

Front Républicain – An Idea for Georgia?

In the French legislative elections in July 2024, a massive mobilization of citizens across the left-right divide managed to bar the road to the government to the far-right Rassemblement National (RN). Even though the French have complained about its failure for decades, the “republican front” worked, just like 40 years ago in 1985, when it was first invoked.

The Gaullist centralized model of the French Fifth Republic was very appealing in many countries that emerged after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Georgia, too, has looked to France for political inspiration. But while the semi-presidential governance model and weak decentralization have fallen somewhat out of fashion, could the French experience of keeping the anti-democratic forces out of power be useful for Georgia?

Protecting from Whom?

The French political phenomenon of the “republican front” was born in a specific political context.

The term was coined by journalist Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber in 1955, during the French Fourth Republic, when the left, center-left, and center-right parties banded together in a coalition for the extraordinary legislative elections in 1956 and won a relative majority.

Even though the “Front” and the outgoing government led by Edgar Faure had many political disagreements (one of which was the election system – to which we return later), the banding of the disparate parties together was linked to the rise of the Union for the Defense of Tradesmen and Artisans (UDCA) led by Pierre Poujade. Incidentally, one of the youngest elected “Poujadist” members of the parliament was Jean-Marie Le Pen.

It is against Le Pen’s Front Nationale (FN) that the new “front républicain” became mobilized in the 1980s and this time, without the capital “F.” It encompassed not a political grouping or an electoral alliance, like its 1950s precursor, but a determination of the political forces across the spectrum



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to refuse any coalition with the extreme right and keep them out of governing arrangements at all levels.

Let us pause here briefly since the discussion about the transposition of the French experience would be impossible without clarifying the reason for France's peculiar dogged resistance to the far right-wing forces.

This resistance draws on a series of formative experiences in the French history of politics: the French Revolution (1789), the Dreyfus affair (1894-1906), and the experience of the Vichy government during the Nazi occupation. Each of these dramatic and traumatic upheavals positioned the extreme right wing of the French body politic against the mainstream of progressive change, whose eventual success resulted in the "pruning" (often violent) of the right wing of French politics. French political families have a strong sense of continuity and succession, drawing on the iconic (and much car-

icatured) heroes, villains, memories, and, importantly, sets of interlinked political ideas and values.

Poujadisme of the 1950s projected itself as a resistance of a "small working Frenchman" against an invasive state – the movement was sparked as a response to the introduction of obligatory taxation and fiscal controls. Yet, this "little white working Frenchman" movement had strong opinions about keeping control of Algeria and rallied against the government of the day with thinly veiled anti-Semitic flair. That was a throwback to the movement triggered by General Boulanger during the Dreyfus crisis almost a century earlier, which had a much more authoritarian political vision but was mobilizing a very similar social class under similar ideological banners.

It is not surprising that Jean-Marie Le Pen got his political spurs in this movement and rose to form the FN, which, in turn, triggered echoes with the Vichy government. After all, its co-founders have

cooperated closely with both France's ultra-conservative collaboration government under Nazi occupation as well as directly the Waffen SS.

In this way, despite many nuances and differences, Boulanger, Poujade, and the Le Pen family (father and daughter) are part of the same ideological and political continuum for the progressive French who try to prevent it from coming to power. They are part of the political stream that is literally "re-fouled"—marginalized and excluded.

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Georgia is a very young republic, especially as compared to France. Arguably, for the democratically-minded Georgians, there is perhaps only one truly "damned" political force – (ethnically) Georgian Bolsheviks who facilitated the Soviet-Russian invasion, which ended the Georgian Democratic Republic in 1921. For many Georgians, this creates an aversion to the left wing (which often encompasses both communists and socialists – much to the French surprise). But unlike Vichy, which only governed for four years, their Georgian cousins ruled for 70, assuring much deeper penetration into social strata and the latent continuity of political culture – however rejected.

In the modern second Georgian republic, the tactic of exclusion was practically implemented once, in late 1991, by the gangster-cum-politician, Jaba Ioseliani, who coined the political slogan "everyone minus one." As one of the leaders of the armed coup in progress, he pointed to the exclusion of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the deposed president, from

the political process. This traumatic episode of civil war in Georgia's history was only ostensibly fought on ideological grounds. Even though part of the opposition (perhaps rightly) accused Gamsakhurdia of anti-democratic tendencies, the regime immediately succeeding the coup was clearly anything but. The violent exclusion of Gamsakhurdia and his political supporters from the political process did, in fact, materialize. But that movement lacks modern-day heirs or a coherent ideology. The "everyone minus one" formula did stick, though, and was used both against Eduard Shevardnadze and Mikheil Saakashvili – but not practically implemented in the same way.

