “Georgia’s search for itself,” *Open Democracy*, July 8, 2008, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/georgia-s-search-for-coexistence> (accessed July 14, 2008).

resources.³³ Furthermore, the idea of national identity, or what it meant to be a citizen of an independent Georgia, was challenged by the ensuing civil war, ethnic conflict and social disorder. Thus, more than a decade of post-collapse internal strife resulting from inept, ineffective leadership can seem like a long period of time – especially if there were no visible end in sight. In these years of independence, when urgent decisions had to be made regarding the needs of the country, the failure was largely because, as Henderson states, neither the leadership nor the population had any profound experience running or living in a democracy.³⁴

More significant, perhaps, is what Manoukian calls the “second wave of revolutionary change” over the past two decades.³⁵ The first wave of great change occurred during the late 1980s and until the USSR’s collapse in 1991. This refers to the Gorbachev years of glasnost, perestroika, national reawakening and reconstruction throughout the Union when the rule of Moscow was seriously challenged.³⁶ The new forms of governance that were brought to the fore challenged the old order in all of the given strategic ways, many of which were little better – if not worse – than that of the USSR. In Georgia’s case, the nationalist-patriotic strategy sought by Gamsakhurdia utterly failed and led to civil war. Following his regime, Shevardnadze’s leftist-retreat reform strategy also faltered, leading to superexecutivism and endemic corruption. As a result, the second wave refers to the current trend of revolutionary change (in colour), as seen in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, where these movements seek, as Liebich puts it, “to readjust the political order”³⁷ and strategies that have failed since the first wave.

After the November 2007 Crisis

Completely readjusting the political order has proven to be too difficult for Saakashvili’s administration. In the maelstrom of the November 2007 crisis there was another disturbingly authoritarian-like manoeuvre made by the incumbent. In fact, the president quickly called for snap presidential elections to be held in the beginning of January 2008. However, according to Tchantouridzé, this was not what the opposition was demanding. It wanted the *parliamentary* elections to be held in accordance with the constitution in order to be able to legally contest Saakashvili within the proper framework of governance;³⁸ in essence, to become a more powerful legislative “check” on the executive branch. Saakashvili had wanted to delay these elections until autumn. Tchantouridzé goes on to suggest that support for Saakashvili’s party (UNM) was waning and that they would not have won a majority in

³³ Philip Goldman et al., “Introduction: Soviet Federalism- its origins, evolution, and demise,” in *From Union to Commonwealth: Nationalism and Separatism in the Soviet Republics*, eds. Lapidus et al. (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 5.

³⁴ Karen Henderson, “The path to democratic consolidation in the Czech Republic and Slovakia: divergence or convergence?” in *Prospects for Democratic Consolidation*, op. cit., 210.

³⁵ Quoted by Manoukian in Cheterian, « Révolutions, » 2005. The use of the word ‘wave’ here should not be confused with that of Huntington’s, which refers to transnational democratisation by proximity (Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave* (Oklahoma Univ. Press, 1991), 13-16).

³⁶ For an erudite, comprehensive account of these issues and years, see Mark Saroyan, *Minorities, Mullahs, and Modernity: reshaping community in the former Soviet Union*, ed. E. Walker (Berkeley: The Regents of the Univ. of California, 1997).

³⁷ Quoted in Cheterian, « Révolutions, » 2005.

³⁸ Tchantouridzé, “On the results,” 2008.

the parliament.³⁹ Although Saakashvili eventually agreed to call the parliamentary elections according to the opposition's demands, he cleverly manipulated the process in his favour by holding the presidential election first. By winning the presidential race, he regained a renewed amount of power going into the parliamentary plebiscite, and decreased the chance of having to contend with a diverse – but necessarily competitive for democracy's sake – parliament. In addition, snap presidential elections meant that the opposition, already suffering from a lack of media outlets, had merely one month to organise a campaign, putting them at a distinct disadvantage.⁴⁰ This situation is in line with Wheatley's above description of Saakashvili's authoritarian streak, and leaves some degree of doubt about the president's commitment to Georgian democracy.

