

Frozen Transitions and Unfrozen Conflicts, Or What Went Wrong in Georgia?

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This article analyzes the dynamics of development, democracy, and conflict in Georgia, focusing on variation in state capacity, political institutions and varieties of nationalism. Whereas Georgia's ethnic nationalism substituted for political institutions in the 1990s, the state's enhanced administrative capacities after 2003 inhibited it from returning to ethnic nationalism while still leaving it vulnerable to revolutionary nationalism, which led Georgia down a dangerous path to violent conflict. Unlike the first transition, which resulted in regime change, the current government survives by drawing on the state's improved capacities. Our analysis illustrates the enduring relevance of Huntington's discussion of political order in changing societies and points to the increased likelihood of instability in the absence of entrenched institutional mechanisms.

Two years after the August War between Russia and Georgia, and a voluminous EU investigative report, some of the most critical questions remain rife with

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having been frozen for fifteen years, and why did it happen in Georgia, rather than elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, where the problem of secession is also present, such as Moldova or Azerbaijan?

The major distinction between Georgia and its former brother republics after the two decades since the fall of the Soviet Union is the country's second transition. The Rose Revolution in Georgia (along with revolutions in Ukraine and to a certain extent Kyrgyzstan) sought to transform a hybrid, semi-functional state apparatus into a democratic, prosperous and strong state. The peaceful revolution and the emergence of young leadership committed to western values in Georgia, raised hopes that a second opportunity to build a modern and stable democracy in the former Soviet space might prove successful.²

Facing the same set of problems in 2003 as it did in the beginning of the 1990s, the most virulent being secessionism, Georgia nevertheless made a concerted effort to rebuild its state institutions and liberalize its economy. While the results five years later remain controversial, most observers concur that the new leadership's aggressive approach unambiguously enhanced certain dimensions of state capacity, especially the state's policing and military powers. At the same time, however, some have criticized Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's revolutionary government for sliding toward authoritarianism.³ In focusing so centrally on the state's coercive capabilities, we suggest that the government has neglected to address the more infrastructural and participatory aspects of state capacity.⁴ Furthermore, we argue that the failure to establish clear national boundaries before embarking on an ambitious state-building project, combined with the Russian–Georgian war in August 2008, almost quashed the entire enterprise and nearly resulted in Saakashvili's ouster. Unlike the first Georgian transition that overthrew former President Zviad Gamsakhurdia, however, the current ruling regime managed to survive the war's turmoil, and to remain in power, largely thanks to the state's enhanced capacity.

The Georgian case illustrates the contemporary relevance of two classic political science propositions. First, as Dankwart Rustow argued forty years ago, agreement on political boundaries of the polity must precede the process of organizing it.⁵ "The people cannot decide," wrote Ivor Jennings, "until

contention. Scholars and analysts diverge over the war's fundamental causes as well as its effects. The only point of general agreement is that frozen conflicts can thaw out and escalate into wars.¹ The central questions remain: why did conflicts from the early 1990s escalate in Georgia after

someone has decided who are the people.”⁶ Second, as Samuel Huntington demonstrated, variation in state capacity is central to understanding and explaining the dynamics of development, democracy, and conflict: “the most important political distinction among countries concerns not their form of government but their degree of government.”⁷ We take these classic propositions to the Caucasus, focusing on the dynamics of Georgia’s political development over the past twenty years. Through a synchronic analysis, we show that the most fundamental domestic cause of the recent instability in Georgia has been the explosion of political emancipation without the proportionate political institutionalization. We argue that Georgia’s unfrozen conflict is the most visible consequence of its frozen transition.

This article briefly highlights some of the theoretical claims that underlie our explanation for political instability, and then develops several testable hypotheses. In the empirical section we focus on two temporal periods—the early 1990s and the post-Rose Revolution—to examine how Georgia’s ethnic nationalism in the early 1990s substituted for, and was exacerbated by, the scarcity of political institutions. After 2003, we argue that the state’s enhanced administrative capacities inhibited Georgia from returning to ethnic nationalism, but the deficiency of its participatory institutions left it vulnerable to revolutionary nationalism, which led Georgia down a dangerous path toward violent conflict. The analysis illustrates the enduring relevance of Huntington’s discussion of the potentially tumultuous relationship between rapid transformations and the likelihood of instability in the absence of entrenched institutional mechanisms.

