

Imperfect Democracy or Electoral Authoritarianism?

Georgia's Descent into a Hegemonic-Party System

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(1) Introduction

On April 9, 1991, Georgia embarked on its path of becoming a functioning state in the modern political world. This process has been marred with difficulties since the beginning, with civil wars and political instability of the 90s. By the end of a decade of independence, Georgia was on the verge of becoming a failed state. Under Eduard Shevardnadze, Georgia regained stability and formation of functioning political institutions began. Although plagued with corruption and legacies of the Soviet Union, Georgia began, at least, functioning as a state. However, only in 2003, following the Rose Revolution led by Mikheil Saakashvili did Georgia begin making first steps towards a Western democracy and a stable liberal state.

After a nine-year-long ruling of Saakashvili's National Movement party, Georgia saw its first peaceful transition of power through 2012 elections. As a result, the Georgian Dream party, then led by the founder Bidzina Ivanishvili, came to power. These elections – a first precedent of peaceful transfer of power – were invaluable for the future of democratic development of Georgia. However, the Georgian Dream party soon began exhibiting anti-Western, anti-Democratic and authoritarian tendencies. After their second win in 2016 elections, the party's focus shifted to consolidating power. The public outrage ensued, with the streets of the capital and major cities transforming into an arena for frequent protests and demonstrations. Yet, with every election, the Georgian Dream party emerges victorious and retains both the majority seats in the parliament and representative seats of the country's regions. In the face of such degree of public outrage, members of the civic society have expressed their concerns with the validity of elections and called on international organizations to evaluate the election processes in hopes of finding evidence of fraud. However, all such evaluations have shown the same results: the

elections are not perfect, might even be considered as slightly manipulated, but are far from fraudulent. The Georgian Dream party remains victorious legally.

Such contradictions prompted me to pursue the issue in my research. The Georgian electorate has a clear chosen political path: Western democracy. Whenever the Georgian Dream party has exhibited very clear signs of going against this choice, the public outrage has been vocal and clear. Even the support base of the party has criticized its strategies in their diplomatic dialogue with the West and their seemingly anti-provocative politics with the Russian Federation (who occupies more than twenty percent of Georgian territory). Nevertheless, when it comes to elections, the same voters cast their votes in favor of the Georgian Dream party again and again. In this paper, I will explore reasons behind continued success of the Georgian Dream party in remaining in power, despite their increasing authoritarian and anti-Western tendencies and frequent public outrage against them.

(2) Background

In the initial stages of my research, I had assumed the authoritarian tendencies of the Georgian Dream government to be a case of democratic backsliding. For this reason, the initial material I looked at had to do with Georgia's initial consolidation as an independent state and its following democratization and theory on democratic backsliding. In his book, *Modern History of Georgia*, Dimitri Shvelidze, proposed the Rose Revolution as the marking point for Georgia's democratization efforts.¹ The Rose Revolution (2003) was a consequence of a series of issues that the Shevardnadze's government was repeatedly failing to address or solve (economic

¹ Dimitri Shvelidze. *Modern History of Georgia*. Tbilisi, Georgia: Meridiani Publishing, 2021.

depression, financial budget crisis, corruption, mass unemployment, etc.).² As the Shevardnadze government was formed following a civil war and a military coup, a considerable portion of the population viewed it as illegitimate.³ By the November 2003 elections, the opposition, mainly the younger generation of politicians, had gained the support of the electorate and was a clear projected winner. Nevertheless, the Election Administration of Georgia (EAG), announced Shevardnadze and his party as the winners. The opposition, immediately, claimed the elections as fraudulent and began a series of protests that triumphed with Shevardnadze resigning and a new government being formed: The National Movement Party led by Saakashvili. Saakashvili began implementing numerous reforms that established Georgia as a rising liberal democracy.⁴

Saakashvili's ruling lasted for nine years and with its numerous accomplishments, ended with immense public outrage over accusations of human rights violations and authoritarian tendencies (censorship, opposition oppression, private sector oppression). In the 2012 elections, The National Movement lost the elections and Saakashvili fled the country. The transition of power was peaceful – the first such precedent in the modern politics of Georgia. The Georgian Dream, led by Ivanishvili, assumed power and began a new stage of Georgia's political development. The newly elected party chose the politics of non-provocation in relation to the Russian Federation. This strategy later transformed into anti-Western statements and authoritarian tendencies. Today, the democratization process is lagging as a result of a strained relationship with the West. Consequently, Georgian citizens' reaction to pro-Russian rhetoric was outrage, demonstrations and protests which led to political instability and even a political crisis in 2020.