The development of political parties and their relationships with each other are necessarily conducive to top-down transitional change. The internal processes of constructing legitimacy, establishing authority and consensus-building among elites has since come to a standstill, as seen in the parliamentary elections of May 2008. This situation attracted a large amount of internal pressure to Saakashvili, particularly in terms of engaging in constructive dialogue with the opposition. The Central Election Commission confirmed the election results on 21 May 2008: Saakashvili's UNM won 59.2% of the vote (119 seats); while the closest competitor, the United Opposition Council (the nine-party coalition led by Levan Gachechiladze), won a meagre 17.7% (17 seats).⁴¹ This gives Saakashvili a constitutional majority, thus rendering any alleviation of the superexecutive syndrome impossible, since the legislative branch will not be able to effectively check the power of the executive without fear of being dissolved. Additionally, there is little chance of an opportunity for competitive and open debate within such a parliament. Initially, the opposition claimed widespread fraud and intimidation as they subsequently took to the streets of the capital, staging a 10,000-strong rally. The protests petered out in the following weeks, in part because the international community noted that the elections were mostly free and fair.⁴² There are, however, more important reasons that explain the lack of prolonged protest.

First, according to Parsons, the opposition parties have failed to develop clear agendas and strategies to counter those of Saakashvili's administration. Instead, they have relied on rhetorical confrontation and character assassination. This lack of an issue-based party system is one indicator of the "immaturity" of democratic political society in Georgia, one of the five elements in the above list from Linz and Stepan.⁴³ This often leaves the Georgian population inclined to either vote for candidates on the basis of personality and charisma, rather than real political issues, or simply against the current government to show dissatisfaction, rather than for an actual candidate.⁴⁴ In fact, Parsons goes on to lament that one of the main candidates

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Rondeli, "Georgia: politics after revolution," *Open Democracy*, November 14, 2007, http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/conflicts/caucasus/georgia_after_revolution (accessed July 14, 2008).

⁴¹ Angus Reid Global Monitor: Election Tracker, Georgia, July 15, 2008, http://www.angus-reid.com/tracker/view/30264/georgia_2008_legislative (accessed same date).

⁴² Press Release from the ODIHR (Tbilisi), "Despite efforts to conduct Georgia's elections," *OSCE*, May 22, 2008 http://www.osce.org/odihr-elections/item_1_31267.html; and EC Delegation, "EU Presidency Statement," *europa.eu*, May 21, 2008, <http://www.delegeo.ec.europa.eu/en/press/22may2008.html>.

⁴³ Parsons, "Georgia's dangerous gulf," *Open Democracy*, May 30, 2008, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/conflicts/georgia-s-dangerous-gulf> (accessed July 14, 2008).

⁴⁴ Konstantine Kandelaki et al., "Local Government in Georgia: Developing New Rules in the Old Environment," *LGI Report (Open Society Institute)*, 275, <http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/georgia/links/government.shtml> (accessed August 1, 2008).

in the opposition who has refrained from the “politics of confrontation” and developed a clearly outlined political agenda is Davit Usupashvili (Republican Party leader, co-chairman of the Alliance for Georgia coalition party), who won only 3.8% of the vote (2 seats). He calls this a sincere disappointment for the mature development of the Georgian party-system infrastructure.⁴⁵ Having separated from Gachechiladze’s United Opposition Council in late February, Usupashvili’s Republican Party is popular with intellectuals and middle-class voters, and its constituency therefore remains small in comparison to that of Gachechiladze’s.⁴⁶ In contrast, Gachechiladze, who came second in the January presidential elections (2008) with nearly 26% of the vote, appeared to focus the bulk of his energy on the organisation of protests against Saakashvili’s administration. Moreover, his political strategy was less clear than Usupashvili’s, and he had the unenviable task of attempting to preserve a coalition of nine parties under constant threat of further fragmentation. As a result of these factors and the August war, Gachechiladze is no longer the strongest, most popular opposition leader. In fact, the face of the opposition is rapidly changing in response to the war’s aftermath, and a few major contenders have reappeared on the political scene, namely Nino Burjanadze (former president of parliament) and Irakli Alasania (former ambassador to the UN).