Participation, Deinstitutionalization, and Nationalism

Consolidation breeds stability, argued Huntington, and transformation breeds instability.⁸ Amid the overall excitement about the “democratic peace” in the mid-1990s, some scholars questioned whether the claims about democracy’s pacific qualities applied to *all* democracies, including new ones. A number of countries that were moving away from autocracy and toward democracy in the early 1990s experienced extreme turbulence, which in some cases produced veritable earthquakes of violent conflict. This casual observation was later corroborated in a number of large-n statistical studies of the correlation between the early stage of democratization and the likelihood of conflict. Additional work suggested that the likelihood of conflict was further increased when democratization was compounded by undeveloped institutions, economic hardships and uneven modernization.⁹ Although these findings relate mainly to involvement in international conflict, there is also a robust correlation between democratization and internal conflict, with a similar causal mechanism linking regimes between democracy and autocracy to internal conflict.¹⁰

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succeed in overcoming those turbulences rather quickly, while others remain trapped in transition.¹¹ We show that four dynamics are especially relevant to understanding variation in the post-Soviet transformations in general and Georgia in particular: (1) simultaneous transformations, (2) the explosion of mass participation, (3) deinstitutionalization, and (4) varieties of nationalism.

First, *simultaneous transformations* are generally seen as more challenging than singular transitions. Some scholars have suggested that “many changes” may be advantageous, however, because it provides new rulers more space for maneuvering in structural predicaments.¹² Regardless of the net costs and benefits balance, the “dilemma of simultaneity”—sometimes called “rebuilding the ship at sea”—implies

at a minimum that certain changes must occur with little if any structural support.¹³ Second, simultaneous political, economic and social institutional change requires—and at the same time causes—the emancipation of social forces, which engenders *mass participation*. Data from the final period of the Soviet Union indicate both an explosion of political participation and a rapid improvement in civil liberties between 1988 to 1990.¹⁴

The third dynamic is *deinstitutionalization*. Simultaneous, rapid transformations spawn institutional vacuums—old institutions cease to exist, and become irrelevant even though new institutions have yet to be fashioned. When combined with an explosion of political participation, this deinstitutionalization is potentially perilous. “The stability of any given polity,” wrote Huntington, “depends upon the relationship between the level of participation and the level of political institutionalization.”¹⁵ Mass participation requires an attendant set of participatory and administrative institutions, both formal and informal. Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder called these the administrative (regulating administration and generating policy outcome) and representative (regulating political competition and intermediation) institutions.¹⁶ While the former is essential for existence of any political entity, democracies require both types of institutions. Prior to the liberalization of the Soviet system,

regulatory institutions strictly controlled the character of participation and were therefore sufficient to ensure stability. When participation exploded, however, Georgia's underdeveloped representative institutions were caught wholly unprepared, inducing severe instability.

The fourth dynamic concerns the *varieties of nationalism*. When institutions cease to generate functional outcomes and new political institutions have not yet been habituated, political players naturally look for substitutes. A new constitution, which should characterize, constrain and counsel the polity, is only a bundle of paper until it is amended, internalized and respected. Political parties, which represent the institutionalization of political participation, admittedly mushroomed after the end of the old regime, but they only represented tiny groups, often divided along cultural, ethnic, religious, and other parochial lines. This is hardly surprising given the general absence of trust beyond narrow social groups, which makes political coalitions and civic grass root organizations hard to build and even harder to maintain in the face of factionalism. The media, which could have created a forum for the exchange of ideas and cement a national identity, was also internally fractured, producing a "divided marketplace of ideas."¹⁷ Under such circumstances, political actors behave as if in the state of nature: "political systems [praetorian polities] with low levels of institutionalization and high levels of participation are systems where social forces using their own methods act directly in the political sphere."¹⁸ In this realm of the praetorian polity the political and social merge: social actors become political players, and social institutions assume political functions, such as intermediation and regulation.