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The current political moment in Georgia is, in many ways, unique. The ruling party stands accused of a "top-down coup" that goes beyond the state capture and is tantamount to breaching the constitutional provision that calls for Euro-Atlantic integration. Apart from the major shift in foreign policy – which has not been electorally or legally endorsed – the ruling party is also implementing an ideological shift towards far-right populism not only in its [foreign policy](#) and [campaign](#) but also in areas such as [education policy](#). This is the first time that the ruling party has articulated such a comprehensive far-right political platform, which stakes its hold on power on the bet that most citizens would support and endorse it.

Will the Georgians give right-wing populism a decisive rebuttal at the 26 October parliamentary elections and confine it to the margins of political life? We could look for an answer to this question in the French experience: yes, they are mobilizing against the far-right, but to protect what, exactly?

Protecting What?

The hint to the answer is contained, of course, in the identity and ideology of the movements against which the barrier is erected. Quite simply – the “republican front” is there to protect the Republic. To be more precise – to protect the liberal democracy based on republican values of liberty, equality, and fraternity which express themselves in the post-war French formula of the “liberal and social democratic republic.” Different periods built different barriers against different counter-revolutionary vices. These barriers and taboos appeared slowly over the years, and even centuries, as a succession of events that echo and resonate with each other.

At the very outset of the French Revolution, the barrier was built against anti-revolutionary, aristocratic parties and royalist movements. They were repressed during the revolution, especially in post-revolutionary terror years. The more legitimate stream has been reduced to the minoritarian Orleanist right, which did not refuse the republic but favored a constitutional arrangement like that of the United Kingdom.

The Bonapartist period, even though drawing on and immediately succeeding the revolution, remains controversial. It gave birth to two right-wing political sub-streams: one is “strongman” Bonapartism – it is anti-republican and favors the dictatorial rule of the providential man. Another is ardently Republican, draped in the glory of the “French exceptionalism” and even particular “Republican messianism.”

To illustrate the first Bonapartist sub-stream, we can refer to an attempt by General Georges Boulanger in 1887-1889 to challenge an inefficient Third Republic and engineer, essentially, an electoral coup. He made an impressively credible attempt to bring the political extremes together

and rally the Bonapartist and royalist forces into a winning majority to overturn the republic. The barrage against “*Boulangisme*” meant – and still refers to – a republican unity against the appeal of providential strongmen.

The “law, order, and progress” Republican stream born out of Bonapartism is infused with a sense of French exceptionalism and a civilizing mission. It was present in French colonialism, carried over to Gaullism, and has retained its political legitimacy to this day because it is fundamentally committed to the republican legal order.

In more modern history, the long Dreyfus affair both boosted to its pinnacle and delegitimized the “land-and-blood” conservative nationalism, often with a small-bourgeois following and largely tinted with anti-Semitism. This is a period of the birth of the original French extreme-right thinking, with its “clubs,” pamphlets, and “leagues,” which created the political language (individualist, anti-systemic, anti-Semitic...) that alimnts France’s extremist political vocabulary to this day. The modern expression of this radical stream was found in the 1934 riots incited by [“L’Action française”](#) – a nationalist royalist paper – against the dysfunctional and corrupt (but undoubtedly liberal and democratic) Third Republic. The first “Popular Front” was created in response to these riots – an exclusively left-wing republican coalition that won the majority in the parliamentary elections in 1936.

The most dramatic experience in terms of understanding the role and the will for the exclusion of the extreme right came immediately afterward following the military collapse and capitulation of the French Army against the advancing Nazi troops in 1940. The appointment of the Marechal Philippe Pétain to head the government in June and conferring him extraordinary powers in July 1940 ended the French Republic. It must be said that the Vichy Government, as it became known, was not of extreme right ideology from the outset. If anything,

Pétain's rise to power had strong echoes of Boulangisme and its adulation for strongmen. It was also profoundly traditionalist. But Vichy gradually but firmly embraced the xenophobic and anti-Semitic policies of the Third Reich and gave prominence to the far-right elements. The "French State" under Vichy, as opposed to "Free France" championed by the exiled leadership of General de Gaulle, drew the political dividing line that persists to this day.

The Vichy is the antithesis of the French republican aspiration. It unites all far-right markers: it abolished the republic, was authoritarian, collaborated with the enemy, and was against the universal equality of human beings both in rhetoric and in policy – especially its virulent anti-Semitism and collaboration in the Shoah.

We can thus understand the modern iteration of the "republican front" as citizens' active denial of Vichyism to any force that presents its distinctive characteristics or advocates any of its policies. In this sense, the "republican front" is thus much wider than the Popular Front, which is a left-wing political project based on the fundamental values of the "republican front" but aims at mobilizing militant action for a more redistributive and social state.