The underdevelopment of political society and party politics directly affects the attainment of legitimacy and stability in the political ranks. The Georgian leadership has a tenuous hold on legitimate power due to the opposition’s efforts to expose fraudulent activity. This pressure from the opposition, combined with various powerful actors in civil society, leads to what de Waal calls the “Caucasus election script”.⁴⁷ He describes this phenomenon as a cyclical chain of events, whereby dubious election results are often produced by the incumbent administration, which in turn spur popular protest. These protests are usually mobilised by the strongest candidate from the main opposition party, who then calls for the incumbent’s removal from office. The Rose Revolution itself was no more than such an event – albeit a most successful one – that had been well organised and supported by powerful external actors.⁴⁸ What is more, it was technically an unconstitutional change of power. This outside support is often the catalyst for encouraging bottom-up pressure that leads to transitional change. For example, Saakashvili, who was the Minister of Justice under Shevardnadze, was supported by the *kmara* (Enough) movement, which was funded by international NGOs such as George Soros’s Open Society Georgia Foundation and the National Democratic Institute (NDI).⁴⁹ At present, although not all the rival candidates possess the same level of support, charisma, and power that Saakashvili had in 2003 against Shevardnadze’s government, it is enough, nevertheless, to prolong the “stalemate” status to which Wheatley refers, and to create a wider rift between Saakashvili’s government and the citizens. The process of building legitimate authority within the context of democratisation is rendered more difficult when a rift between political actors is present, and when civil society is able to continuously

⁴⁵ Parsons, “Georgia’s dangerous gulf,” 2008.

⁴⁶ *Civil Georgia*, “Parties and Election Blocs,” May 14, 2008, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=17830> (accessed June 5, 2008).

⁴⁷ Thomas de Waal, “The Caucasus Election Script,” *IWPR*, April 2, 2008, http://www.iwpr.net/?p=crs&s=f&o=343751&apc_state=henprcrs (accessed April 15, 2008).

⁴⁸ There is terminology dispute in this case, that is, whether the 2003 event was actually a coup or a revolution. See Giorgi Kandelaki, “Georgia’s Rose Revolution: A Participant’s Perspective,” United States Institute of Peace, Special Report No. 167 (July 2006), <http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr167.html> (accessed May 3, 2009).

⁴⁹ Cheterian, « Révolutions, » 2005.

threaten its construction. It becomes more pronounced, however, between the general population and the government when the incumbent administration cannot be trusted in the electoral process, and the opposition cannot be trusted to offer feasible change.

In fact, the political impasse between the Georgian leaders is all the more unfortunate in view of the fact that the actual gap is not due to ideological difference, i.e. the majority of the Georgian political elite “rejects” communism and a return to it is unlikely.⁵⁰ There is general political consensus that Saakashvili’s western orientation, in particular, away from the Russian sphere of influence, is a satisfactory course for the nation to take. Instead, the opposition disputes Saakashvili’s modus operandi and his excessive power over the executive and legislative branches of government, as well as his unwillingness to engage in constructive dialogue. According to Lewis, these factors and a lack of party competition result in the continuation of the “hegemonic” party system of the Soviet past.⁵¹ Nonetheless, it is of great importance that there is such a political consensus in which the threat of a communist party coming back to power is virtually non-existent. This is the type of divergence that democratic reformers pursuing a pragmatic-reformist strategy need in order to continue the transitional process. However, it is constantly under threat from participants in the process, both from the ranks of the elites (top-down) and from the mobilisation of the populace (bottom-up).