Nationalism is an unavoidable outcome of any transformation because of its connection to increased mass participation, which is utilized to legitimize the new system. In this regard, nationalism and democracy both rely on mass ideologies and on mass participation. "In the name of the people" and "rule by majority" is transcendental for both.¹⁹

Despite these similarities, nationalism and democracy come in many forms, some combinations are compatible and complementary, but others destructive and discordant.²⁰ Democracy needs nationalism to delineate its borders and to define what it means to belong to the polity. As Ghia Nodia puts it, "modern nations and modern democracies alike are too large to do without this "imagined" quality" [of nationalism].²¹ The precise effect of nationalism on democratic stability, we argue, depends on character of nationalist accommodation and the extent to which nationalism appeals to social groups both inside and outside the political community. It is to this distinction that we turn now.

From Ethnic to Revolutionary Nationalism

Just as democracy sometimes comes with adjectives, so too does nationalism.²²

Only in liberal democracy is popular sovereignty guaranteed for all members of the political community: political institutions channel political participation during and between elections and safeguard the rights of minorities. Democracy *per se* is rule by majority, so a “tyranny of majority” is also potentially democratic. Similarly, nationalism can be (and indeed often is) exclusionary, but it need not be so.²³ Although civic nationalism is often seen as the counterpart of liberal democracy, this ideal model is hard to find in the real world.²⁴ Instead, nationalism is typically either ethnic (addressing a culturally homogeneous community and excluding others) or revolutionary (addressing culturally diverse communities and including others).²⁵

Based on the balance between accommodation and coercion in creating the nation-state, we can define both types of nationalism as more or less civic.²⁶ Civic nationalism involves expanding the targeted communities while preserving their original identities whereas revolutionary nationalism involves more coercion and is aimed at assimilating identities. Ethnic nationalism consists of shrinking boundaries by dividing diverse communities. Just as all forms of nationalism can produce instability, so none of them can guarantee the preservation of political boundaries.²⁷ It is therefore crucial to disaggregate nationalism into its varieties and to relate the form of nationalism to the degree of institutional development.

According to Snyder, *ethnic nationalism* is characteristic of societies with the most belated development. The state is rudimentary and institutions—both participatory and administrative—are weak or non-existent. The political leadership lacks institutional levers to attach people to politics and so resorts to ethnic nationalism, which generates ethnic fragmentation and increases the probability of internal conflict.²⁸ *Revolutionary nationalism* is characteristic of societies where administrative and coercive institutions are either preserved or have been reestablished, but where participatory institutions are not sufficiently developed to enable accommodation. We argue that these two types of nationalism can be mapped onto the two transformations in Georgia.

Before turning to the Georgian case, let us briefly summarize the logic we have just outlined. When mass emancipation occurs in a weakly institutionalized setting “groups become mobilized into politics without becoming socialized by politics.”²⁹ The less developed the intermediary institutional capacity, the greater the chance for exclusionary nationalism to emerge. Similarly, in the absence of entrenched representative institutions, the more developed the administrative and coercive institutional state capacity, the greater the chance

for revolutionary nationalism to materialize. If administrative institutions are still strong, the new elite can oppress minorities, deter them from secession and forcefully integrate them. However, if administrative institutions are weak, social divisions may become deep political divisions. In both scenarios, conflict and violence are likely.

Based on this theoretical logic, we investigate four testable hypotheses.

Hypotheses 1: Rapid political emancipation without supportive institutionalization contributes to instability.

Hypotheses 2: When participatory institutions are weak, social actors apply their own methods, awakening exclusionary nationalism in multicultural societies.

Hypotheses 3: When administrative institutions are weak, the ruling elite cannot suppress social opponents, so the outcome is ethnic nationalism and confrontation.

Hypotheses 4: When administrative institutions are relatively strong (but participatory institutions are still weak), the ruling elite try to suppress opponents and re-establish the state, so the outcome is revolutionary nationalism.

