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The political cycle in a transitional society: The case of Georgia

Observing the cyclical nature of economics and politics, popular in the early 20th century, is regaining popularity. We consider the cyclic pattern of the political process in the post-Soviet Republic of Georgia, focusing our attention on the gradual change in dynamics and the specific pattern of political cyclicality in a transitional society. The main finding is that at the early stage of transition the cycle is more uneven and tends to reveal itself in civil unrest and is not coupled with electoral cyclicality, even if unrest may sometimes be prompted by an electoral event (as in the case of the Rose Revolution of 2003). We argue that in hybrid regimes like Georgia the nature of the political cycle subsequently changes with the gradual consolidation of democracy and strengthening of democratic institutions, while civil unrest is replaced by evolutionary rather than revolutionary processes.

Keywords: political cycle, transitional society, Georgia

Cykl polityczny w społeczeństwie w czasach transformacji. Przypadek Gruzji

Obserwowanie cykli w gospodarce i polityce, tak popularne na początku XX w., obecnie znów staje się powszechne. W niniejszym artykule rozważamy cykliczność procesu politycznego w postsowieckiej republice Gruzji, koncentrując się na stopniowej zmianie dynamicznego i specyficznego wzoru cykliczności politycznej w społeczeństwie w czasach transformacji. Głównym wnioskiem jest to, że na wczesnym etapie transformacji cykl jest bardziej nierównomierny, ma tendencję do ujawniania się w niepokojach społecznych i nie jest powiązany z cyklicznością wyborczą, nawet jeśli niekiedy niepokoje bywają wywołane wydarzeniem wyborczym (jak w przypadku rewolucji róż w 2003 r.). Twierdzimy, że w reżimach hybrydowych, takich jak w Gruzji, charakter cyklu politycznego zmienia się wraz ze stopniową konsolidacją demokracji i umacnianiem instytucji demokratycznych, podczas gdy niepokoje społeczne zastępowane są raczej procesami ewolucyjnymi niż rewolucyjnymi.

Słowa kluczowe: cykl polityczny, społeczeństwo w czasach transformacji, Gruzja

Since achieving independence, Georgia has experienced repetitive cycles of euphoric acceptance of political change and leaders, followed by disappointment, mass protests and civil unrest, and then new euphoria emerged with a new leadership and it all begins again. Several years ago, Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen predicted that “the future will be full of revolutionary movements” but short of “revolutionary outcomes.”¹ Why do they come to such a conclusion, and does the statement have relevance for Georgia? What are the factors most likely to influence future political developments in Georgia? What can we conclude about the quasi-cyclic political processes observed in Georgia over the last three decades?

Cycles

Let's start with noting the interconnection between two different phenomena – first, the quasi-cyclic nature of economic, social and political processes²; and second, “contagion” or “synchronisation” across borders.³ The quasi-cyclic nature of many social, demographic, economic and political processes is nothing new, and nor is cross border contagion. The former can be observed in the form of oscillations in public preferences for centre-left or centre-right political parties throughout the post-WWII period in European politics, while contagion is obvious in processes such as the youth protests of the 1960s, the colour revolutions in the post-Soviet space, and the Arab Spring in 2011.

Cyclic processes and their causality differ depending on geographic scale. They exist at global (globalisation cycles), supra-national, regional, or country levels. There are predictable political cycles such as elections, which are key factors of political regularity at the national and other levels. There are cycles, too, at the global/supra-national level related to technological progress (there is now talk of the Fourth Industrial Revolution⁴). Economists deal with the phenomenon of cyclic processes first described by Jean Charles

1 E. Schmidt, J. Cohen, *The new digital age. Reshaping the future of people, nations and business*, Knopf, London 2008, p. 121.

2 Strictly speaking, quasi-cyclicality is used here to describe a cyclic development of processes and alternations between calm and unrest, but the situation never returns to where the cycle started. We will sometimes use the term *cycle* in its broader meaning.

3 While it is difficult to prove full causality in such processes, synchronisation or mutual influence in cross-border developments is common, as demonstrated by ethnic conflicts and colour revolutions in the post-Soviet space, in post-WWII decolonisation waves, or during the Arab Spring.

