

Opinion

Lost in Democratization and Modernization: What Next in Georgia?

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Abstract

Georgia's elite is more interested in modernizing the country than democratizing it. They sought to achieve a society transformation, restore the country's territorial unity, and modernize it all at once. However, the August 2008 war with Russia has exhausted the leadership and undermined its key accomplishments – establishing effective state institutions and securing public confidence in them. The regime is now ready to go back on its previous reforms in order remain in power. To this end, it has even sought to improve relations with the Georgian Orthodox church.

Learning the Lessons of the Georgian Experience

"Want More Democracy? Thanks, No" – I recently came across an article with this title in one of Georgia's magazines. It is dated July 2005 and its main argument is similar to Fareed Zakaria's analysis of "illiberal democracy" since it explains why democracy can turn into despotism of the majority and how democratic means can serve non-democratic ends. The angle from which the Georgian author depicted the contradiction between liberalism (rule of law and individual freedom) and democracy was the most striking feature of the text. The author stands for liberal values and would even agree to limit the democratic rules if necessary, if liberal values were under threat. In other words, he prefers the European autocratic liberalism of the 19th century to the illiberal democracy of the 21st century.

The logic of modernization as a prerequisite of democracy is not new either in theory or practice, as demonstrated by discussions of "democracy from above," "controlled democracy," "modernization first," "weak state vs. strong society," etc. Examples of elite-driven modernizations are spread across history and continents, from Latin America to East Asia, and, recently, in the former Soviet Eurasia.

Georgia is an example of the new wave of transformation in Eurasia. Observers variously depicted it as a country "lurching toward democracy" in 2001, starting to "awaken with the Rose Revolution" in 2003, and ending with "sliding towards Authoritarianism" in 2007. Is Georgia an ordinary case of high expectations and quick disappointments? Has the second post-Soviet transformation in this country already ended? What comes next in the Georgian puzzle?

The following article briefly examines the democratization-modernization debate in Georgia since 2004. The main argument is that the ruling elite used the modernization slogan as a tool for consolidating its own power.

Countries like Georgia lack some essential prerequisites for democracy. Most importantly, anti-individual values still prevail in the society (particularly religious and anti-minority views) and make the democratic process dangerous for democracy itself. The main lessons we have to learn from Georgia's colored transition are: 1. the transition to democracy needs more time than promoters often wish; 2. moralistic and messianic approaches should be replaced with more pragmatic policies, both by democracy promoters and democratization candidates; and 3. exaggerations regarding political aims have negative effects on political ends.

The article starts by laying out the main points of the Georgian ruling elite's modernization project. Then it describes the reform-power dilemma, which became obvious after the events of August 2008. The article concludes with some general observations about the Georgian case.

Democracy and Modernization: Contradicting Logics?

The elite governing Georgia since the Rose Revolution of November 2003 seek modernization, not democratization. President Mikheil Saakashvili believes that historians will view him as a leader who "made Georgia a modern European State." Of course, democracy is also a modernization project, but many, and not only in Georgia, see societal transformation and a sound economic foundation as preconditions for democratic rule. They view a functioning state as the most necessary prerequisite.

The Georgian elite under Saakashvili's leadership started the project of quickly modernizing the country and society. They believed that it was necessary to transform Georgian society, which they considered to be pre-modern and dominated by traditional values which contradicted modernity. Ethnic nationalism and the increasing Orthodox religious identity of Georgians were seen as the most challenging issues. The new government

implemented a program of state-managed nation building. This endeavor included expanding state institutions as well as economic liberalization. Saakashvili believed that only strong and effective state institutions could increase public trust in formal institutions and replace established informal and personal loyalties in Georgian society. In particular, the government strengthened the coercive power of the state as security sector reform became one of the main goals of the new regime.

Saakashvili wanted to achieve quick results. He considered discussions about political ends and means to be a waste of time and boring. Georgia's leaders rebuffed every criticism of the government and its policies in the first years of Saakashvili's rule and depicted such opposition as national betrayal as time went on. Unfortunately, the longer Saakashvili was in office, the more apparent it became that the new regime was more idealistic, or even utopian, than pragmatic and realistic in its agenda setting. Georgia's leaders wanted to achieve societal transformation, territorial restoration, and economic modernization simultaneously, as quickly as possible and without asking for resources or conditions. They alienated potential supporters in the domestic political opposition (members of parties and groups that had allied with the ruling party during the Rose revolution) and focused foreign political dependence on the US, instead of diversifying it to include leading western European countries.