Establishing the empirical validity of these statements in Georgia is important from a policy viewpoint and speaks to broader theoretical debates about political change and instability. This article explains what went wrong in Georgia and shows why Georgian leaders pursued ethnic nationalism in the early 1990s, but revolutionary nationalism since 2004. We attribute the differences in the form of nationalism to variation in the institutional setting and state capacity. Since 2004 the ruling elite in Georgia has managed to overcome an internal political crisis, thanks to increased administrative capabilities, but it has failed to contain ethnic conflict as a result of weak infrastructural and participatory institutions.

Ethnic and Civil War in Georgia, 1990–1993

Georgia's rocky journey towards democracy started in the late 1980s, parallel to the processes of *Perestroika* and *Glasnost* in the Soviet Union. National feelings quickly spread among Georgians and, beginning in 1988, tens of thousands demonstrated in support of Georgian independence in front of the parliament in Tbilisi. After April 9, 1989, when the Soviet Army violently dispersed a peaceful demonstration in Tbilisi and killed several people, nationalism did not stop in Georgia. Georgia became the frontrunner in political emancipation in the Soviet Union after the Baltic republics. However, it was only *Perestroika* that made a national awakening possible. *Glasnost* opened the media and the first nationalist ideas about Georgia's self-determination reached ordinary people. A few dissidents from the Soviet period, mostly unknown to the broad

masses, became heroes overnight. They traveled from town to town, appeared in newspapers and even in broadcast media still under local communist control. Georgia's newspapers still in the state's possession changed their names, so "Young Comsomol" became "Young Iverieli" (one of the Georgia's ancient names), "Peoples Education"—"Nation" etc. Georgian intelligentsia followed suit: historians, linguists, and artists were competing with newly emerged politicians in a nationalistic outcry. Even the local communist party, still a member of the all union party, proclaimed the independence of Georgia as its political goal by 1990.

The political emancipation was tremendous but lacked adequate institutionalization. In the 1990s, the first national multiparty elections took place in Georgia when the whole republic, including the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, participated. An election rule that prohibited regionally based parties from running in the national elections practically blocked the (already mobilized) ethnic minority representation from holding power in parliament. The election produced a new regime in Georgia—a nationalistic political party union, "Round Table—Free Georgia." The election drove the first wedge between Georgians and other ethnic groups and also inside the Georgian national movement.

Several parties did not recognize the government's legitimacy because Georgia was still part of the Soviet Union and elected their own institution, National Congress. The new government, under the charismatic President Zviad Gamsakhurdia, tried to build up political institutions. In 1991, presidential and local elections occurred and, in the same year, an electoral arrangement was achieved with the Abkhaz guaranteeing their representation in the regional parliament.³⁰ However, the ruling elite understood those institutions not merely as means of participation and socialization, but rather as levers for control, merely with administrative functions. For instance, the role of local elected councils was diminished through the appointment of prefects—heads of local governments directly subordinated to the president. In many respects, prefects simply replaced *Rayon* Party Secretaries from the Soviet era.

Instead of building participatory institutions, the new government "deformed institutions," using them for purely instrumental, administrative purposes.³¹ The major institutions of mobilization—political parties—were large in number, but small in membership, often not exceeding a few hundred. A very rudimentary civil society could hardly substitute for the absence of political institutions. Even political parties and civil groups were internally divided along ethnic and other lines (Gamsakhurdia supporters vs. Gamsakhurdia opposition, for example). The central media, now under control of the new elite, went on propagating the same ethnic nationalism. This mirrored

developments in the ethnic minority regions, where local elites used access to media and other means of mass mobilization.

Ethnic conflict exploded first. Georgia recognized the rights of minorities only in terms of an independent Georgia as a country primarily of ethnic Georgians. Ossetians, Armenians, and Azerbaijanis were seen as “guests.” Abkhazians were seen as indigenous people, but with only 17 per cent of the population in Abkhazia, ethnic Georgians viewed their privileges as more than sufficient.³² In Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the parallel processes of political emancipation started with an underlying desire to preserve their ethnic identities against a perceived Georgian threat.