² Dimitri Shvelidze. *Modern History of Georgia*. Tbilisi, Georgia: Meridiani Publishing, 2021.

³ Dimitri Shvelidze. *Modern History of Georgia*. Tbilisi, Georgia: Meridiani Publishing, 2021.

⁴ Dimitri Shvelidze. *Modern History of Georgia*. Tbilisi, Georgia: Meridiani Publishing, 2021.

(3) Literature Review

In their book, *How Democracies Die*, Daniel Ziblatt and Steven Levitsky propose how democratic backsliding can take place under elected rulers.⁵ They firstly define the basic democratic norms that characterize stable democracies: mutual toleration and mutual forbearance. One of the biggest threats to these norms they concluded is extreme polarization, where political blocks begin to view the opponent as an existential threat.⁶ Such a political environment creates a perfect opportunity for potential autocrats to emerge as leaders. Additionally, they proposed a Litmus Test – a test to establish whether a politician is acting like or has become an autocrat.⁷

Their theory, at a first glance, fit Georgia's case almost perfectly. The Georgian Dream and the now opposition – National Movement, view each other as existential threats and both have repeatedly violated the mutual forbearance and mutual toleration. Both parties also fail on the Litmus Test, proposed by Ziblatt and Levitsky. However, there were several issues with taking this route. Ziblatt and Levitsky's argument was based on observing historically stable democracies, mainly the United States. Although in the first decade of the century, Georgia exhibited a clear potential for democratization and showed progress, it has never been a stable democracy. Therefore, Ziblatt and Levitsky's argument cannot be fully applied to Georgia. Additionally, the Litmus Test was designed for individual politicians. In case of Georgia, the Georgian Dream party failed on it. Evidently, the party as a whole had begun to exhibit traits of

⁵ Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt. *How Democracies Die*. Vol. First edition. New York: Crown, 2018.

⁶ Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt. *How Democracies Die*. Vol. First edition. New York: Crown, 2018.

⁷ Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt. *How Democracies Die*. Vol. First edition. New York: Crown, 2018.

autocracy. However, Georgia remained a democratic republic: multiparty elections have been taking place in accordance with the constitution and, although there are cases of vote buying and manipulation, are considered legitimate by various international evaluation organizations. In these elections, the Georgian Dream remains victorious, often winning the supermajority, even in the face of large-scale public dissatisfaction.

In her book *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and Its Demise in Mexico*, Beatriz Magaloni examines Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) as a case of electoral authoritarianism, specifically a hegemonic party system. Her argument is largely centered around how these types of autocracies remain in power and sustain mass support of the electorate in multiparty elections.⁸ Such systems behave as democracies on institutional level as one of their defining characteristics is holding multiparty elections that are considered legitimate as, despite the presence of vote manipulation, there is little to no election fraud.⁹ In such systems, opposition is also present and often has a place in the legislative process as well. By allowing elections and the presence of the opposition, these hegemonic parties create a façade of democracy.¹⁰ However, in reality, such parties remain in power over long periods of time, often winning elections with supermajorities, which allows them to modify the institutions (and in some cases even the constitution) to ensure they remain in power.¹¹ Although autocratic hegemonic parties are characterized by their long-term rules, a party that remains in power for more than one

⁸ Magaloni, Beatriz. *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and Its Demise in Mexico*. 1st ed. Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

⁹ Magaloni, Beatriz. *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and Its Demise in Mexico*. 1st ed. Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

¹⁰ Magaloni, Beatriz. *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and Its Demise in Mexico*. 1st ed. Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

¹¹ Magaloni, Beatriz. *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and Its Demise in Mexico*. 1st ed. Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

consecutive term can be examined from this perspective. Specifically, The Georgian Dream, which has been in power since 2012 and remains the most supported party in Georgian politics, fits the criteria almost perfectly. While Magaloni applied the theory to Mexico, cases of electoral authoritarian states can be found all over the globe. Although the Georgian Dream Party is still fairly young it seems to be on the path to becoming a hegemonic party and Georgia – an electoral authoritarian state.

(4) Theory and Research Design

The phenomena of hegemonic-party survival may be the causes of the electoral survival of the Georgian Dream party in the Georgian political climate, despite its clear authoritarian and anti-Western tendencies and the increasing public dissatisfaction. To test this hypothesis, I have used Magaloni's theory on authoritarian equilibria of hegemonic party systems and applied it to Georgia. While Magaloni's theory was centered around Mexico, it can be universally applied to hegemonic party systems as it defines their behavior under different circumstances. I will be analyzing the empirical state of Georgia under the Georgian Dream to test whether these conditions are being met to establish whether the Georgian political climate provides an opportunity for electoral authoritarianism to emerge.