August 2008–April 2009

The August 2008 Russia-Georgia crisis offers further proof of the drift away from the communist past: the opposition largely stood behind Saakashvili, insofar as calling for Georgian solidarity in the face of the Russian incursion. Amid statements from Gachechiladze, Usupashvili and David Gamkrelidze, leader of the New Rights party and co-chairman of the Alliance for Georgia party, calling for a halt to inter-party confrontation, even Okruashvili, still in exile in Paris, announced his willingness to overcome the problems/allegations of the corruption scandal in order to return and offer the government his support.⁵² On the other hand, however, as the crisis has come to a nervous conclusion, the opposition has begun again to question Saakashvili’s actions and his surfeit of power. As *The Economist* notes, the fact that Saakashvili could have made such a radical decision in launching the offensive on Tskhinvali, without voices in the opposition calling for restraint, attests to the superexecutive syndrome and the shortcomings of Georgian democratic institutions.⁵³ Among powerful potential rivals, former Rose revolutionary and UNM parliamentary speaker Nino Burjanadze, who stepped down from her role in April 2008 due to “tactical differences” with the party, formed the Foundation for Democratic Development (FDD, July 2008). In October 2008 her Democratic Movement–United Georgia party took

⁵⁰ Lane, “Trajectories,” 4.

⁵¹ Paul Lewis, “Party Systems & the State Socialist Legacy,” in *The Legacy of State Socialism*, op. cit., 39-40.

⁵² Brian Whitmore, “The War at Home -- Unity, Nationalism, And Bravado In Georgia,” *RFE/RL*, August 11, 2008,

http://www.rferl.org/content/Georgian_War_At_Home_Unity_Nationalism_And_Bravado/1190003.html

(accessed same date).

⁵³ Tbilisi correspondent, “The war in Georgia: A Caucasian journey,” *Economist*, August 21, 2008,

http://www.economist.com/world/europe/displaystory.cfm?story_id=11986018 (accessed August 23, 2008).

shape, and she will use it as a platform to run for office.⁵⁴ Burjanadze is noteworthy for the fact that Moscow may be more inclined to see her in power,⁵⁵ and she also maintains a strong working relationship with the US and the West. With a more moderate stance than Saakashvili, Burjanadze (or other potential candidates) may be able to begin to repair the fractured Moscow-Tbilisi relations in August's wake, while at the same time involving the West in such a political framework. If the Georgian leadership can continue to build on the progressive ties with the West and its institutions that Saakashvili has pursued, while simultaneously beginning to mend fences with Russia, it would transform Georgia into an important regional actor – and solving external instability can often lead to internal stability.

As the political ceasefire after the August war has ended, a “united” opposition movement has taken to the streets in protest (April 2009) with continued scrutiny of Saakashvili's legitimacy and demands for his resignation. Although opposition leaders managed to rally tens of thousands of demonstrators, signs of divisions in solidarity have already begun. (For instance, Alasania made a departure from the opposition's steadfast demand for Saakashvili's resignation when he stated that discussions and compromise may still be possible.) Nevertheless, even if the protests slowly peter out after Orthodox Easter with the result that Saakashvili remains in relatively strong standing, if there is no violence and a slim chance of two-way dialogue, the impact of the demonstrations will speak to a degree of progress with respect to democratic values.

Neo-functionalist Progress at the Expense of Social Reform

Despite the political struggle and the two crises, in concrete terms of progress since 2004 Saakashvili's administration has taken many positive steps forward. First of all, in progressive economic terms, Wheatley's definition of a hybrid regime differs somewhat from the functionalist approach defined by Thompson, who explains that the focus of leadership is often predisposed towards economic efficiency replacing ideology.⁵⁶ In this instance, the leadership calculates that the resultant economic modernisation will give way to national prosperity and, ultimately, legitimacy. With respect to such an agenda, Saakashvili's administration has been much more successful than his predecessors in pushing through with radical economic reform, as well as actively pursuing foreign investment and inclusion in Western international institutions. Moreover, this modernisation campaign has been implemented in an impressively short amount of time, and it is in this sphere that Saakashvili successfully represents a break with the past in terms of leadership.

