

Redressing the Accountability Deficit

The International Logic of “Rustaveli Avenue Politics”

Georgia watchers have gotten used to seeing Tbilisians fill the streets of their capital whenever political passions boil over – which happens regularly. In the past two years, the images of Georgians marching with European flags became a staple of the international press, giving the protests a foreign policy dimension. The ruling Georgian Dream party added a dash of conspiracy, accusing foreign donors of fomenting the regime change. But why did Rustaveli Avenue, a central Tbilisi thoroughfare in front of the Parliament, become a totem site for the Georgian people’s democracy? While some left-wing analysts see the subversive hand of international capitalism, this phenomenon may have to do more with the internally deficient institutional quality of Georgian democracy.

Win Big – Lose Big

Ever since regaining its independence in 1990, Georgia’s political life has been a predictable roller-coaster: political coalitions gained massive majorities in elections, only to decay and be dethroned in a more or less dramatic fashion.

Zviad Gamsakhurdia’s Round Table coalition was first to come to power in 1990. Only months later, it fell apart and went literally up in flames as a civil war ravaged the country. A rag-tag coalition of politicians and warlords that emerged was only subdued by former Soviet strongman Eduard Shevardnadze in 1995 to give way to the Citizens Union of Georgia (CUG). After having governed for over eight years of increasing stability but corruption and institutional decay, the CUG was pushed



JABA DEVDARIANI
Contributor

Jaba Devdariani, a seasoned analyst of Georgian and European affairs, has over two decades of experience as an international civil servant and advisor to both international organizations and national governments. His significant roles include leading the political office of OSCE in Belgrade from 2009 to 2011 and serving as the Director for International Organizations (UN, CoE, OSCE) at the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2011-2012. Currently, as a volunteer co-editor for Europe Herald, a Civil.ge project (FB/@EuropeHerald), Devdariani dedicates his expertise to elucidating European current affairs for a broader audience.



out of power in 2003 after rigged elections. The United National Movement of Mikheil Saakashvili took up its place and redressed the governance but flailed on human rights and was dethroned in 2012 – this time through elections – by the Georgian Dream, which is facing perhaps its greatest electoral challenge this year in 2024 after having governed for a record 12 years.

All those political groupings came to power as alliances or blocs of various parties. All were led by a strongman who served as an operational head and a symbol of the movement. All but the Georgian Dream swept to power with a quasi-unanimous popular vote. Gamsakhurdia/Round Table garnered 88% in 1991, Shevardnadze was supported by 97.9% in 1992, and Saakashvili received 96,9% in 2004. The Georgian Dream received 54.9% in 2012, but this support was converted into the absolute

majority of seats, which later translated into the constitutional majority in 2016, despite only receiving 48%. While in power, all the coalitions fragmented and eventually fell apart, opening the way to an increasingly authoritarian rule shaped around the idea of loyalty to the strongman.

The periodic public mobilization occurred against the sitting governments. In many cases such mobilizations were in the name of improving democratic institutions, against corruption, or to claim civic and political rights. To counter that pressure, the governments engaged in counter-protest mobilization of their own supporters. Some of that took place under conservative, anti-democratic, or populist banners. These pressures have contributed to the eventual unseating of the ruling parties. So, what is the political rationale behind this dynamic?

Crises of Accountability

Georgia's democracy has been imperfect, struggling to redress itself sufficiently to carry the weight of governance and ensure alternatives. V-Dem Democracy [Reports](#), the most comprehensive and multi-dimensional evaluation of the state of democracy, have classified Georgia as an "electoral autocracy" from 1991 to 2003, as a "democratic gray zone" in 2004-2007, followed by two years of an "autocratic gray zone" in 2008-2009 and back to a "democratic gray zone" in 2010-2012. After the electoral transition of power in that year, it was classed as an "electoral democracy" until 2023. The Economic Intelligence Unit's [Democracy Index](#), which reports data from 2006, considered Georgia a "hybrid regime" for the whole period since that year, almost breaking into "flawed democracies" in 2016-2017. Some of these weaknesses are systemic.

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The winner-takes-it-all mentality and practice is one key flaw. Almost all victors got to power with overwhelming majorities. Almost all who lost, disappeared from the scene. So once in power, the parties occupy all branches of government and build institutional obstacles to prevent their potential adversaries from gaining a foothold through elections.

The mixed, proportional/majoritarian system of elections and the relatively high election threshold always gave the ruling parties an unfair advantage. They recuperated all votes cast under the threshold and almost all majoritarian seats through the use of administrative levers. Thus, even while the ruling parties no longer garnered majority voter support, they still commanded a parliamentary majority.

Georgia has had a serious, persistent problem with political accountability. The distortion of the election system undermined "vertical accountability"—that of the elected representatives to the voters. Simultaneously, the ruling party's control over various branches of government and its subjugation of civil service sapped "horizontal accountability"—the checks and balances between the different branches of government.

The only avenue left to communicate the shifting public mood to the authorities was so-called "diagonal accountability;" that is, all the means by which citizens make their voices heard to influence politics directly – associations, professional unions, and other civil society actors that engage in advocacy, lobbying, and pressure, through rallies, demonstrations, sit-ins and other forms of protest.

Thus, we can consider "Rustaveli Avenue politics"—recurring large protests to voice discontent and achieve change—as a way in which Georgians have sought accountability for their representatives when no other institution was fully capable or willing to do so and/or when significant segments of the population felt that the results of the elections did not adequately reflect public opinion.

