



## WHY IS THIS GUY STILL TALKING ABOUT DEMOCRACY IN GEORGIA?

LINCOLN MITCHELL

GIP commentary / March 2017

When you've spent a well over a decade writing about democracy in Georgia and are asked by a friend to write another piece about the topic, several challenges arise right away. The first is the question of what you can write about democracy in Georgia that you haven't already written in a book, article, or blog. A related question is why anybody would want to read yet another piece by you about democracy in Georgia.

The second challenge is that of remaining analytical and unemotional. It's easy to let show my frustration with the current Georgian government for not realizing that they do more harm to themselves and to Georgian democracy by creating problems for Rustavi 2 than that station could ever do to them through its critical programming.

---

\* Lincoln Mitchell is a scholar and analyst who has written extensively on Georgia. You can visit him online at [www.lincolnmitchell.com](http://www.lincolnmitchell.com) or follow him on Twitter @LincolnMitchell.

Similarly, while I'm angered and gobsmacked by the self-righteous accusations aimed at Bidzina Ivanishvili for being the real power behind Georgian politics voiced by those who happily ignored the bizarre, dysfunctional, Sultanistic nature of the regime Mikheil Saakashvili presided over during his last few years in office, that shouldn't drive my writing either. It's also difficult to watch western experts, of which I am one, think they (we) have solutions to Georgia's democratization-related problems, only to see those solutions fall short for entirely predictable, and often predicted, reasons.

Third is the constant need to guard against putting too much weight on the events of the moment. It's tempting to frame any discussion of Georgian democracy within the most recent election result, latest controversy, or bizarre statement by a major political figure. While this approach is appropriate for regular reporting and analysis, in pieces aimed at the bigger picture, it's less effective. A related challenge is that of seeing more recent events as trends, cycles, or patterns in Georgian politics.

The last major challenge is working to benefit from everything I've learned over the years. Many Georgians just beginning their careers in politics, media, and civil society have no recollection of pre-Rose Revolution Georgia. Amazingly, in a few years the youngest professionals will have only dim memories of Saakashvili's Georgia.

This is even more stark for internationals working in Georgia. Few of them have been in the country for more than four years, so have no firsthand recollection of Georgia before Georgian

Dream came to power. I, on the other hand, have been observing, writing about, and working on Georgian politics since the late Shevardnadze period. I am not sure what that says about me, but it is true.

This makes me a source of institutional memory – which is a polite way of saying that I'm old. But with that comes valuable perspective. For example, it was common in the middle and late Saakashvili years to hear foreigners describe the Shevardnadze government, which was deeply corrupt and venal but also weak and unable to govern in any meaningful sense, as a much nastier and more authoritarian regime than it actually was.

Today, many foreigners and Georgians who work in politics in the country overestimate how much criticism from abroad the Saakashvili government encountered as it moved away from democracy in its later years. These and numerous other examples demonstrate the value of having watched Georgia over a long period of time.

This institutional memory can, however, sometimes lead to cynicism. Observing the same problems year after year, including the need for parties to meaningfully discuss issue differences or represent different interests, a civil society that while often very impressive is rarely constituency based, parliaments that waver between effectiveness and irrelevance, and politics that are dominated by the same tired government-opposition narratives rather than substance, is difficult, and can sometimes lead to giving up hope in Georgia's democratic future.

I'm not sure what I can usefully say about de-

mocracy and politics in Georgia that successfully avoids all of the pitfalls listed above, but I will make some observations nonetheless. First, it is useful to see Georgian politics as wildly unpredictable and simultaneously largely foreseeable.

For example, in the summer of 2011, if you had told most Georgian political elites and foreign analysts, observers, and kibitzers that the next four people to serve as president and prime minister would be Bidzina Ivanishvili—at that time a reclusive billionaire with seemingly no interest in politics—Irakli Garibashvili, Giorgi Margvelashvili, and Giorgi Kvirikashvili, they would have thought you a little nutty.

However, if back then you had said that in early 2017, media freedom, informal governance, and the absence of interest- or ideology-based political parties would all be major concerns for Georgia regardless of who was in power, almost everyone would have agreed with you.

The unpredictable naturally gets more attention. An unexpected person becoming prime minister, a new political party emerging, or an interesting new issue or scandal coming to light are, of course, going to draw interest.

However, these things often make it more difficult to focus on the longer-term problems of Georgian democracy that are, axiomatically, not easy to solve. In some regards, it doesn't matter who the prime minister is if Georgia lacks a genuinely pluralistic party system. That new, upstart opposition party may seem interesting, but even if they win, as they did in 2012 but not in 2016, many of the deeper problems linger.

Second, the Georgian people remain too separate from Georgian politics, but that is where the real power in Georgia lies. One way that think about this is that President Margvelashvili has, at the time of writing, approximately 9,000 Twitter followers. I am one of them; there is a good chance you are, too. There are other ways to determine who is a member of the Georgian political class, but following the president on Twitter is as good a measure as any. The number of followers feels like a good ballpark figure for the membership of what might be called the global Georgian political class.