4 K. Schwab, *The fourth industrial revolution*, World Economic Forum, Geneva 2016.

de Sismondi,⁵ labelled by Joseph Schumpeter as “business cycles.”⁶ Depending on their length, they are known today as Juglar cycles, Kondratiev waves, Kuznets swings, or Kitchin inventory cycles. There has been a revival of interest in these economic cycles due to a number of crises that have shaken national, regional or global economies in the last few decades.

These economic cycles are intimately related to political and social processes at every level (Simon Kuznets, for example, linked the cycle that bears his name to migration waves and talked of them as “demographic” cycles).⁷ Some historians frame the dynamics of the Soviet Union and its collapse with the duration of a Kondratiev wave, which normally ranges from forty to sixty years.⁸ Eric Hobsbawm noted the predictive capacity of the Kondratiev model. He wrote: “[...] good predictions have proved possible on the basis of Kondratiev Long Waves [...] it has convinced many historians and even some economists that there is something in them, even if we don’t know what.”⁹ Indeed, as Hobsbawm suggests, cyclic processes are easily observed, but there is little consistent theory explaining them.¹⁰

Many political cycles involve civil unrest. Civil unrest may be issue-based or identity-based, or something in-between, and the focus often changes in the process. Issue-based political cycles frequently take the form of mass protests and public campaigns, while those based on identity will more often lead to secession, ethnic conflicts and civil war. Cases of civil unrest based on communal identity can be the most brutal, in extreme cases leading to armed movements, civil war, and ethnocide (such as the current examples of sectarian violence in the Middle East). Violent forms of civil unrest are most often related to divided identities, and political manipulation of those identities.

5 J.Ch. de Sismondi, *New principles of political economy*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, NJ 1990 (based on original French text of 1819).

6 J.A. Schumpeter, *Business cycles. A theoretical, historical, and statistical analysis of the capitalist process*, McGraw-Hill, New York–London 1939.

7 Kuznets’s swings refer to economic growth cycles with a length of 15–26 years. Simon Kuznets denoted them as ‘demographic’ or ‘building’ cycles/swings. Kuznets swings were particularly visible during the decades before WWI as a significant feature of national economic growth in many European countries. See, also: S. Solomou, *Phases of economic growth 1850–1973. Kondratieff waves and Kuznets swings*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge–New York 1990.

8 See: T.J. Berge, *Has globalization increased the synchronicity of international business cycles?*, “Economic Review” 2012, third quarter, p. 5–39, available at: <https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2166923> [accessed: 7 June 2019].

9 E. Hobsbawm, *Age of extremes. The short twentieth century 1914–1991*, Abacus, London 1999.

10 T.J. Berge, *Has globalization...*

Civil unrest frequently shows a cyclic nature in the sense that it starts, develops and ends within a certain time scale, as described by Charles Tilly and Sydney Tarrow in their work.¹¹ Sydney Tarrow argues that protests usually coincide with cyclical openings and political opportunity, i.e. beginning at the point when authority is perceived as vulnerable to change, while at the same time, demands for change are increasing. Tarrow stresses that whatever the outcome, past cycles of protest, even when defeated or suppressed, leave behind a residue that is cumulative in the long term, leading to new protest cycles, and influencing their character. There are, in addition, social contagion effects (export and import of civil unrest), and an endogenous dynamic of positive or negative feedback, which influences how civil unrest emerges and unravels. So, civil unrest in Uzbekistan has in the past spread to neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, while developments in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq have influenced domestic politics in all their neighbouring states. The Balkans is another region where political change in one country has had a dramatic impact on its neighbour.

Many political processes reveal their periodic nature due to formal political cycles such as elections and changes in leadership. But there are also other processes – demographic, cultural, and social – that reveal a cyclic nature. They are often intertwined with political cycles related to changes in attitudes, the succession of generational cohorts, technological progress, or a general shift in *zeitgeist*, as can be observed in a wide range of countries from China and India to Africa and Latin America.¹² Political and economic cycles are often closely linked – short-term cycles in economic policies such as the budget, are often related to election cycles.¹³ In consolidated democracies, in the absence of some catastrophic developments, political cycles are

11 Ch. Tilly, *The politics of collective violence*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003; *Transnational protest and global activism. People, passions, and power*, ed. D. della Porta, S. Tarrow, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham–Boulder–New York–Toronto–Oxford 2004, available at: <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=o3E7r6WgKwC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false> [accessed: 7 VI 2019].