Where do Georgians stand? The [polls suggest](#) that democracy is now considered the "best form of government" – 67% thought so in 2024 against only 10% who said other forms may be better in some circumstances. These figures stood at 49% and 20%, respectively, in 2019, indicating growing confidence against the background of evident state capture. A total of 42% [said](#) Georgia was a democracy now, a share that has also been declining since 2019, according to the same poll.

However, belief in democracy as a form of government only partially encompasses the republican ideals. The markers of xenophobic, homophobic,

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The biggest political sin of the Vichy in France was, of course, collaboration with the occupying enemy. The Georgian opposition accuses the ruling party, the Georgian Dream, if not of collaborating with Russia directly but, at the very least, of letting the fear of Russia substantially alter Georgia's foreign policy. Pétain (whose military credentials, in contrast to the current Georgian leaders, were uncontested) also pointed to the inevitability of submitting to the overwhelming force and the common sense of waiting for better days.

Georgians have hit the streets in tens, perhaps even hundreds of thousands in 2023 and 2024, to say that they see a direct link between the rolling up of democracy at home, submitting to Russia's *diktat*, and the loss of the European perspective for their country. Only the October 2024 elections will show whether Georgian voters can vote strategically as the "republican front" – protecting their right to live in a free, democratic, and European republic.

This raises the question of electoral tactics and math, which have been critical to keeping the French far-right from power until now.

Protecting How?

The "republican front" may be a political instinct and a tradition, but it is a political practice of tactical voting. In the most striking manifestation, the tactical voting carried Jacques Chirac to vic-

tory in the second round of the presidential polls against Marine Le Pen with an unprecedented 82% of votes in 2002. In the case of presidential elections through universal suffrage, this tactic is simple – go to vote and vote for anyone but the FN/RN candidate.

Things get more nuanced in the parliamentary polls. The early elections of 2024 were the first and, so far, the only case when the far-right Rassemblement National had the chance of securing the majority and governing the country. That the RN failed to do so, despite collecting a similar number of votes as in the first round of the polls, is mainly due to the specificities of the electoral system.

In France, elections are held in 577 precincts on uninominal lists through a majoritarian, two-round system. The election rules stipulate that all candidates garnering at least 12.5% of the total votes listed in the precinct can present themselves in the second round. In 2024, an unprecedented 501 out of 577 mandates went into the second round. From those in 89 precincts, three candidates qualified, and in two – four.

The “republican front” expressed itself in two ways: firstly, 224 candidates who qualified for the second round withdrew from the race in favor of the best-placed opponent against the RN. And secondly, the voters have largely heeded the call from their favorite parties to vote for their political opponent just to bar the RN candidates from power. Combined with the surprising left-wing agreement about the “Popular Front,” this meant that instead of getting the keys to the Matignon palace, the seat of the French government, the RN only came third in the race.

Lessons for Georgia

Most obviously, the same electoral tactic on the parties’ side will not work in a fully proportional system. However, simple tactical voting – like in

the French presidential elections – may be used. This would require the significant political actors to decide on (and the voters to agree on) what “anti-republican” means in the Georgian context. Most straightforwardly, anti-constitutional policies may qualify as such. While the degree of “ownership” of the Constitution and the model it foresees is relatively low, the level of commitment to the European future seems to be considerable.

The French experience is unique in many ways, but it holds a lesson for Georgia and the international community that supports the development of sustainable democracy in the country.

It tells us that political polarization can be managed when there is an agreement on the fundamentals of the “republican” system of governance. Such a fundamental agreement can then be represented and channeled through the political system to ensure stability and sustainability. The French Fifth Republic’s constitution was drafted to avoid the dysfunctional governing coalitions of the Third and Fourth Republics and to secure the hold of the two major political strands (Socialist and Gaullist) on power. This was done through the voting system and, more importantly, through the party funding system, which bans significant private donations and makes state funding of the campaigns depend on previous electoral success – thus favoring the incumbents.

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Another lesson is that the rise of populism cannot be avoided entirely, especially in crises, but may be delayed, hoping that the political system will regain its stability before the extremes gain uncontested power.

France offers the more confrontational method of “barrage” based on traumatic historical experiences and a politically engaged electorate. States with proportional parliamentary systems, such as the Netherlands, suggest another model of “taming” the radicals through binding governing coalitions but this model requires a political culture rooted in consultation and compromise – something that is lacking in Georgia.

However, the overarching conclusion is that loyalty to the Republic is based on the ownership of

the constitutional system by the absolute majority of the citizenry. If Georgia manages to redress its political process and foreign policy course in October 2024, this may become a crucial task – to engage the constitutional process that would lead to the consensual founding of the new republic, the one bestowed with sufficient legitimacy to erect a barrier against all extreme forces that would be prone to subvert and abolish it ■