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From Sovereignty Claims to Legitimacy Challenges

Georgian protests have evolved over time from identitarian and independence rallies to legitimacy challenges and then complemented by recent “way-of-life” protests. Early modern mass protests included the identitarian/independence protests against Stalin’s ideological dethronement in 1956 and the 1978 protests to maintain Georgian as a state language. These events, occurring during the Soviet occupation, laid the groundwork for modern political movements. The 1988-1989 mass rallies by emerging political parties sought independence, culminating in the tragic Soviet Army [crackdown](#) on 9 April 1989, which propelled Gamsakhurdia’s Round Table coalition to power in the 1990 elections.

Following independence in 1990, protests often challenged the electoral legitimacy of authorities. The first major challenge to President Zviad Gamsakhurdia, emanating from the parties around the so-called National Congress that questioned the Round Table’s accession to power through the Soviet Constitution - occurred on 2 September 1991, escalating rapidly into an armed coup and civil war. The Military Council, later the State Council headed by Eduard Shevardnadze, came to power after the coup and thus faced an inherent legitimacy crisis. A large rally of its opponents on 24 September 1992 was met with armed violence. Persistent civic disobedience and armed resistance continued until 1995.

Shevardnadze’s newly created Citizens’ Union of Georgia (CUG) won the 1995 elections, bringing relative stability amid endemic corruption and economic decay. Within the CUG, reformist and conservative factions emerged, briefly creating a more functional horizontal accountability system bolstered by civil society organizations. However, by the late 1990s, public discontent grew due to state failures in security and economy. The 1999

elections, held with a 7% threshold, did not reflect the shift in public mood. The “diagonal” protests came back: in 2001, large protests started after an opposition TV station was shut down for investigating police corruption, which led to a decisive split within the CUG.

The 2003 Parliamentary elections, perceived as rigged, led to the Rose Revolution, during which Shevardnadze resigned and the United National Movement (UNM) took power. The UNM’s anti-corruption reforms triggered early interest group protests from the “losers of reforms,” such as the 2004 [Wrestlers’ Riot](#). As the UNM shed its erstwhile coalition partners and consolidated power, the demand for more horizontal accountability led to the 2007 crisis with police crackdowns on opposition protests.

Despite temporary unity during the 2008 Russian invasion, opposition to the UNM continued, peaking with the 2009 “City of Tents” protest, which paralyzed the capital for months. The 2012 [campaign rally](#) by the Georgian Dream - Democratic Georgia (GDDG), an embodiment of the electoral [challenge](#) by Bidzina Ivanishvili, drew on a groundswell of demand for CUG accountability and paved the way for the GDDG’s election victory in 2012. However, the initial enthusiasm for an [orderly power transfer](#) faded as the GDDG’s rule became more authoritarian, bolstered by oligarchic financial muscle.

Way of Life

Most protests in Georgia up to the last decade have centered on legitimacy [challenges](#), particularly after elections where the opposition sought to unseat the ruling party. While the Georgian Dream (GD) party faced such political challenges, especially from the United National Movement, it effectively discredited the UNM and succeeded in framing all opposition as disguised UNM factions.

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The gradual oligarchic capture of government branches, independent institutions, and media significantly reduced the political opposition's ability to ensure horizontal accountability. However, demands for diagonal accountability persisted, manifesting as “outrage protests” against government corruption and inefficiency, such as the [2018 protests](#) over the mishandling of a high-profile teenage murder investigation and the [2017 riots](#) after a deadly fire in a seaside town.

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A major convergence of this legitimacy challenge with the liberal “way of life” protests occurred on 20 June 2019 when protests erupted after Russian Communist MP Sergei Gavrilov was invited to speak in the Georgian Parliament. The violent police [crackdown](#) resulted in severe injuries and arrests, leading to the Parliament Speaker's resigna-

tion and [promises](#) to reform the electoral system and ensure better representation of the popular will – which never materialized.

However, the illiberal counter-mobilization, sanctioned and [abetted](#) by the government did materialize. In 2021, conservative hate groups [attacked](#) the gay community and journalists, with police failing to react – marking a stark contrast to the crackdown on liberal protests.

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The government's backlash against civil society became systemic and culminated in proposing a law branding Western-funded groups as “foreign agents,” akin to Russian and Hungarian legislation. Initially [withdrawn](#) in 2023 due to protests, it was reintroduced and [passed](#) in 2024 amid significant opposition and international condemnation. Georgia's democratic and European future remains uncertain as it approaches the October 2024 elections.

Distortion is Not Where You Think It Is

Propaganda voices from Russia, domestically, but also from some quarters of the European hard left, have argued that the Western choice is being imposed on Georgia from outside and that, significantly, civil society actors, often working with Western funding, are [distorting](#) the political scene. But the distortion, as we have seen, lies elsewhere.

Georgia's decision not to live in the authoritarian Soviet state was made more than three decades ago. But the journey through authoritarianism, the political trauma of civil war, and economic upheaval left the political system with the key distortion that has dampened the democratic transition - namely, the lack of vertical and horizontal accountability.

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tortion that has dampened the democratic transition - namely, the lack of vertical and horizontal accountability. An active civil society and public mobilization have helped to compensate for this problem rather than exacerbate it, although not all civic movements were and are pro-democratic or liberal. Moreover, the current regime has instrumentalized the illiberal counter-mobilization of civic groups to counteract the compensatory effect of civil society activism.

The protests in Georgia in 2019 and beyond are a symptom of the refusal of large segments of the population to live in a closed society. The European flags flying on Rustaveli Avenue are not a sign of foreign policy naivety; Georgians do not believe that Brussels will magically take care of their problems. The European flag flying in Tbilisi is a "republican" banner, a symbol of the choice of the European ideal based on human rights, solidarity, and peaceful coexistence.

The European response to the Georgian crisis should be calibrated with this aspiration in mind: fixing Georgia's politics means solving the fundamental problem of accountability, which requires an environment where constitutional discussion is possible without the key distortion - the overbearing influence of oligarchic capital that has captured the institutions ■