12 See: P.A. Sorokin, *Social and cultural dynamics*, Sargent, Boston 1970; A.M. Schlesinger Jr., *The cycles of American history*, Houghton Mifflin, New York 1999; T. Goertzel, *Generational cycles in mass psychology. Implications for the George W. Bush administration*, Rutgers University Press, Camden, NJ 2001, available at: <<http://www.crab.rutgers.edu/~goertzel/cycles.htm>> [accessed: 7 VI 2019].

13 W.D. Nordhaus, *The political business cycles*, “Review of Economic Studies” 1975, vol. 42, No. 2, p. 169–190; Shi M., J. Svensson, *Political budget cycles. A review of recent developments*, “Nordic Journal of Political Economy” 2003, vol. 29, p. 67–76, available at: <http://www.nopecjournal.org/NOPEC_2003_a04.pdf> [accessed: 7 VI 2019].

coupled with the electoral cycle, while in authoritarian and hybrid societies, other factors are at work such as accidental events, like the death of an autocrat (Venezuela, North Korea, Turkmenistan), war (Iraq, Afghanistan), or corruption scandals (Brazil, South Korea, South Africa). In these systems, elections, in many cases, play a secondary and formal role. Transitional societies also show a changing pattern in cyclic processes when a normative regime (based on constitutional principles and the rule of law) gradually takes over from a prerogative system of governance (based on strongly personalised decision-making, informal practices and networks),¹⁴ as we will see when considering the Georgian case.

Cyclic processes in the Soviet period are of considerable interest, and though we will focus on the post-Soviet period, we begin with the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. This was the time when talk about “the end of history”¹⁵ became popular; neoliberal forms of globalisation expanded simultaneously with the digital revolution in information technology, conducive to the spread of mass culture and ideas, but at the same time creating opportunities for the revival of conservatism, traditionalism, nationalism, and fundamentalism.

Georgia

In investigating the Georgian case, there are several points to keep in mind. First of all, we will restrict the discussion to shorter-term political cycles, as the period after the break-up of the Soviet Union and the establishment of independence by Georgia is too short for any conclusions about longer-term cycles. Global developments and cultural contagion play a much greater role in longer-term social, cultural or civilizational waves and cycles, and their study would require longitudinal, cross-country and cross-regional analysis.¹⁶ At the same time, for Georgia, as a small country, external influences and cycles play a significant role; they induce secondary and indirect influences on internal cyclic developments. Extraordinary events and radical systemic changes also influence

14 The general idea of competition between prerogative and normative governance was proposed by Ernst Fraenkel and Carl Schmitt. See: *The dual state. Parapolitics, Carl Schmitt and the National Security Complex*, ed. E. Wilson, Ashgate, Farnham, UK 2012; R.J. Evans, *The Third Reich in history and memory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2015.

15 F. Fukuyama, *The end of history?*, “The National Interest” 1989, No. 16, p. 3–18, available at: <https://www.embl.de/aboutus/science_society/discussion/discussion_2006/ref1-22june06.pdf> [accessed: 7 VI 2019].

16 G. Modelski, *Long cycles in world politics*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 1987.

political cycles, either accelerating or slowing them down. Such was the case with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which happened unexpectedly and had a huge impact on unprepared and newly independent states.

We will briefly discuss the following five periods of Georgia's political development:

1. The Gamsakhurdia period (1990–1991),
2. The Kitovani-Ioseliani period (1992–1994),
3. The Shevardnadze period (1995–2003),
4. The Saakashvili period (2004–2012),
5. The Ivanishvili period (2012–to date).

The first two periods are relatively short and less related to elections, while subsequent cycles are much longer and roughly correlate with electoral periods. What is characteristic for Georgia is that each of the above-listed periods started with broad-based support for the new leadership¹⁷ and ended with a wave of civil unrest. Euphoric support for the new leadership is usually followed after a few years by gradual disappointment, and increasing hostility is articulated through mass protests. Civil unrest leads to the change of the ruling elite, and then the new cycle starts (the 2012 protests were an exception; they led to a transfer of power without challenges to the constitutional order).