In December 1990, after only two months of elections, the Georgian Supreme Soviet abolished the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast as a reaction to demands for an upgrade in administrative status. The first ethnic skirmishes followed, escalating into a violent conflict that lasted until a Russian-Georgian–Ossetian agreement on peacekeeping terms was reached in 1992. By contrast, Gamsakhurdia managed to keep the situation in Abkhazia under relative control, mainly because of the demographic picture and the above mentioned bargain with the Abkhaz leadership. However, the conflict in Abkhazia broke out in August 1992, by which time Gamsakhurdia was already out of power. It ended in 1993 with the defeat of the central government and the exodus of ethnic Georgians from the region. Russia became the main peace broker in both conflicts.

Ethnic conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia were accompanied by civil war between Georgian political factions. Again, Gamsakhurdia failed to provide institutional mechanisms to deal with the opposition. As a result, political groups paved their own paths to political participation—most oppositional parties joined National Congress and organized military wings. At the beginning, Gamsakhurdia managed to suppress the opposition, relying on the still-working bureaucratic machinery of the Soviet system—the police and the military. In 1991, Gamsakhurdia abolished *Mkhedrioni*—the most influential militia in the opposition—and detained its leadership by using internal Soviet troops. He was not able to rely on their support after late 1991, since he had alienated most of the former high-ranking bureaucrats along with some of his own followers. In September the bulk of the newly-founded National Guard joined the opposition and overthrew Gamsakhurdia in the December–January putsch. The Civil War continued in the western part of Georgia, parallel to the war in Abkhazia and ended only after Georgia’s central government was defeated in Abkhazia. Ironically, Russian military support, which contributed considerably to the escalation of violence and the ultimate Georgian defeat in Abkhazia, saved Shevardnadze after Georgia

agreed to join the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the quasi-successor of the Soviet Union, established in December 1991.

This first phase of Georgia's transformation ended in total failure. The massive political emancipation in late 1980s erupted into massive ethnic nationalism, both among Georgians and ethnic minorities. The nonexistence of political and civil institutions made interethnic as well as inter-factional cooperation impossible and conflict likely. Gamsakhurdia's (and subsequently Eduard Shevardnadze's—Independent Georgia's second ruler since 1992) government did not possess the administrative capacities to suppress competing groups, which is one of the primary reasons why his presidency lasted only one year.

Despite having lost control over Abkhazia, Shevardnadze and his weak, corrupt hybrid regime managed to stay in power, but he served at the Kremlin's pleasure. Shevardnadze's expert balancing act between various regions, factions, and parochial groups inside Georgia, as well as between Russia and the West in his foreign policy, produced relative stability even as it reinforced stasis and stagnation in state formation.

Revolutionary Nationalism, State Building and War, 2003–2008

In 2003, tens of thousands of Georgian citizens demonstrated in front of the parliament in Tbilisi for the second time in modern history. The new wave of national awakening took place as a reaction to election falsifications. Shevardnadze tried to block the opposition by gaining a majority in the parliament (not an unusual tactic) and inadvertently caused the Rose Revolution—a peaceful regime change in Georgia.³³ His former followers, mostly among the young generation of Georgian politicians, constituted the new opposition under the banner of a second transformation—for the “unification, security, and well-being” of Georgia.³⁴

The media again played a decisive role in mass mobilization. This time, it was an independent TV station, Rustavi 2, which effectively transformed itself into a platform for the opposition, spreading their ideas to the average Georgian citizen. After days of demonstration, people broke into the parliament building to prevent the new elected Parliament from opening its first session, causing Shevardnadze to resign, and opening the way for new leadership to run the country.

The new government of President Saakashvili utilized nationalism, which had been kept by Shevardnadze always on low heat. The new administration needed popular support to implement its ambitious plans of creating an effective state, promoting the economy, and changing the frozen status quo in the conflict regions. At the same time, there was a principled distinction

between Gamsakhurdia's nationalism and Saakashvili's nationalism. The new government consciously chose an inclusionary nationalism discourse addressing Georgian citizens and not only ethnic Georgians. Saakashvili repeatedly addressed Azerbaijanis, Armenians, Ossetians, and Abkhazians, traveling to the minority regions that were still under the control of the central government.

