

ISCKMC 2020**International Scientific Congress «KNOWLEDGE, MAN AND CIVILIZATION»****FROM SAAKASHVILI TO IVANISHVILI: PRECEDENT FOR
LEGITIMATE RECRUITMENT OF POWER IN GEORGIA**

Ruslan Valeryevich Lekov (a)*, Gennady Vladimirovich Kosov (b),
Dina Gennadievna Alborova (c), Alina Stanislavovna Bizikova (d)

*Corresponding author

- (a) North Ossetian State University named after K.L. Khetagurov, 44–46, Vatutin str., Vladikavkaz, 362025, Russia,
Lekrus83@mail.ru,
(b) Sevastopol State University, 33, Universitetskaya str., Sevastopol, 299053, Russia,
kossov1@yandex.ru,
(c) South Ossetian State University, 8, Moskovskaya str., Tskhinval, 100001, Republic of South Ossetia,
mariadement93@gmail.com,
(d) North Ossetian State University named after K.L. Khetagurov, 44–46, Vatutin str., Vladikavkaz, 362025, Russia,
alina77bizikova@mail.ru

Abstract

Dynamics of political processes in Georgia in the post-Soviet period is analyzed in the article. Crucial attention is paid to contemporary internal political processes, namely, the electoral confrontation between two key parties in the country – “United National Movement” and “Georgian Dream.” Since 2012, the Georgian political arena has become virtually bipolar. It was divided between the political coalition of “Georgian Dream”, which was headed by the richest man in Georgia B. Ivanishvili, and Saakashvili’s party “United National Movement”, which was the ruling at that time. Having removed Eduard Shevardnadze from power, Saakashvili and his team began to implement large-scale systemic transformations in the country. However, Saakashvili began to deviate from democratic principles and slide towards totalitarianism at the end of his first presidential term. He made changes to the basic law of the country and significantly increased full powers of the president. The personification of authority violated the balance of forces, and all power was concentrated in the hands of Saakashvili. During the second presidential term, Saakashvili’s regime was finally transformed into a totalitarian democracy. Both the Georgian Constitution and supporters in the West did not allow Saakashvili to run for the third presidential term. Thus, he decided to maintain his rule by “repotting” in the chair of the prime minister with full powers similar to those that the president had. However, this combination encountered the will and aspirations of Bidzina Ivanishvili, a politician and businessman who had substantial financial resources independent of the authorities.

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Keywords: Georgia, Constitution, elections, reforms, the President, Parliament



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1. Introduction

The dissolution of the Soviet Union cut down on Georgia most painfully. First years of independence in the Transcaucasian republic passed in an atmosphere of social and political commotions, aggravated by ethnic conflicts (South Ossetia, Abkhazia) and civil war. In the early 90s, Shevardnadze (2006) managed to win in the inter-elite confrontation. He is an experienced politician with a rich background: Minister of the Interior (1965–1972), First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in Georgia (1972–1985), Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR (1985–1990). The situation in Georgia began to stabilize after Shevardnadze's confirmation as president in 1995, however, stability quickly turned to stagnation (Shevardnadze, 2006). Political regime established by Shevardnadze was focused on strengthening and maintaining own power, while the population's requests for improving the socio-economic situation were ignored. The infrastructure was dilapidated, population was getting poorer, and the "decline" of Shevardnadze's rule loomed more and more clearly. The epilogue was political crisis that erupted after parliamentary elections in 2003. The opposition, without recognizing the elections' outcomes, brought its supporters to the streets and removed Shevardnadze from the presidency in an illegitimate way. Events that took place on November 23, 2003 in Georgia came down in history as the "Rose Revolution." As a result, a young team of reformers headed by Mikhail Saakashvili came to power. He managed to stay in power for two presidential terms – from 2004 to 2013 (Koppiters & Legvold, 2005).

Georgian society perceived the "Rose Revolution" as a progressive event for the republic. People believed that Saakashvili could be able to open up new perspectives and give impetus to the development of a country that had reached a dead end (Gakhokidze, 2005).