A similar cycle was present in the late Soviet period, although it was generally longer, and unrelated to any electoral imitations; cyclic protests would be mostly issue-based, though to a great extent they related to generational changes. For example, the tragic events of March 1956 in Georgia started with students' protests against the defamation of Stalin at the 20th Congress of the CPSU, which was a cultural shock for Soviet citizens after decades of nourishing his cult¹⁸; in April 1978, massive student protests in the streets of Tbilisi began with anger against Soviet constitutional changes diminishing the status of the Georgian language. While there seems to be approximately a decade-long hiatus between these mass protest activities, the lack of such activity during the 1960s may be explained by the extraordinary shock of the repressions and killings of protesters in March 1956. In April 1978, it was the generation that did not possess vivid memories of 1956 who took the lead, while older people were horrified by the expectation of a new tragedy.

17 The Kitovani-Ioseliani period of 1992–1994 may be considered a special case with less public support for the new leadership which came to power through a military *coup-d'état*. Unfortunately, no sociological data is available to cover this period of turmoil and crisis.

18 T. Blauvelt, *Status shift and ethnic mobilisation in the March 1956 events in Georgia*, "Europe-Asia Studies" 2009, vol. 61, issue 4, p. 651–668.

In the 1988–1989 protests against Soviet power in Georgia, demonstrators were initially focused on the rise of nationalism and identity-based interethnic clashes in Abkhazia, before turning it into a more general demonstration for Georgia's national independence. Paradoxically, in spite of many decades of internationalist propaganda, ethnic nationalism became the dominant driver behind mass protests in most of the Soviet periphery, and it is not surprising that with the weakening of the Soviet system of control, it developed into violent forms that led to interethnic strife, particularly in the Caucasus, and most visibly in Georgia in 1991–1993. However, with independence, and apart from the two violent interethnic conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia that quickly developed into civil war in the early 1990s, it was mostly periodical protests against the incumbent government that recurred repeatedly in Georgia (starting with the late Soviet years of 1988–1989, then followed by the post-independence years of 1991–1992, 1999–2003, 2007–2009, 2012).

The first post-Soviet truncated cycle was that of Gamsakhurdia's rule. It started with widespread support for the nationalist leader, followed by disillusionment and finally his ousting. The fragility of the state made this cycle much shorter. The political confrontation which led to Gamsakhurdia's downfall was located in the capital and did not involve the majority of the population; it took the form of an armed revolt involving small numbers from the National Guard and other paramilitary groups. The anti-Gamsakhurdia protests were not triggered by the violation of any democratic procedures such as elections, but rather by small-scale police violence against protesters that took place in September–October 1991. This may suggest that in the situation of a fragile/failed state, the length of the cycle between euphoric support and mass protest is much shorter, and sudden developments can be triggered by any symbolic action on the part of the government (in that regard, one may recall the start of the Arab Spring in Tunisia which began over a trivial incident involving a fruit seller). Dramatic developments related to the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the dysfunction of the Soviet state institutions made Gamsakhurdia's new state extremely fragile, as there was no professional political class capable of governing the country; the economy, so strongly integrated with the Soviet economic system, was unable to function properly, while the isolationist and nationalistic government disrupted external trade and internal cohesion in the country. Hard core supporters of Gamsakhurdia continue to show loyalty to their leader more than two decades after his mysterious death in 1994, but no influential political party or movement has survived his downfall, and Gamsakhurdia's supporters have not played any important political role since.

The Military Council (later State Council) which ruled the country after Gamsakhurdia's ousting, had an equally short time in power (1992–1994), even after inviting Eduard Shevardnadze as a symbolic leader to bolster its legitimacy. The triumvirate of Tengiz Kitovani, Jaba Ioseliani, and Tengiz Sigua, who overthrew Gamsakhurdia, was unable to consolidate its power and was easily outplayed by the experienced political manipulator Eduard Shevardnadze, who turned his symbolic position into real power. He arrested two of the triumvirate (Kitovani and Ioseliani), and became the new favourite of the majority of Georgians.