The Saakashvili government practiced revolutionary, rather than ethnic, nationalism. The new administration quickly succeeded in building state capacities, especially in the security sector, and then relied on the relative strength of those institutions. At the same time, it did not develop or devote adequate attention to participatory political institutions. Saakashvili's nationalism sought to unify Georgia's polity and to bridge ethnic and other distinctions, but the lessons of the early 1990s, and fear in the face of a fractured political landscape, persuaded the government to tighten control.

Ethnic and regional parties continue to be banned by legislation. At the same time, Georgia's central parties remain reluctant and poorly prepared to act in ethnic minority regions.³⁵ While the local governance reform in 2006 did improve the financial self-sustainability of local entities, the strong overview functions in the hands of regional governors—presidential appointees—deprived them of real self-governance. The ruling party continued co-opting influential local individuals in ethnic minority regions—the policy adopted by Shevardnadze since the mid-1990s. As a result, many local followers of Shevardnadze quickly became supporters of the new regime.³⁶

In general, the new government succeeded in its effort to increase the administrative capabilities of the state. Public structures became more present nationwide, providing better services with considerably less corruption. In minority regions, the Georgian government is more eager to implement different policies aimed at integration, including Georgian language courses where appropriate. Based on its increased capabilities and popular support, Saakashvili managed to effectively broaden governmental control over the regions of Georgia. In 2004, the local revolution in Adjara Autonomous Republic pushed the de facto local ruler Aslan Abashidze to abandon the country. Saakashvili also increased state presence in Javakheti, an ethnic Armenian populated region, where the central government's control under Shevardnadze was almost a formality. Similarly, the tax revenue process was significantly improved, resulting in an increased collection of almost 700 % from 2003–2008.³⁷

While these coercive state capabilities increased, the weakness of participatory institutions caused a remarkable setback to Georgia's democracy. Here again, the memory of factionalism from the early 1990s, and the absence of trust

among the major political actors, contributed to the marginalization of the opposition. In 2007, the antagonism between the ruling party and the opposition reached a critical point when a new wave of demonstrations in front of the parliament was dispersed by the police. The government officials drew parallels with the civil war of the early 1990s.³⁸ According to one student of Georgian politics, the government of Saakashvili made a “false dichotomy” between state building and democracy, seeking to prioritize the former over the latter.³⁹

The police action dispersing the protestors was probably aimed at demonstrating the state’s new capabilities, compared to the weakness of Gamsakhurdia’s government, but it damaged the democratization process in Georgia. Indeed, Saakashvili’s administration suffered much internal and international criticism but it survived, mainly thanks the increased coercive capabilities of the state.

Revolutionary nationalism reached its limits in conflict zones. First, the recent experience of ethnic hatred (between Georgians and Ossetians and Georgians and Abkhazians) was still alive. Second, Saakashvili’s civic discourse but revolutionary behavior increased fears in both minority communities. One scholar notes that:

while the Georgian national minority policy was not overtly chauvinistic, and certainly not indicative of a full-scale crackdown on the secessionist territories, Georgia’s state-building programme, particularly its focus on anti-corruption and military reform, as well as the effects of increasing state centralization, disproportionately hurt ethnic and cultural minorities and created a pathway for aggressive state action.⁴⁰

In 2004, Saakashvili attempted to apply the Adjara approach in South Ossetia. A mixture of military threats to the local elite and social help program incentives for the local population failed because, unlike Adjara, these measures strengthened rather than weakened local elite-population coherence. After brief skirmishes, Saakashvili put the Ossetian issue on hold. Nevertheless, the Georgian government eagerly tried to change the status quo in both conflict zones—sending peace plans and threat messages to the local leadership, trying to gain supporters among their leaders, especially in Ossetia, where several former high-ranking Ossetians defected to the Georgian side between 2005 and 2007.⁴¹ Saakashvili’s strong promise on national unity in 2004 became his political fate in 2008 when the conflict in Ossetia escalated into the Russian–Georgian war.