Saakashvili understood that Georgian society was tired of stagnation and expected changes, and these changes did not take long. Saakashvili initiated large-scale reforms in the country from the first days of his presidency. He transformed and modernized the capital and large cities, established tax discipline, namely, taxes began to be collected, which significantly enhanced the budget of Georgia. An effective state apparatus was formed, law enforcement agencies and the judicial system began to reform.

2. Problem Statement

Permanent political crisis in Georgia prevents authorities from focusing on social issues. Competition between crucial political groups continues to go beyond the legitimate field. Upcoming parliamentary elections in 2020 have caused a wide scale political crisis in the country at the preparatory stage, and the USA and the EU are actively involved in its resolution.

3. Research Questions

The subject of the paper is to consider the process of transformation of political institutions in contemporary Georgia.

1. Why political competition in Georgia traditionally takes place outside the legitimate field.
2. Why the power recruitment in Georgia is always associated with political.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to analyze the transformation process of political system of Georgia, and its transition from democratic to totalitarian democratic principles.

5. Research Methods

The research is based on a combination of a system approach (D. Iston, K. Doich) to the political process analysis with the institutional one (T. Veblen). The conjunction of both methods made it possible to partially overcome the inherent limitations of those reforms and constitutional changes in the analysis that had happened in Georgia since the beginning of Saakashvili's presidency. The theory of rationality, which facilitated an objective assessment of political groups' actions, was also applied in Georgia.

6. Findings

Saakashvili devoted his first presidential term not only to reforming the state apparatus, but also to the maximum liberalization of the economic sector. Perhaps the largest privatization in the post-Soviet space was then being carried out in Georgia. Both enterprises and social institutions passed from state to private ownership. Strategic factories, infrastructure facilities, natural resources, as well as health and education institutions were privatized. More than 60 % of all agricultural land in the country had also passed into private ownership. A new "eloquent expression" "Georgia must sell everything except conscience", authored by Kakha Bendukidze, who was then Minister of Economy, came into use (Burakova, 2011).

Despite the large-scale systemic transformations that the President Saakashvili managed to implement in Georgia, he could not resist the temptation of power. The democratic principles, which his political career was built on, began to hinder the achievement of his goals, and he diluted them with totalitarianism. It all began with the media, which he diligently took under control. In 2007, the assault on the independent and extremely popular TV Company "Imedi" in the country became the apogee. (Mendkovich, 2012).

Saakashvili's next step was to amend the Constitution of the country in order to expand presidential powers. This was not the last change in the basic law with a view to strengthen their power. The personification of authority led to a disruption in the balance of forces, all power was concentrated in the hands of a single person. The famous expression of the English politician of the 19th century John Acton, that "power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely" in the political reality built by Saakashvili, was becoming extremely popular. The President of Georgia tried to convince Georgian society that a good goal of reform justifies any method (Ogandzhanian, 2013).

Saakashvili's regime rapidly transformed into a totalitarian democracy, in which the police state was hiding under the auspices of people sovereignty. Law enforcement officials were allowed a lot. This became evident during the prison scandal, which was one of the major factors in the defeat of "UNM" party in the 2012 parliamentary elections (Metchell, 2008).

Both the Georgian Constitution and supporters in the West did not allow Saakashvili to run for the third presidential term. Thus, he decided to maintain his rule by “repotting” in the chair of the prime minister with full powers similar to those that the president had, making changes to the Constitution again. He was blinded by the conviction that the opposition was weak and fragmented and, therefore, could not prevent the “United National Movement” victory, the party of Saakashvili’s supporters, in the parliamentary elections. However, this combination encountered the will and aspirations of Bidzina Ivanishvili who had substantial financial resources independent of the authorities.

Since 2012, the Georgian political arena has become virtually bipolar. It was divided between the political coalition of “Georgian Dream – Democratic Georgia”, which was headed by the richest man in Georgia B. Ivanishvili, and Saakashvili’s party “United National Movement”, which was the ruling at that time.

The 2012 parliamentary elections became the first precedent for a legitimate change of government for post-Soviet Georgia. This was unexpected because the political field of Georgia was overheated throughout the entire pre-election cycle.