(6) Analysis

Magaloni defines authoritarian equilibria based on the presence of a punishment regime and a degree of long-term economic growth.¹² A punishment regime is characterized by the governing party (in this case a hegemonic party) withholding certain benefits from opposition voters and

¹² Magaloni, Beatriz. *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and Its Demise in Mexico*. 1st ed. Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

politicians and awarding these same benefits to its members and supporters.¹³ This creates incentives for the opposition to defect to the party supporters and encourages the existing support base to remain loyal to the party. The punishment regime is usually the driving strategy behind the success of a hegemonic party, especially once it begins exhibiting authoritarian tendencies and needs to retain mass support. Depending on whether a punishment regime exists, and whether a country experiences a high or low degree of long-term economic growth, the hegemonic party system can result in three types of equilibria: self-destructive authoritarian equilibrium, unstable authoritarian equilibrium, self-reinforcing destructive equilibrium.¹⁴

To examine which criteria Georgia fits, it is necessary to establish the conditions of economic growth and the presence of the punishment regime in the country. I will begin with the latter, by providing examples of party supporters benefiting from the government, while the opposition supporters face artificial obstacles in three fields: public movements, private sector, and arts and culture.

(6.1) Public Movement

Presence of a potent public movement has been characteristic of Georgian politics ever since the 90s that eventually led to the country's independence. The Georgian Dream government, however, created conditions in which citizens, with similar ideologies as the party, enjoy freedom of expression while those that oppose it are either ignored or persecuted.

¹³ Magaloni, Beatriz. *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and Its Demise in Mexico*. 1st ed. Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

¹⁴ Magaloni, Beatriz. *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and Its Demise in Mexico*. 1st ed. Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Following the Rose Revolution (2003) and during the Saakashvili ruling, the expression of opposition ideas became less active largely due to the strict restrictions imposed on any oppositional ideologies and censorship.¹⁵ In the initial stages of the Georgian Dream government (2012), there were no catalysts for the activation of the opposition to the ruling party by the public either. However, overtime, as the party began exhibiting anti-provocative, pro-Russian rhetoric, citizens began speaking out against it. Nonetheless, there was no mass strategic mobilization of public movements until 2019 – following the events of June 20th, also known as the Gavrilov’s Night.

On June 20th, 2019, Georgian Parliament hosted the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy, where officials from historically Orthodox Christian countries gather. During the assembly, Sergei Gavrilov – a member of a Communist Party in Russia – sat in a chair of the Head of Parliament of Georgia and delivered a speech in Russian. Sergei Gavrilov, has repeatedly violated the (Law of Occupation), by visiting the occupied territories of Georgia without the permission of the Georgian government and has voted in favor of declaring Abkhazia (one of the occupied regions), an independent state.¹⁶ The fact that an official of a historic aggressor, who evidently does not recognize the sovereignty of Georgia, was allowed to sit in the seat of the Head of the Parliament sparked severe public outrage. The same night, protestors gathered in front of the parliament building to call for the resignation of Georgian Dream party Parliament members who had allowed Gavrilov such liberties. The protests escalate into clashes with the

¹⁵ Resource Center on Media Freedom in Europe. “Censorship and Self-Censorship in Georgia.”

¹⁶ BBC News. “Georgia Protests: Thousands Storm Parliament over Russian MP’s Speech,” June 21, 2019, sec. Europe.

riot police. Later in the night, special task divisions of the Ministry of Internal Affairs deployed rubber bullets and tear gas.¹⁷ This sparked the summer of protests: organized by a mobilized group of protesters who later became known as the Shame Movement – one of the biggest public movements in Georgia since the fight for independence in the 90s. Since their formation, the Shame Movement has continued speaking out against the government's pro-Russian rhetoric and has expanded into formation of watchdog groups that track the party's corruption levels, disinformation and propaganda efforts, and anti-Western and authoritarian tendencies. Consequently, the founders and the members of the organization have faced oppression in the form of false arrests. The members have been arrested for shouting anti-government slogans, groundless accusations of non-compliance with the law enforcement based on testimonies from witnesses that were never at the scene of arrest.¹⁸

The Shame Movement is not the only public movement in Georgia, however. With rising popularity, the Conservative Movement has become prominent in their defense of so-called traditional values, with extreme aggression against the LGBTQ community and an openly pro-Russian rhetoric. This movement, unlike the Shame Movement, acts in accordance with the Georgian Dream party and criticizes the opposition and progressive part of the society instead. Consequently, both the founders and the members of the organization do not face any constrictions in their operations. Specifically, on July 5th, 2021, the movement organized a mass demonstration with calls for violence against the Tbilisi Pride Movement that was planning to hold a pride parade.¹⁹ The parade was canceled, and numerous members of both Georgian and

¹⁷ BBC News. "Georgia Protests: Thousands Storm Parliament over Russian MP's Speech," June 21, 2019, sec. Europe.