The post-Rose Revolution years of national-level economic indicators are impressive: according to the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), in 2007 real GDP growth was 12.4% – up from approximately 9.3% in both 2005 and 2006, and markedly better than 5.9% in 2004. Furthermore, the new president delivered on improving tax and

⁵⁴ Liz Fuller, “South Ossetia Debacle Could Trigger Political Backlash In Georgia,” *RFE/RL*, August 21, 2008, http://www.rferl.org/Content/South_Ossetia_Debacle_Could_Trigger_Political_Backlash_In_Georgia/1192751.html (accessed August 21, 2008).

⁵⁵ Although speculative, see Dmitry Rogozin's comments, which may be somewhat indicative of Moscow's preferences, in: *RIA Novosti*, “Russia NATO envoy says US planning to replace Georgian leader,” November 28, 2008, <http://www.unian.net/eng/news/news-287175.html> (accessed April 15, 2009).

⁵⁶ Mark Thompson, “Totalitarian & Post-Totalitarian Regimes,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, vol. 3:1 (Summer 2002): 91-95.

customs administration, which led to an increase in revenues from 16.2% of GDP in 2003 to 23.4% in 2005.⁵⁷ Another example of economic progress is the World Bank's compilation of statistics: in 2006 it listed Georgia as the leading global reformer, and it has remained one of the list's top ten reformers for the two years since. This is particularly because Saakashvili has improved procedures for starting up businesses, obtaining the requisite licences, and clearing up regulatory and bureaucratic "red tape".⁵⁸ As a result, the Doing Business report 2008 lists Georgia 18th out of 178 countries for business friendly environments. Only three years ago, it was ranked 112th, making it the only country to have made such an amount of progress so rapidly.⁵⁹ Consequently, many other Western international institutions and individual countries have also responded favourably to such tangible results and view Saakashvili as "the best man for the job".⁶⁰ They have taken an acute interest in Georgia's development; the EBRD alone signed on for 57 new projects in January 2007, which totalled nearly €300 million.⁶¹ Since Saakashvili and his fellow technocrats carefully devised this process of economic reform, the speed and scale of the recent progress is empowering. The president, intently gazing westward, uses it as a prime example in his case to consolidate legitimacy.

However, many of these sweeping functionalist reforms only focused on specific socio-economic sectors, such as the areas of finance, energy, and the armed forces. These reforms seem to be aimed more at ensuring eventual membership in NATO and increased co-operation with institutions like the World Bank, EBRD, the IMF, and the EU, rather than improving local-level problems. The international focus has blurred the lens pointed towards the domestic scene, and this approach has alienated much of Georgia's population, which still suffers from widespread poverty, unemployment, and income inequality. The November 2007 protests signalled the latent discontent that Saakashvili has failed to allay over the last four years. This was most clearly shown by the results of his second presidential nomination, where he won only 53.4% of the vote, narrowly avoiding a second round run-off. As Smirnov notes, Saakashvili's reforms have not succeeded in alleviating poverty, inflation, and unemployment, all of which are directly responsible for the low standard of living for the majority of the Georgian population, over half of which were living below the poverty line as of 2006.⁶² As overall GDP growth continues to slow (down to 7% in 2008⁶³), so does this neo-functional momentum. In its wake, lagging social prosperity and defaulting on democratic reform will continue to lead to internal frustration and complicate the leader-citizen relationship.

⁵⁷ EBRD, "Georgia Country Presentation (EBRD Annual Meeting, Kiev 2008)," <http://www.ebrd.com/new/am/program/georggvindadze.pdf>; and "Georgia: EBRD country factsheet," <http://www.ebrd.com/country/country/georgia/index.htm> (accessed April 3, 2009).

⁵⁸ Parsons, "Georgia: progress interrupted," 2007.

⁵⁹ Worldbank, "Georgia- Country Brief 2007," January 2008, <http://www.worldbank.org/>, Path: Countries; Georgia; Overview (accessed July 30, 2008).