Shevardnadze brought a certain level of order and stability to the country. He formally became the leader of the country in 1992, but had fully consolidated his power by the fall of 1995. By the end of 1998, his popularity had fallen considerably due to widespread corruption, nepotism and poverty. There was a dysfunctional infrastructure and frequent energy blackouts, along with economic difficulties in the aftermath of the "Asian" financial crisis of 1997. He was unable to introduce effective reform, and finally lost his power after mass protests in November 2003, following parliamentary elections that were rigged but not actually lost by his party, the Citizens' Union of Georgia (CUG). The events in Georgia in November 2003 became the first of the colour revolutions in the post-Soviet space, dubbed the Rose Revolution. It was not elections *per se* that caused mass protest in 2003, but rather the political and economic disappointment in the government, triggered by expectations that unpopular and corrupt functionaries would take over after Shevardnadze. Shevardnadze was already a "lame duck" in 2003, as he was due to end his presidency in 2004. This created, in Sidney Tarrow's words, an "opening in political opportunity" for the opposition. There were a number of external and internal factors that contributed to Shevardnadze's loss of popularity and the start of mass protests against his rule: the Russian financial crisis of August 1998, which had a huge impact on Georgian economy, the diminishing managerial capacity of an ageing leader, and a perpetual energy crisis that kept the population in the dark during a significant portion of any day. Nevertheless, the protests that started in 1999 led to the weakening of Shevardnadze's ruling Citizens' Union of Georgia party. In 2000 and 2001, he was abandoned by his young political allies who formed several opposition parties – the "New Rights" led by Levan Gachechiladze and David Gakrelidze, and then the parliamentary speaker Zurab Zhvania and justice minister Mikheil Saakashvili, who created the "United Democrats" and "National Movement," respectively. However, the protests did not acquire enough momentum and were unable to bring down Shevardnadze until the parliamentary elections of November

2003. Such resilience of the increasingly unpopular Shevardnadze's regime demonstrated on one hand the elite's staying power, but on the other, a continued attempt to use non-constitutional means to change the government. This suggested a certain strengthening of the resilience of the previously highly fragile Georgian state and its institutions, but this was insufficient to keep political processes within a constitutional frame.

As with the two previous regimes, Shevardnadze's CUG disintegrated very soon after his removal, though in contrast to the Gamsakhurdia case, there were no noticeable groups of followers after Shevardnadze's political demise. The reasons include his less cultish personality and greater age, as well as the style of his governance, which was less dependent on personal loyalty and more on managerial skills borrowed from the Soviet past.

Mikheil Saakashvili, or "Misha," was elected Georgia's president in January 2004. He was hugely popular at the early stage of his rule. During the first few years, he introduced a number of successful economic reforms, but his reformist zeal was later replaced by a strong proclivity for authoritarian control, and in 2007 a wave of mass protests began which undermined his authority, damaged further by Georgia's loss of the five-day war against Russia in August 2008. Notwithstanding the upsurge of mass protests, and the loss of popularity among the urban population, he was able to finish his full presidential cycle, despite his ruling party's defeat in the October 2012 elections. The electoral defeat was preceded by mass protests and hostility towards Saakashvili's government, stimulated by a scandalous story concerning the abuse of power by police in the prison system.¹⁹ The scandal was revealed in a rather timely manner just before the 2012 parliamentary elections.

The end of the Saakashvili cycle demonstrated some new features in the nature of the political process in Georgia. Unlike 2003, Saakashvili's removal was a constitutional process; Saakashvili remained the country's president for one more year after the 2012 electoral defeat. He was forced to "cohabit" with the new government with drastically truncated powers as a result of a semi-parliamentary constitution introduced by Saakashvili himself back in October 2010²⁰ (apparently Saakashvili was hoping to occupy

19 *Georgia: investigate sexual abuse in prison. Graphic video material points to need for accountability*, "Human Rights Watch" [online], 12 IX 2012 [accessed: 7 VI 2019], available at: <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/09/19/georgia-investigate-sexual-abuse-prison>>.

20 A. Dolidze, *Analysis of the October amendments to the Constitution of Georgia*, "I-CONNECT" [online], 27 XI 2010 [accessed: 7 VI 2019], available at: <<http://www.iconnectblog.com/2010/11/analysis-of-the-october-amendments-to-the-constitution-of-georgia/>>.

the much-strengthened prime ministerial post after the end of his presidential term). Saakashvili's party, the United National Movement (UNM), retained its organisational structure, political influence, and loyal followers even after Saakashvili had left the country and acquired Ukrainian citizenship and the position of the Odessa region's governor.