¹⁸ OC Media. "Georgian Activist Arrested for Shouting Anti-Government Slogans," February 25, 2021.

¹⁹ Darnell Bahl, Lane. "On July 5 Violence in Georgia." U.S. Mission to the OSCE, July 8, 2021.

international press were injured by the demonstrators. Even though the perpetrators of violence were arrested and some prosecuted, in his address to the people following the incidents, Prime Minister Garibashvili put the blame on the opposition rather than the organizers of the demonstrations and founders of the movement. In his address, he claimed the events of the day could have been avoided if it were not for the provocations of the opposition in their attempt to host the parade and accused the opposition of plotting to discredit authorities and the church.²⁰

(6.2) Private Sector and Business

The punishment regime can also be observed in the private sector, where businesses with ties to the Georgian government operate freely and receive benefits, while those with oppositional views or no open support to the Georgian Dream party face additional obstacles. In 2020, the Georgian Dream government canceled an investment contract with the Anaklia Development Consortium (ADC) to build the first deep seaport in Georgia, as the ADC was unable to secure the funds it was required to before the designated date.²¹ As standard procedure, the government vowed to announce a new tender and secure a new contract to ensure the construction of the port. The project of Anaklia Port was launched during the government of Saakashvili under the National Movement. The strategic importance of a deep-sea port was viewed as essential for the continued development of Georgia as a geopolitical player in the region. For this reason, under the National Movement, changes to the constitution now obligate a Georgian government to facilitate construction of a deep-sea port on the Black Sea.²² The Georgian Dream party is, then,

²⁰ Dumbadze, Ana. “PM: Attack on Journalists Was Catastrophic Mistake, We Know the Provocateur.” Georgia Today, September 3, 2021.

²¹ Agenda News. “Gov’t to Cancel Deal with Anaklia Development Consortium to Build Deep Sea Port,” January 9, 2020.

²² Menabde, Giorgi. “The ‘Big Game’ around Georgia’s Deep-Water Ports.” Jamestown Foundation, May 18, 2021.

required to complete such a project. However, following the termination of the contract with ADC – who cited lack of government support as one of the reasons for failure to secure the funds – the construction of the Anaklia Port was halted indefinitely, with no tenders announced by the Georgian Dream. The party, on the contrary, began speaking of expansion of an already existing Poti port that has been proven to be unsuitable for deep-sea port construction.²³ In March 2020, the Poti port was approved for extension under the Poti Port Operator Company.²⁴

(6.3) Arts and Culture

The punishment regime can also be observed in arts and cultural spaces, where the party has begun installing loyalists and removing employees that do not openly support the party and have opposing stances. In March 2021 Thea Tsulukiani was appointed a Minister of Culture and Sports. After assuming her new position, she began series of reforms that served to replace the number of employees (of museums, science centers, cultural institutions) with those loyal to the Georgian Dream party. From attempting to influence literature contest results by appointing a loyalist jury member to firing long-serving national museum staff, Minister Tsulukiani's reforms are far-reaching and extensive.²⁵ Reforms affected museums, contests, theaters, and numerous other cultural spaces under government funding. Tsulukiani was also open about her reforms serving to “cleansing these institutions from the remnants of the United National Movement,” the coalition of the opposition parties.²⁶

²³ Transparency International Georgia. “New Developments around Anaklia Port,” June 19, 2019.

²⁴ Transparency International Georgia. “Developments around Georgian Ports: What Is New?,” April 22, 2021.

²⁵ Georgia's Reforms Associates. “Cleansing UNM Remnants: GD's Culture Minister Tsulukiani's Politically Motivated Firings,” February 18, 2022.

²⁶ Georgia's Reforms Associates. “Cleansing UNM Remnants: GD's Culture Minister Tsulukiani's Politically Motivated Firings,” February 18, 2022.