⁶⁰ Tbilisi correspondent, "Misha bounces back," *Economist*, January 12, 2008, vol. 386:8562, 27-28.

⁶¹ "Georgia: EBRD country factsheet".

⁶² Sergey Smirnov, "The Economy of 'Rose' Georgia: Flowering or Fading?" *Central Asia and the Caucasus Journal of Social and Political Studies*, vol. 1:43 (2007) http://www.ca-c.org/online/2007/journal_eng/cac-01/13.smieng.shtml (accessed July 30, 2008). Incidentally, the percentage of citizens living below the poverty line has by some accounts decreased between 2006–8 (54–31%).

⁶³ CIA World Factbook, "Georgia," April 2, 2009, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/gg.html#Econ> (accessed April 9, 2009).

In addition to failing to bring about internal economic prosperity, Saakashvili's reforms have also been lacking in the legal system and increasing civil liberties and political freedom.⁶⁴ This is particularly an issue for citizens at local level. In 1999, during Shevardnadze's administration and still four years before the Rose Revolution, Georgia was given a rating of '5' for political rights and '4' for civil liberties on the *Freedom House* scale. This scale goes up to '7', which is the best rating, from '1', which denotes the worst score. According to Lane, Georgia's scores rate in the middle of the scale and this assumes that in 1999 Georgia was only a "partly free" society where transition was still uncertain.⁶⁵ Today, however, almost five years since the revolution, Georgia's rating still stands at '4' for civil liberties and has fallen to '4' for political rights.⁶⁶ In order to assemble these marks, *Freedom House* includes a checklist in its methodology for both categories, which contains each one of Dahl's egalitarian requirements for preserving democracy (free, fair and frequent elections; freedom of expression; alternative sources of information; associational autonomy; inclusive citizenship),⁶⁷ as well as ratings for Linz and Stepan's five arenas. If in 1999 transition was in doubt in accordance with these poor performance ratings, then the lack of improvement suggests that this doubt remains in place, weakening the momentum of the second revolutionary wave for Georgian citizens.

Although it is not all-inclusive as a means to understand a nation's political modalities, as an experienced outside observer *Freedom House* also offers a coinciding analytical report by a Georgian insider, Nodia, who provides some reasons as to why political freedom is falling behind that in the sphere of the economy. First, Nodia notes the low marks Georgia received at the levels of both national and local governance. At national level, the report mentions the superexecutive syndrome overwhelming the other branches of the state apparatus.⁶⁸ At local level, the low marks are attributed to the newly installed system of municipal governance, which is still ineffective in its degree of competence.⁶⁹ This assessment is reiterated by K. Kandelaki's (et al.) comprehensive report on local government in Georgia, in which he states that the lack of any clear tradition of self-government is in part attributed to the Soviet legacy of installing local "puppet" governments, completely acquiescent to the central authority.⁷⁰

As a result, the relationship between the two levels of government is structurally deficient, relying on elite bargaining over issues and subject to mismanagement and corruption in multiple areas, especially the electoral process.⁷¹ This structural weakness of local government has a direct effect on the ability of the citizenry to effectively participate in politics because of its inefficiency, proclivity to corruption and restricted freedom. Therefore, the previously mentioned economic difficulties for the majority of the Georgian population are compounded by a lack of political rights – both issues for which the leadership should assume direct responsibility.

⁶⁴ Rondeli, "Georgia: politics after revolution," 2007.

⁶⁵ Lane, "Trajectories," 18-19.

⁶⁶ *Freedom House*, "Country Report: 2008 Edition,"

<http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&country=7398&year=2008> (accessed Aug. 7, 2008).

⁶⁷ Robert A. Dahl, *On Democracy* (Yale Univ. Press: New Haven, CT, 2000), 92.

⁶⁸ Ghia Nodia, "Georgia," *Nations in Transit* 2008 report, 232-234,

http://www.freedomhouse.hu/images/fdh_galleries/NIT2008/NT-Georgia-final.pdf (accessed Aug. 7, 2008).