It would be easy to ascribe this different pattern of change after the new elite came to power in 2012 – because it was unlike previous transitions when the political force backing the leader disappeared from the political scene – to Saakashvili's charisma and personal qualities, his relatively young age, and his political skills, but there were other more important factors at play. The UNM was a more mature and functional party than previous ones, and there was also a gradual change in leadership. President Saakashvili kept his position for a year after the parliamentary elections. There was also significant international support for Saakashvili as a reformer, and in the UNM's leadership; there were skilful leaders like Gigi Ugulava and Giga Bokeria. The rather confused political profile of the new leadership, united in 2012 around the figure of billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili by a common desire to get rid of Saakashvili's government and mobilise the protest vote, made the transition to a new political reality confusing. Lacking any clear vision of the future, the new political coalition was more of an unconsolidated conglomerate of various groups with different ideological backgrounds and political orientations. Ivanishvili's subsequent resignation in late 2013 and the election or appointment of rather mediocre leaders to key governmental positions did not help create a positive context for political consolidation of the new governing elites.

The parliamentary elections of 2016 strengthened the normative nature of Georgia's governance system, although the electoral contest was to some extent the expression of rivalry between two shadow political leaders who held no formal position in Georgian politics – former prime minister Bidzina Ivanishvili and former president Mikheil Saakashvili. Georgian Dream overwhelmingly won the 2016 elections without too many violations, and the population became increasingly attuned to a pattern of a constitutional change of order in the country, even though manipulation behind the scenes by the two shadow politicians was a major part of the reality. At the same time, the influence of both these leaders is diminishing. The split in the United National Movement²¹ and the creation of a new party, the "Movement for Liberty-European Georgia", which co-opted

21 *UNM's parliamentary faction changes its head, name*, "Civil" [online], 13 I 2017 [accessed: 7 VI 2019], available at: <<http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=29773>>.

the majority of young politicians from the UNM, will change the political landscape before the next parliamentary elections. The Georgian Dream coalition of 2012–2016 dissolved before the elections, and the Georgian Dream coalition which now dominates the parliament and the government, lacks the skilful human resources that the 2012–2016 coalition possessed. Another novel development is the lack of charismatic leaders in the new political arena, which makes the political process less personalistic for the first time.

Some theoretical observations

The relatively modest time scale of political processes in independent Georgia does not provide enough material to make convincing conclusions, based on just four cases of post-independence transitions of power. This would require a longer-term time frame. Still, a number of points are in order, along with a few general conclusions.

After the two short Gamsakhurdia and Kitvani-Ioseliani cycles, in which identity-based politics and conflicts dominated political life, both the Shevardnadze and Saakashvili cycles lasted for about eight or nine years. At the same time, the sequence of developments looks similar, allowing us to speak of a cyclic dynamic – initial euphoria and overwhelming support for the new leadership – disappointment starting in urban centres and gradually spreading to other parts of the country – civil unrest and then the downfall of the incumbent. The civil unrest component was not present in 1994, notwithstanding deep disappointment with the Kitaovani-Ioseliani-Sigua triumvirate which appeared unable to improve dire living conditions and bring order, stability, and international support to the country. People wanted someone to reinstate order, not a new cycle of violence, and Shevardnadze was quite adept at seizing power in just two or three years.

External influences played a role in the transitions of power, whether at the governmental level, through covert manipulation, military action, or through the “CNN effect” of enhanced international attention. In 1991–1992, the Russian government manipulated the situation during and after the coup against Gamsakhurdia, as arms and even military support were provided by Soviet military units stationed in Georgia to both sides of the conflict.²² Russia supported Shevardnadze in 1993; but in exchange they obliged

²² *Georgia. A country study*, ed. G.E. Curtis, GPO for the Library of Congress, Washington 1994.

Georgia to join the Russia-dominated Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Western influence over governance reforms became more pronounced during the Shevardnadze and Saakashvili periods, and contained their urge towards authoritarianism. Yet civil unrest at the end of each cycle, which led to a change of government, was caused primarily by internal factors – by the disappointment and anger of ordinary Georgians, by the inability of the incumbent government to improve living conditions, by authoritarian policies and corruption, and by significant human rights violations. During Saakashvili's rule, issues such as the arrest of former defence minister Irakli Okruashvili in 2007, and protests in 2009–2010 that followed the August 2008 Georgian-Russian war, triggered mass protests, but, while they were directed against the authoritarianism of the presidential administration, they did not lead to an immediate change in government.