Mass protests took place in September 2012 in the largest cities of Georgia, such as Tbilisi, Poti, Gori, and Batumi. Videos of torture and humiliation of prisoners in Gldani prison were the occasion of protests. TV “Channel 9”, which belonged to Ivanishvili, showed videos of torture in Gldani prison just before the elections. As a result, the Minister of Interior Bacho Akhalaia and the Minister for the Execution of Punishments Khatuna Kalmakhelidze resigned. The government’s response was not long in coming.

Trying to level the political resource, Ivanishvili was deprived of his citizenship. In this regard, his wife Yekaterina Khvedelidze headed the coalition “Georgian Dream – Democratic Georgia”. Later, Ivanishvili was accused of bribery of voters and fined in total of \$ 95 million, then a part of his business assets was seized (Feshchenko, 2012).

OSCE observers, attended at the 2012 elections, described the electoral campaign as polarized, and the actions of the two crucial political parties “Georgian Dream – Democratic Georgia” (B. Ivanishvili) and “United National Movement” (M. Saakashvili) as tough and conflictual.

Nevertheless, adjustments were made to the political traditions of Georgia. There was the first time legitimate change of power in its post-Soviet history in 2012. In the past, the change of power took place three times in Georgia, and this process had always been burdened by forceful confrontation. In 1991, Z. Gamsakhurdia came to power, and then the fall of his government and a civil war happened, which resulted in the coming to power of E. Shevardnadze in 1992. And in 2004, M. Saakashvili came to power as a result of the coup proclaimed by the “Rose Revolution” (Dolidze, 2007).

The victory of the “Georgian Dream” party in the elections in Georgia showed the whole world that the recruitment of the top leadership in this Transcaucasian state can take place in a peaceful and democratic way. Ivanishvili’s party took 85 out of 150 seats in Parliament, its opponent, United National Movement, gained only 65 seats.

On November 17, 2013, the removal of Saakashvili from power was finalized. The representative of the ruling coalition “Georgian Dream” Giorgi Margvelashvili was elected the new president of Georgia. Saakashvili said in his farewell TV speech: “Dear citizens, I am not tired and I do not need a rest, but the time has come for you to take a break from me”.

Speaking about the achievements of Saakashvili, one can note his peaceful and democratic departure from the post of state's head. Perhaps the unprecedented deterioration in Georgian-Russian relations should be recognized as a crucial mistake. To this day, our countries do not have diplomatic relations and are in a state of conflict (Markedonov, 2008).

The election results were predictable, and now the non-public Ivanishvili, who took over as prime minister, replaced Saakashvili. As for the elected president, he had completely different full powers than his predecessor. After the inauguration of Margvelashvili, amendments to the Constitution, adopted back in 2010, come into force, which dramatically changed the distribution of full powers between the branches of government. According to new Constitution, the President was more a representative than an authoritative figure. However, he still acted as the head of state and was the guarantor of the Constitution and the commander-in-chief of armed forces. At the same time, the President could not influence domestic and foreign policy, and he was also deprived of the right to legislative initiative. The prime minister became the center of authority, in addition to the key functions of the executive branch, he was also transferred the right to appoint governors.

Approval of the Cabinet of Ministers was in the competence of the Parliament. Interior policy was under the control of Bidzina Ivanishvili, who was approved by the Prime Minister of Georgia on October 25, 2012 at a parliamentary meeting. The people of Georgia gave power to Ivanishvili. Getting the executive and legislative branches under control, he began to play the role of a grey eminence in the new political system of Georgia.

The victory of Ivanishvili's party and the inauguration of the prime minister led to a decrease in M. Saakashvili's influence in the country, he lost his cohorts in the government and the majority in the Parliament. "UNM" initiatives were blocked by most of the "GD" party. The government consisted entirely of Ivanishvili's people; a serious rotation was carried out in the country's diplomatic corps. Saakashvili had lost influence on judges and security officials (Sattarov, 2012).