⁶⁹ See Appendix (p. 16) for a table with the *NIT* report's scores.

⁷⁰ K. Kandelaki, "Local Government in Georgia," 270.

⁷¹ Nodia, "Georgia," 244-246.

Conclusion

In order to represent a clean break with the recent past of inept post-Soviet leadership in Georgia, President Saakashvili and his administration must make several more steps towards democracy. By following the pragmatic-reformist strategy that Ishiyama and Bozóki recognise, the Georgian leadership, engaged in Manoukian's second revolutionary wave, can maintain its momentum and appeal, thus leading to democratic transformation and legitimacy. The internal challenges to the current regime are formidable: mounting discontent from the population, infighting amongst the opposition, and an executive branch with a glut of power. Nevertheless, important progress can continue to be made, particularly in terms of Saakashvili's willingness to engage in constructive dialogue with the opposition so as to alleviate the symptoms of superexecutivism. Moreover, structural advances are needed in the realm of local government to ensure political freedom and participation for the Georgian population. Finally, all independent media outlets must be allowed to operate without governmental restrictions, the likes of which were evident during the November 2007 crackdown.

When Saakashvili took the reins from his predecessor, the initial honeymoon period was filled with great change and hopes for the future of a country that could, perhaps, prove to be an example for its immediate Caucasian neighbours and for other former Communist republics in Eurasia. Moreover, the administration has resolutely looked westward with the hope of achieving what the ex-Soviet countries in east-central Europe have: economic, political and social integration with the West. However, democracy can prove to be a confusing concept, especially for a nation in the process of transition with considerable pressure exerted upon it from various actors. The internal combustible combination of pressure from below – i.e. civil society and the general public – and powerful political elites was brought to a head in the November 2007 crisis. The resulting situation has been fraught with difficulty and has left much of the Georgian population in doubt of Saakashvili's ability to be a legitimate democratic leader.

Finally, although the August 2008 war was clearly a pressure exerted upon the leadership by an external actor, it manifested itself internally with the April protests against Saakashvili, his decision-making and legitimacy, and calls for his resignation. Whether these circumstances will now serve to further unite the opposition in its motivation for consolidation, or conclude in another political crisis, is yet to be seen. Despite the turmoil, President Saakashvili and the opposition still have an unprecedented opportunity to rekindle the spirit of 2003, which would benefit not only the leadership and democracy, but also the Georgian population as a whole. If any positive result arises from the last two challenging years, it may be an emergence of a strong leader who can unite a consolidated opposition party to challenge the UNM, taking Georgian politics to an unprecedented higher level – which would represent the cleanest break with the past of them all.

APPENDIX

NATIONS IN TRANSIT (NIT) RATINGS & AVERAGE SCORES: *Freedom House Europe*

*Ratings based on a scale of 1 to 7, with ‘1’ representing the highest level of democratic progress and ‘7’ the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year. (Source: Nodia, “Georgia, Nations in Transit,” *Freedom House* 2008 report, http://www.freedomhouse.hu/images/fdh_galleries/NIT2008/NT-Georgia-final.pdf.)

	1999	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Electoral Process	4	4.5	5	5.25	5.25	4.75	4.75	4.5	4.75
Civil Society	3.75	4	4	4	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.5
Independent Media	3.75	3.5	3.75	4	4	4.25	4.25	4	4.25
Governance	4.5	4.75	5	5.5	5.75	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
National Democratic Governance	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	5.5	5.5	5.5	5.75
Local Democratic Governance	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	6	5.75	5.5	5.5
Judicial Framework & Independence	4	4	4.25	4.5	4.5	5	4.75	4.75	4.75
Corruption	5	5.25	5.5	5.75	6	5.75	5.5	5	5
<i>Democracy Score</i> [total]	4.17	4.33	4.58	4.83	4.83	4.96	4.86	4.68	4.79