(6.4) Economic Growth

Along with the presence of the punishment regime, Magaloni's theory on authoritarian equilibria considers long-term economic growth. In the presence of long-term economic growth, the electorate is more likely to stay loyal to the party, as the economy improves and stability is ensured. On the other hand, as the economy improves so does the median income of the voters. In the punishment regime, this leads to the party needing to deploy more rewards for their supporters to prevent them from investing in the oppositional political blocks.²⁷ If the degree of economic growth is low, the voters are more inclined to switch their support to oppositional groups, as their dissatisfaction grows. In this case, the party relies on vote buying as means to retain their support base and requires less rewards to achieve this goal, as the median income of the electorate remains low.²⁸

The conditions of economic growth can be more challenging to establish in the case of Georgia as its economy has only stabilized in the recent two decades and with the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic does not paint the full picture. Since the Rose Revolution (2003) until 2013, Georgia's economic growth exhibited progress, with GDP growth averaging 6 percent.²⁹ During the 2014 – 2015 period, GDP growth slowed as a result of a slump in global oil prices. However, starting in 2016, Georgia's economic growth resumed and even outperformed most countries in the region (Europe and Central Asia).³⁰ In 2020, the impacts of the pandemic were severe, as a

²⁷ Magaloni, Beatriz. *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and Its Demise in Mexico*. 1st ed. Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

²⁸ Magaloni, Beatriz. *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and Its Demise in Mexico*. 1st ed. Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

²⁹ World Bank. "Georgia - Country Economic Memorandum." World Bank Group, June 30, 2022.

³⁰ World Bank. "Georgia - Country Economic Memorandum." World Bank Group, June 30, 2022.

large percentage of the economy relies on tourism and services. However, the economy bounced back in 2021, with an estimated growth rate of 10.4 percent.³¹

Evidently, despite clear progress and resilience in the face of the pandemic, Georgia's economic growth performance varies and cannot be characterized as a high long-term economic growth. However, this condition needs to be contextualized. After the economic and political crisis, the country experienced following the fall of the Soviet Union and a decade-long instability marked with coups and civil wars, the economic growth that it is experiencing today must be considered as stable, or as one that ensures a degree of stability to its citizens. With the memory of the 90s crisis still present amongst the electorate, such economic performance is more than satisfactory. Therefore, the electorate does not have incentives to defect to the opposition by the reason of economic performance. On the contrary, a large portion of the party's support today is based on the image of peaceful stability of the country.

(6.5) External Factors

Along with these internal factors, Georgia also faces several external circumstances that influence its democratization processes. Its shared borders with the Russian Federation, have been an arena for conflicts since the declaration of independence in the 90s. Two regions of Georgia – Abkhazia and Samachablo (South Ossetia) – are occupied by Russian military forces and the borderization processes increase their presence in the occupied territories each year. In such circumstances, the Russian Federation favors authoritarian regimes in Georgia, that prove to be more loyal to it and display anti-Western sentiment. Therefore, as a regional superpower, it

³¹ World Bank. "Georgia - Country Economic Memorandum." World Bank Group, June 30, 2022.

promotes authoritarianism in the Caucasus region and these efforts reflect on Georgia's political status quo as well.

(7) Discussion and Conclusion

As demonstrated, the Georgian Dream party has established a punishment regime in Georgia, effectively creating incentives for its support base to remain loyal and for the opposition supporters to defect to the party. Although the economic growth is not characterized as high long-term growth, when discussed in the context of Georgia's consolidation as a state, it produces the same result for the formation of the hegemonic-party autocracy. Additionally, hegemonic-party systems often rely on the initial reason of victory to retain support.³² In the Georgian Dream's case, the victory is painted as a symbolic defeat of the constrictive regime of the National Movement and Saakashvili. The party uses this image to create an illusion of themselves as saviors and with the looming threat of National Movement's return (and with it the Saakashvili regime) the Georgian Dream creates additional incentives for its electorate to remain loyal. In Magaloni's authoritarian equilibria theory, Georgia can then be characterized as an emerging self-sustaining authoritarian hegemonic system. Consequently, the Georgian Dream's consolidation as a hegemonic-party, would drastically harm Georgia's democratic future and its continued success as a free-liberal state in the region. With more than twenty percent of the country being occupied by the Russian Federation, a party with an increasingly loyal attitude towards the aggressor becoming a hegemonic autocrat puts under question Georgia's continued territorial integrity as well. However, even though the pre-conditions for the Georgian Dream to become a hegemonic party are present, they have not consolidated as one yet. In this way, there

³² Magaloni, Beatriz. *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and Its Demise in Mexico*. 1st ed. Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

is still a possibility of avoiding such scenario. Whether the opposition will manage to mobilize against the party in time, however, remains to be determined but is not yet impossible.

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