The economy was a crucial variable in causing the slump from expectations and hopes at the beginning of each political cycle to frustration and anger at the end. After independence, none of Georgia's successive leaderships was able to increase the well-being of the population, or reduce the increasing income gap and high unemployment. The roots of Shevardnadze's loss of popularity started in 1997–1998 with the Asian and then Russian financial crises. The perpetual economic crises had severe repercussions for all ruling regimes in Georgia, but they alone were never able to mobilise sufficient protests to topple the government. During the earliest period of post-independence transition in Georgia, despite the severe hardship experienced by the population, public dissatisfaction arose for predominantly political reasons – mainly the poor quality of governance and corruption – which led to overwhelming public disappointment and civil unrest. As democratic institutions strengthened, however, the stability of governance improved and political interests found legitimate ways to express dissent. In this case, economic factors became more important in swaying public support for one or another political grouping. Thus, unless there is any catastrophic degradation in the quality of life, civil unrest will be stimulated by political issues, such as corruption scandals, large-scale injustice, human rights violations, attacks on the media, or unexpected decisions regarding territorial integrity and sovereignty.

Acts of civil unrest include illegal but peaceful manifestations and protests, such as sit-ins and other forms of obstructive behaviour. But there are also full-scale riots and mass violence, which often escalate into political chaos. One of the most important characteristics of civil unrest is its scale. With technological progress and increased communication possibilities at the horizontal

level (i.e. between individuals or groups residing at any distance), any act of civil unrest can quickly spread geographically, as in the case of Arab Spring or the colour revolutions. Civil unrest can be exported or imported, but there should be certain preconditions in place for such unrest to take on a destructive momentum, as in the case of identity-based polarisation. Georgian experience suggests that while civil unrest can be manipulated and initiated for political reasons, it only becomes a revolutionary force at the end of a political cycle when the government has lost public support.

If we compare the Georgian political trajectory with its neighbours, we see equally short political cycles and changes in leadership at the early stage of post-independence statehood. State fragility and identity-based conflicts initially brought nationalist leaderships to power, but they were later replaced by former Soviet functionaries. However, the regimes of father and son, Haidar and Ilham Aliev in Azerbaijan, or of Robert Kocharyan and Serj Sargsyan in Armenia, were consolidated, notwithstanding several waves of civil unrest. Protest movements never attained enough public support to topple the government. There could be various reasons for the different political trajectories in Azerbaijan and Armenia, including differences in political culture, identity structure, external threats and orientations, economic resources, or geography. In the case of Armenia, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and over-dependence on Russian support against external threats strengthened the incumbents' hold on power, while in Azerbaijan there was the additional factor of significant resources brought by oil wealth, which allowed the repressive regimes of the Alievs to consolidate support.

Confrontation with Russia over territorial conflicts strengthened Georgia's pro-western orientation, and diminished Russia's leverage over Georgian internal politics. This factor, perhaps, contributed to establishing softer degrees of authoritarianism in Georgia, as western powers increased their influence over the political process. The comparison demonstrates the inapplicability of any simple explanatory model to similarly structured states and societies, even if the factors influencing political change appear very similar.

Five years ago, referring to the global wave of anti-establishment protests, Paul Mason wrote: “[protests] mark the disillusionment of the citizen-voter. The current protests function as an alternative to elections, testifying that the people are furious; the angry citizen heads to the streets not with the hope of putting a better government in power but merely to establish the borders that no government should cross. The protest movements bypass established political parties, distrust the mainstream media, refuse

to recognise any specific leadership, and reject all formal organisations, relying instead on the internet and local assemblies for collective debate and decision making.”²³ We have observed many similar cases of civil unrest during the last two decades. Such protests have taken place in neighbouring Armenia almost every summer for the past 4–5 years,²⁴ and the contagion/spill-over to Georgia would have been probable if there had been more restrictions on Georgians’ opportunities to channel disapproval with the government, or if they had coincided with the end of the Georgian political cycle. The situation in Georgia is less conducive to such mass protests at present, although there are frequent smaller scale protests around such issues as the decriminalisation of soft drugs, or the protection of the natural/urban environment.

