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Speculations on Georgia's Status in the Light of Regional Changes

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From a free-wheeling kleptocracy to “a Western country”

Although Georgia had not explicitly progressed towards a democratic ruling system due to the ethnic problems under Zviad Gamsakhurdia's presidency at the beginning of the 1990s, it commenced taking democratic steps in Eduard Shevardnadze's term due to the credibility of Shevardnadze as a reformist in the eyes of western politicians. He was known as the 'gatekeeper' of Western funds (Christophe, 2004, p. 10). However, as mentioned by Lazarus (2010, p. 5), this age can be explained by three concepts: feckless pluralism (Carothers, 2002, pp. 10-14); chaotic pluralism; and a mafia-dominated state which corresponded to Georgian political atmosphere under Shevardnadze with his authoritarian power. The late years of Shevardnadze rule is even identified with the notion of 'free-wheeling kleptocracies' by Mitchell and Philips (2008, p. 164).

According to Mitchell, (2012, pp. 101-102), three features explain and provide clues as to why the post-Soviet Central Asia, and the South Caucasus countries have authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes. The first feature is that these regimes are not dominated by strong parties. Throughout the regions, individuals are stronger than the formal party mechanisms. The second is that the leadership of those countries is highly centralised. As a common result of this, all governors, majors, and leaders of other sub-national policies are almost entirely appointed by the president rather than directly elected. Thirdly, the legislative bodies of those post-Soviet countries are powerless. Mitchell claims that many parliamentary members see the parliament as a way to make business networks and gain access to corruption rather than a place of decision-making (Mitchell, 2012, p. 102).

Democracy promotion played a key role in the political transformation of Georgia from 1995 to 2003. Looking at the volume of external aids, from 1992 to 2007, the US provided \$778 million to Georgia in order to flourish and strengthen democracy in this country (Jakopovich, 2007, p. 213). As for the EU, the financial contribution was £420 million between 1992 and 2004, and this amount excluded individual aid from separate member states (Tudoroiu, 2007, p. 323).

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The leading role of the US in the democratisation process of Georgia clearly affected the destiny of Georgia. The demonstrators of the RR waved American flags while protesting against Shevardnadze for his resignation. After Shevardnadze was removed from power, a billboard located in downtown Tbilisi had the words 'Thank you, USA' written on it (Mitchell, 2006, p. 671). Having succeeded in Georgia's RR, the US president, George Bush, held an open-air meeting with the young western-educated Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili, at Freedom Square, Tbilisi, on 10 May 2005. Bush hailed Georgian democracy and stated in his speech that Georgia was a beacon of liberty¹ (The Guardian, 2005; Muskhelishvili & Jorjoliani, 2009, p. 684; Jones, 2015, p. 139). The RR was a milestone in the democratic transition of Georgian history that was mainly encouraged by the US. Furthermore, the revolution of Georgia in 2003 was called a 'short-lived fourth wave of democratization that spread over the countries such as Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, and Lebanon (Mitchell, 2009, p. 2).

According to Wertsch (2005, pp. 520-521), a couple of basic forces at work prior to the RR provide insight into why it took place. These are civil society; a vibrant free press; a lack of state authority; and lastly Georgian national identity and unity. However, this democratic enrichment in Georgia lost its speed due to political issues that range from the centralisation of power to intolerant, and aggressive political discourse towards political opponents (Muskhelishvili & Jorjoliani, 2009, p. 693). Nevertheless, the interest of donors has maintained in some various degrees over a quarter century.

The democratic transition in Georgia reached another peak point. A new political protest wave flourished in Georgia between 2007 and 2008 though foreign actors did not play the same role as they had done in the RR (Muskhelishvili & Jorjoliani, 2009, p. 682).

The regional disputes and the enlargement policies of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the EU have been the top issues that have affected the interactions of the Western countries with Georgia in the context of democratic reforms (Mitchell, 2012, p. 104). At that point, the August 2008 War between Georgia and Russia in the region played a vital role which concluded with Russia recognising two regions of Georgia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, as an independent country. This catastrophic war was also supposed to be a milestone in terms of the relationships between regional and international powers with Georgia and Russia.

Dance of Georgia and European Union Together

According to Kopstein (2006, p. 86), the US and EU differ from each other through their interpretations of 1989's lessons. European statespersons encouraged the elites to build stable and democratic states on their periphery where the Yugoslav tragedy occurred. To achieve these aims, the post-communist elites were supported in order to strengthen their enthusiasm for joining the EU as a grant project of reconstruction since democracy promotion was principally a top-down project in the eyes of Western Europe

¹ Although the original saying of Bush was 'beacon of liberty', Muskhelishvili and Jorjoliani used the term beacon of democracy, possibly to emphasise its influence on democracy.

(Kopstein, 2006, p. 90). Moreover, according to Youngs (2009, p. 895), while promoting democratic norms in third-world countries, the EU uses networks more than hierarchical approaches to governance.

Looking at the European Union, it can be seen that programmes such as PHARE²) were carried out firstly in Poland and Hungary and then in some other countries. Technical Aid to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) and the Freedom of Support Act were launched with a broad democracy assistance perspective by the EU (Bishku, 2015, p. 45). It should not be forgotten that the EU also implemented a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with Georgia in 1999. In the following years, as mentioned by Bishku, new instruments of the EU, the ENP and its specific dimension the EaP, were enacted. At this stage, as emphasised by Nilsson and Silander (2016, p. 44), the EU's policies to promote democracy, and sustain peace and security were embedded into its foreign and security policies, development aid, international treaties with third states, and all potential member states. The EU-Georgia Association Agreement entered into force in July 2016 and is occupied with doing political association and economic integration between the EU and Georgia. Indeed, economic indicators show the European Union as Georgia's largest trading partner. Georgian citizens have benefitted from visa-free travel to the Schengen area since 2017.

The Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) is a network of research, resource and training centres established in 2003 in the capital cities of South Caucasus to strengthen social science research and public policy analysis. Having looked at CRRC's datasets (2014-2020) regarding the most important national issues of Georgia, such as territorial-related issues, EU membership, NATO membership and democracy-related problems are not listed but jobs, poverty, and rising prices/high inflations are on the agenda of Georgia.

Instead of a Conclusion, Some Speculations: from “a Western country” to uncertainty

Georgia, which is the more western state of the South Caucasus, is open to various crises due to the recent regional-global events. Firstly, in the face of the ever-increasing tension between the EU and Russia, the failure to find a solution regarding Georgia's use of its sovereignty rights based on Abkhazia and South Ossetia may damage relations of trust in the medium term. Because the EU has not been successful in this issue for more than a quarter of a century. Secondly, Although Georgia, which has not found a solution to the problems of Abkhazia and Ossetia due to sovereignty, is eager for the EU and NATO, it has not been given the green light due to the reservations of its interlocutors. Thirdly, the progress of the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict, which has not been resolved in the region for many years, with moves that strengthen the territorial sovereignty of Azerbaijan, will potentially open new avenues to various economic, political, and military changes in the region. Fourthly, the development of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia under

² Poland and Hungary Assistance for the Restructuring of the Economy.

the mediation of China will also bring about regional changes. Lastly, when we add the rising populist politics and the influence of regional autocratic regimes to all regional developments, it is hardly possible to think that this atmosphere will not affect Georgia's domestic politics.

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