The first political action of Ivanishvili and his party was the adoption of a law on a large-scale amnesty in December 2012. The law was passed despite a veto of the incumbent President Saakashvili. About 3 thousand prisoners went out of jail in January 2013. This demonstrative step for the electorate was to emphasize that Georgia was moving away from the image of a police state.

Concerning other decisions of the new leadership, they turned out to be not as dynamic and effective as expected. The political agenda continued to be replete with criticism of Saakashvili and his team. At the same time, such urgent issues as poverty and unemployment, the problems of refugees remained unresolved. In any case, the power in Georgia was extremely personified, and it was associated with the name of B. Ivanishvili. It did not matter in what capacity he was, prime minister or philanthropist, one way or another, the levers of governing the country were in his hands. Ivanishvili did not break, but on the contrary, strengthened personalism as a political principle in Georgia. The position of the prime minister became central in state administration, which, in the absence of a real multiparty system, made his power unlimited.

In 2013, two major characters of Georgian politics, M. Saakashvili and B. Ivanishvili, around whom the entire political life of the country revolved, left their positions. The first was because the presidential term ended, the other was because he achieved his goal, namely, a victory over "UNM" and,

personally, over the President Saakashvili. However, Ivanishvili, stepping aside, retained his informal influence on the current processes in the country.

The Minister of Interior Irakli Garibashvili succeeded Ivanishvili, who owed his career to the outgoing head of government. He took the prime minister's seat at the age of 31 (Markedonov, 2013).

After the leader of the ruling “Georgian Dream” party and the actual leader of the country, Bidzina Ivanishvili (2012–2013), ceased to lead the Cabinet of Ministers, three prime ministers were shifted in Georgia. Irakli Garibashvili (2013–2015) took the post for more than two years, his successor Giorgi Kvirikashvili (2015–2018) held on for six months longer. Mamuka Bakhtadze (2018–2019) received the prime minister's chair in June 2018 and resigned in September 2019. The new prime minister was announced the day after his resignation. The post was taken by the head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Vice-Prime Minister of Georgia Giorgi Gakharia.

None of Ivanishvili’s followers became an independent political figure. Generally speaking, all of them performed his representative functions.

The slogans with which the “GD” party went to the parliamentary and presidential elections were not implemented in practice. As a result, election promises were of populist nature. According to the World Bank, Georgia was still the poorest country in the Transcaucasian region. Devaluation of the national currency, lari, had a negative impact. The situation did not change even after “GD” won the parliamentary elections in 2016, while receiving also a constitutional majority, and in fact, absolute power during the first term of Saakashvili.

Banal tiredness of promises, populism and the domination of one figure began to play against Ivanishvili over time. Replacement in the government took place only to remove public discontent, but this had no effect anymore. The rotation of power had a negative impact on the efficiency of public administration. The government was constantly waiting for resignation, which did not contribute to efficient work. The process of approving a new prime minister in office was protracted. Within a week, the ruling “GD” party was determined with a candidate for the post of the government head, and then his presentation to the president was to take place. Moreover, the candidate for prime minister had to name the ministers of his cabinet. Prolonged behind-the-scenes negotiations and consultations in the Parliament were required for this. Thus, political intrigues took too long.

In 2018 Ivanishvili was forced to return to public politics as the leader of the ruling party. The reason for his return was due to the fact that warring political groups paralyzed the activities of the government and the parliamentary majority. In December 2018, presidential elections were held in the country, in which Ivanishvili’s candidate Salome Zurbishvili managed to win only in the second round.

Paradoxically, Saakashvili and Ivanishvili began to resemble each other in their actions. The first, in preparation for the 2012 parliamentary campaign, relied on the head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs Vano Merabishvili. He was appointed prime minister and actually became the head of the “UNM” headquarters. Ivanishvili appointed a chief police officer as the “savior” of the “GD” party. We will see the result in the near future.

The country is preparing for elections. Georgia, according to the Constitution, is a parliamentary republic, and the balance of forces, which will be determined at the end of October 2020, will form the country’s party-political landscape for the foreseeable future (Andzhaparidze, 2020).