Along with the proposed cyclicity of the political process in Georgia, there are also linear (non-cyclical, such as technological development or integration into western institutions) and simply accidental developments, which make it difficult to predict the next few years with accuracy. However, general trends are visible. We see the emergence of political pluralism along with a certain degree of de-personalisation of Georgian politics (with both Saakashvili and Ivanishvili losing popularity and influence). This makes the dominant power pattern, as described by Thomas Carrothers,²⁵ a less probable development in the near future, and hence massive social protests less likely. The mounting disappointment with the currently ruling political party is destined to diminish its popularity, already evident in the polls,²⁶ but it is not until some alternative political force gains enough public support that it is dangerous for the ruling party. Otherwise, it is reasonable to expect that the changes will take place through orderly elections, and that the electoral cycle will become the main temporal structure ordering political dynamics in Georgia.

23 P. Mason, *Why it's kicking off everywhere. The new global revolutions*, Verso, London 2012, p. 45.

24 G. Atanesian, *Armenians step up their demands in a fourth summer of protest*, “The Guardian” [online], 30 VII 2016 [accessed: 7 VI 2019], available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/30/armenia-hostage-police-station-fourth-summer-of-protest>>.

25 “[...] one political grouping – whether it is a movement, a party, an extended family, or a single leader – dominates the system in such a way that there appears to be little prospect of alternation of power in the foreseeable future.” T. Carrothers, *The end of the transition paradigm*, “Journal of Democracy” 2002, vol. 13, No. 1, available at: <<http://www.journalofdemocracy.org/article/end-transition-paradigm>> [accessed: 7 VI 2019].

26 See: L. Thornton, K. Turmanidze, *Public attitudes in Georgia. Results of an April 2017 survey carried out for NDI by CRRC Georgia*, NDI, Tbilisi 2017, available at: <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI_April_2017_political%20Presentation_ENG_version%20final.pdf> [accessed: 7 VI 2019].

Much, of course, depends on the performance of the government and external global processes, including economic crises. Civil unrest may take place frequently, but it will likely be more local, issue-based, and less disruptive for the system of governance.

Georgia is, at present, in the process of less visible but important political change in which constitutional order takes over from a prerogative system of governance. This will change the way politics is done, and while the repetitive pattern of political cycles will remain part of Georgia's political life, they will more likely follow local electoral cycles and global developments in the future. Having said this, the recent attempts of 2017 by the Georgian Dream dominated government to introduce constitutional changes that are aimed at perpetuating incumbent power – such as the decision to transfer all “wasted” votes for political parties below the 5% electoral barrier to the leading party – may reverse the latest trends and bring back civil unrest as the key element in end-of-cycle political change.

It is interesting to observe the presidential elections of October 2018 (actually the last direct presidential elections following the above-mentioned constitutional amendments) from this “cyclical theory” perspective. Six years after coming to power, the ruling Georgian Dream has experienced serious difficulty having its candidate, Salome Zourabichvili, elected as Georgia's president. Zourabichvili won just 38.64% of vote while Grigol Vashadze of the United National Movement got 37.74%,²⁷ leading to the second round taking place. Although the Georgian Dream candidate would eventually win the post, the voting results of the first round clearly indicate that the political cycle is nearing its end as the popularity and influence of the ruling party is obviously diminishing. At the same time, the cycle itself is closely correlated with the electoral cycle, hinting at the growing maturity of the political system in Georgia.

Concluding, we hypothesise that in hybrid regimes like Georgia, the nature of the political cycle changes with the gradual consolidation of democracy and the strengthening of democratic institutions, while civil unrest – the key mechanism for change in authoritarian regimes which is less dependent on electoral cycles – is replaced by evolutionary rather than revolutionary processes. This change is strongly tied to voting procedures broadly trusted to bring change when voters are disappointed with the incumbent. If this

27 See: *Elections 2018. Presidential Elections of Georgia, 28 October 2018. Preliminary results*, available at: <<https://results20181028.cec.gov.ge/>> [accessed: 7 VI 2019].

scenario continues in Georgia, the episodes of issue-based civil unrest will not present an existential threat to the governance system. However, democratisation processes can be reversed, and as a result, the essence of political cycles. Georgia's current cycle of democratic change is under challenge today as Georgian Dream attempts to preserve its power through constitutional manipulation. In this case, we may see a return to Georgia's traditional political cycle of frustrated opposition and civil unrest.

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