After August 2008: End of the Rose-Colored Legacy and Power-Reform Dilemma

We can blame the Georgian government for being unrealistic, underestimating, miscalculating or even provoking the August 2008 war with Russia. These speculations cannot change the obvious fact that Russia is back on the offensive. Moscow achieved its goals domestically by consolidating the new power duo of Putin-Medvedev, regionally by stopping former Soviet countries from sliding towards the West, and internationally by reclaiming its great power status. Moscow stopped the wave of democratization, which was enthusiastically welcomed and supported in the West, but feared and resisted in a paranoid manner by the authoritarian regimes in the East. Ironically, the Russian offensive discredited the liberal approach, not only in international security politics, but also regarding democracy-promotion strategies. After August 2008, security conditions are no longer favorable for democratization in the former soviet Eurasia.

Despite this, after August 2008 Saakashvili announced the second wave of the Rose Revolution – changing the balance of power between the president and the parliament in favor of the legislature, strength-

ening the judicial system, increasing the role of the opposition, expanding guarantees for media freedom, etc. Should we see these moves as a partial recognition of mistakes and shortcomings made by the government? Is the government willing and capable to continue old reform projects and start new ones? The August events hit the most visible achievement of Saakashvili's government – establishing effective state institutions and securing public confidence in them. State agencies continued working properly during and after the fighting, but the loss of the war undermined the confidence people had placed in them. Accordingly, Georgian citizens often interpret the new wave of democratization not as a fresh round of initiatives by an energetic leadership, but rather as a sign of the government's exhaustion. The frequent reshufflings in the government and the abandonment or slowdown of some old reform projects strengthen this attitude.

This backslide is most visible in state-church relations. The new ruling elite stands for secular values. It opposed the active engagement of the church in politics and tried to undermine the church's anti-secular legacy. Senior representatives of the government were ready to make unpopular statements in this regard. However, the situation has started to change since ongoing political crisis erupted in November 2007. The government increased the budgetary financing of the Georgian Orthodox Church (25 million GEL in 2009 up from 9.5 million in 2008) and government officials now regularly attend religious ceremonies (similar to other political figures). Saakashvili understands the importance of support from the Church and Patriarch personally, since the public has the highest level of confidence in this social institution.

Now the revolutionary government of Georgia is starting to distance itself from the colored legacy of transforming society and bringing it into modernity. The dilemma between holding power and continuing reforms is obvious. The ongoing political crisis and the outcome of the August war have exhausted the regime, depriving it of resources to continue its reform agenda. It favors stopping or even reversing reforms in an attempt to gain momentum, hold on to power, overcome the crisis, and only then continue the initial undertaking. However, the power-reform dilemma has no positive historical examples and none of the reformist regimes managed to solve it in their favor.

What Next?

From the perspective of democracy or modernization theories, the Georgian case is not unique – the process

of system transformation needs more time and resources and cannot be translated into the language of project objectives and project outcomes. In other words, the main lesson that we can learn from the Georgian case is that it is necessary to abandon idealistic aspirations for democracy promotion based exclusively on the strength of soft power resources. We have to look more realistically at correlations between democracy, modernization and, last but not least, security. For example, NATO's decision in Bucharest not to offer Georgia and Ukraine Membership Action Plans contributed neither to appeasement of Russia nor towards further democratization of Georgia. Democracy promotion can only be effective when it is coupled with strategic goals and politics. After August 2008 conditions for democratization in the former soviet

space became even worthier. Moscow's method of modernization for many societies appears more attractive and understandable than Western models.

The Georgian government believed that it could transform society, build the state and economy, solve conflicts, overcome Moscow's power of attraction and manage the country's integration into Western structures simultaneously. The war in August 2008 ended the idealism of the Georgian ruling elite and pushed it to concentrate on a survival strategy. The main achievements of the revolutionary regime are now under threat and could even be reversed. Any successor government in Georgia will be very careful about conducting modernization projects in the future.

About the author:

David Aprasidze is Head of the Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development.

Recommended Reading:

- Giga Zedania, "More Democracy? – Thanks, No," *Anabechdi*, No. 7, 2005, p. 144–145.
- Theodor Hanf/ Ghia Nodia, *Georgia: Lurching to Democracy*, Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2001.
- Jonatan Wheatley, *Georgia from National Awakening to Rose Revolution. Delayed Transition in the Former Soviet Union*, London: Ashgate, 2005.
- International Crisis Group, *Georgia: Sliding towards Authoritarianism?*, ICG Europe Report, No. 189, 19 December 2007.
- Ellen Barry, "Russia Aside, Georgia's Chief is Pressed at Home," *New York Times*, 30 December 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/31/world/europe/31georgia.html?n=Top/News/World/Countries%20and%20Territories/Georgia> (accessed 8 January 2009).