Elections in 2020 were supposed to be held under a proportional system and with a zero electoral barrier. The authorities made these concessions against the backdrop of mass protests caused by the visit of Russian State Duma Deputy Sergei Gavrilov to Georgia, who participated in the Interparliamentary Assembly of Orthodox Countries in the Parliament of Georgia.

The situation was acute because the “Georgian Dream” party, during the first (summer) protest wave, gave the opposition a promise to change the game rules and go to the elections on a proportional rather than a mixed system in 2020. Nevertheless, the party did not keep this promise, which caused a second wave of protest. A memorandum on the parliamentary campaign model was signed on March 8, 2020, and it seemed that the ruling party and its opponents had reached a compromise agreement. The proportional part of the deputy cabinet was expanded (120 out of 150 mandates should be determined in this way).

A mixed electoral system for forming a parliament in Georgia has existed since the time of Shevardnadze (2006). It was the optimal model for keeping the ruling party in power and little has changed since then. The most influential people on the ground are always interested in having the power on their side, and even better – they want to become this power. The current majoritarian electoral system is the ideal mechanism for achieving these desires. For instance, representatives of the ruling party won in all majoritarian districts, without exception, in the 2016 parliamentary elections. An even funnier example is the teleportation of majoritarian deputies “UNM” to Ivanishvili’s party, which won the 2016 elections.

All opposition parties, without exception, demand the transition from a mixed to a proportional electoral system for the same reason, and “GD”, which solemnly promised to abandon the mixed system in 2020, prevents this transition in every possible way.

The number of political parties in Georgia varies around 500. An ambitious citizen of Georgia begins to think about the prospect of creating his own party in conditions when twenty thousand voters can secure a seat in the Parliament.

The political potential of the ruling “GD” party consists of three key components: the financial resource of Bidzina Ivanishvili, the local administrative resource, and the media resource. Considering these factors, it can be assumed that Ivanishvili’s party has every chance of retaining power even with a proportional system (Vasadze, 2019).

According to the National Statistical Service, the overall price level increased by 7 % by the end of 2019. Such inflation has not been observed in the country since 2017. This year, prices for public transport, as well as for gas and electricity, may increase. If the upward tendency in prices continues, this will painfully hit the poorest strata, which make up a considerable segment of the electorate.

Accordingly, economic difficulties will affect the mood of voters. If the situation does not improve in the time remaining before the elections, the position of “GD” will be significantly weakened. The electorate understands that in case of “GD” is defeated in the upcoming elections; the political landscape of Georgia will be changed greatly. And we will see this year whether the voter wants these variations.

7. Conclusion

The intensification of the protest actions of the united opposition in the struggle to amend the electoral system convinces us that the political system of Ivanishvili has failed. Twelve of the leading and

most charismatic “GD” deputies left the parliamentary faction within a year. The media are increasingly circulating the call for Ivanishvili to leave the political Olympus of Georgia.

Anyway, he is ignoring this call for now. 73 out of 150 deputies of a single-mandate constituency are personally managed by Ivanishvili. He single-handedly commands the Parliament and government without resorting to a coalition. If he manages to maintain the status quo, then he will be able to rule the country even if the party gets a minority in the elections. Based on the latest political concessions, it can be concluded that Ivanishvili is ready to give up the monopoly on the Parliament but retain his power. The result of the last parliamentary session has shown that he holds big plans for 2020.

The Parliament of Georgia approved constitutional amendments to the country's electoral system with 117 votes “for” and three “against” at the last June session. At present, elections will be held under the new system. This is part of the agreement, which the “Georgian Dream” party reached with the opposition on March 8 through the mediation of the USA and the EU Delegation. According to the changes, 120 deputies under the proportional electoral system and 30 under the majoritarian system will be elected to the Parliament in 2020. Moreover, the electoral barrier will be reduced from 5 to 1 %. Parties that can submit signatures of supporters in the number of at least 5,000 voters are allowed to participate in the 2020 elections (Eadaily, 2020). We conclude that the upcoming electoral cycle will be extremely competitive with an unpredictable outcome.

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