Russia's policy towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia was critical to the escalation of tensions into violent conflict. Worsening relations between Tbilisi and Moscow, Russia's growing ambitions in the former Soviet space and the western brokered independence of Kosovo all influenced Russia's position regarding Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia's involvement in Georgia's conflicts and support to the local regimes has never been a secret, but Moscow's "hidden hand" turned into even more direct and open engagement in early August 2008.⁴² After Kosovo's independence, Moscow began the de facto recognition of the Ossetian and Abkhazian regimes by setting up direct institutional links between Russian and corresponding public agencies in both regions. Further, Moscow increased its military presence and infrastructure in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, culminating in the five-day war between Russia and Georgia in August 2008 and Russian recognition of both breakaway republics' independence.

Beyond the strategic reasons for Russian policy, Georgia's internal development had an immense impact in Russian internal politics, where administrative institutions under Putin have become strong, but representative institutions remain weak. Struggling to keep and consolidate power in a multiethnic country with an artificially unified political landscape, especially during the 2008 Medvedev–Putin dual reign experiment, Russia's ruling elite was too vulnerable to accept a direct blow to the great-power rhetoric ambitions on which the Russian ruling regime is founded.⁴³

The question nevertheless remains as to why the Georgian leadership, aware of those dangers, still continued to risk confrontation with Russia in the conflict zones. The government in Georgia had been entrapped in the conflict since 2004 when President Saakashvili made unanimous public commitments to restore Georgian territorial integrity. "Political leaders," write Mansfield and Snyder, "may become entrapped in their own swaggering rhetoric, their reputations mortgaged to their nationalistic commitments."⁴⁴

By 2007–2008 Georgia recognized that Russia would not allow territorial integrity in Georgia to be restored on Tbilisi's terms and was witness to Russia's creeping annexation of the regions. The Georgian government was internally divided; the opposition took an even more populist (i.e. aggressive) approach to conflict settlement, thus in effect forcing the government to act if it wished to survive. Just as the Russian ruling elite could not permit Georgia to settle the conflicts and realign its policy westward, the Georgian ruling elite could not refrain from acting.

During the second transformation, Georgia succeeded in strengthening its state institutions, increasing their nationwide presence, and forming clearer borders for the polity. The transformation started, as before and elsewhere,

with an explosion of mass political emancipation orchestrated by the new opposition that exploited the media. The revolutionary nationalism was based on increased state capabilities that enabled the government to project power outside the capital city and to prevent political crisis from escalating as it did in the early 1990s. The second transformation significantly altered the status quo in the conflict zones as well, alienating local de facto regimes along with Russia. Moscow's actions not only blocked the Georgian leadership's plans, it effectively threatened to undo many of the successes of the second transformation.

Not only rapid but also frozen transitions engender the danger of political instability.

Conclusion

In this article we show that not only rapid but also frozen transitions engender the danger of political instability. The second transformation in Georgia—embodied in the Rose Revolution—set into motion issues that had remained largely frozen throughout the 1990s, including ethnic conflicts and regional disputes.

Our explanation for the instability and conflict in Georgia highlights the interaction of institutions and nationalism. We note that the rapid political emancipation of Georgia in the early 1990s took place in the near total absence of political institutions, and that the rocky democratization of early 1990s was followed by ethnic nationalism, resulting in two ethnic wars and one civil war. In 2003 a second wave of emancipation contributed to a new national awakening. This time, the ruling elite succeeded in strengthening administrative institutions, but it failed to develop participatory institutions as well. The weakness of participatory institutions marginalized the political opposition, creating internal fractures, and revealing shortcomings in Georgia's democracy. At the same time, the improved state coercive capacity enabled the central government to contain an internal crisis and prevent it from reaching the level of a civil war, as it did in the early 1990s. These increased administrative capabilities, coupled with revolutionary nationalism, contributed to efforts to change the status quo in the conflict zones, but failed in achieving its goals.

With reduced, but relatively clearly-defined, political boundaries and effective administrative institutions, much of the groundwork has been prepared for the emergence of participatory political institutions, which we argue would bode well for the future of democracy, security, and stability in Georgia and the region. ▶

—Mark Dietzen served as the lead editor of this article.

NOTES

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