The people in that political class come from different countries and represent a range of political opinions, but they have some things in common. None of them are going to determine Georgia's political future or solve the lingering problems of Georgian democracy.

In some respects, the most critical and consistent question in Georgian politics is about the role played by people who are not part of the political class. These Georgians are heard from on Election Day and occasionally when they come together for large demonstrations.

We have a sense of how these people think about issues and politicians through periodic polling, but all of these are very blunt tools that do not provide the vast majority of Georgians with a useful means of engaging in political life. Obviously, voting and demonstrating, preferably peacefully, are important rights that all people should be able to exercise, but it is a very limited and inaccurate way to operationalize the notion of political participation.

It is a nagging and often overlooked problem of Georgian democracy that politics and even democracy continue to be viewed by many Georgians as something that has little to do with them. They may participate in very circumscribed ways and occasionally benefit or, more occasionally, encounter problems from politicians, but for the most part the Soviet adage that keeping one's head down is the best and safest way to engage with the government continues to frame Georgian political life.

In Georgia, there is a paucity of interest groups that represent people, of organizations that bring people into politics through issues or activism, and of political parties that engage people on issues directly relevant to them.

This is exacerbated by the tendency of the Georgian political elite to look down on the people. Sadly, in most discussions with political elites across the political spectrum, it usually doesn't take long for a Georgian elite to make a disparaging remark about the readiness of the Georgian people for democracy.

This is extremely troubling, but it is also absurd considering that, on balance, in recent years the Georgian people have conducted themselves democratically, intelligently, and with integrity. It is the Georgian people who peacefully gathered to oust the corrupt Shevardnadze government in 2003.

Almost a decade later, the Georgian people engaged in peaceful demonstrations and then, against substantial odds, ensured a peaceful election to get rid of the Rose Revolution government that had grown brutal and undemocratic

in its waning years. In both cases, the leadership of those benefitting from these movements was helpful, but the lion's share of the credit should go to the Georgian people.

Third, all of us who write, think, and speak about democracy in Georgia would be wise to remove from our vocabulary the word "transition" as well as "path", "road", "journey", and any other that suggests unidirectionality. Georgia looks like many other countries that are neither consolidated democracies nor clear authoritarian democracies.

These countries may fluctuate between periods of greater or lesser liberalism and party competition, but over time it becomes clear that Georgia is not going to remain somewhere in the middle. It is possible that in five years Georgia will look like a European democracy, although who knows what that means today, but it is more likely that Georgia will continue in its present state.

In the last quarter century or so, some countries like Estonia and the Czech Republic have transitioned from Communist authoritarian regimes to functioning democracies, while others like Russia have seen authoritarian regimes tighten their grip and reverse whatever democratic gains that had been made. Georgia fits neither of these categories, but continuing to assume change or the inevitability of democracy following any democratic gain will continue to make it harder to understand Georgia's actual regime dynamics.

I have, to use an old and no longer literal metaphor, spilled a lot of ink writing and thinking

about Georgian democracy. I may have even learned a few things along the way. At the very least, I have learned some useful questions to ask. The first is whether linear movement, cycles, or a series of unrelated events best explains Georgia's development.

We tend to assume linear movement, but frequently thinking in terms of cycles is more useful. The macro question facing Georgia today is whether Georgian Dream can break the cycle of one-party dominance followed by collapse that has been at the core of Georgian politics for over 25 years. That can only be understood if we look at events today not by asking if Georgian democracy is going in the right direction, but by asking if we have seen this before.

It is also important to ask just how important are events at a particular moment. There was a moment in 2013 when the selection of Giorgi Margvelashvili as Georgian Dream's candidate for president was seen as proof that Ivanishvili was running the country and was committed to staffing the government with people entirely loyal to him.

Similarly, in mid-2004, many observers placed great emphasis on Saakashvili's democratic rhetoric while more or less overlooking the beginnings of his repression of the media and efforts to concentrate power in his own hands. In both cases, the import and meaning of current developments were either not interpreted correctly or simply less important than they seemed at the time.

Lastly, all of us who write about Georgia should ask more questions of ordinary Geor-

gians. I am just as much at fault here as most. A five-day trip to Georgia, even by somebody like me who has some background in the country, that is limited to Tbilisi and possibly Batumi and to meetings and discussions with English-speaking elites, regardless of political views, is an inadequate way to gather information about democracy and Georgia. It makes it all but impossible to understand the thinking, frustrations, and hopes of the Georgian people who stand to gain or lose the most.

Today, the small and large trends in Georgian democracy are further complicated by the democratic rollback in the United States, the country that more than any other has been Georgia's most powerful friend and patron during its modern period of independence.

Sadly, this coincides with a disturbing and nontransparent relationship between the new American administration and the Kremlin that might lead to very dire consequences for Georgia. All of this creates additional challenges both for Georgia and for those foreigners who would like to help Georgia become a consolidated democracy. Nonetheless, a nuanced framework for thinking about Georgia, based on my experience and writings I have tried to lay out in this piece, may be more necessary than ever now.

THE GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS (GIP)  
is a Tbilisi-based non-profit, non-partisan, research and analysis organization. GIP works to strengthen the organizational backbone of democratic institutions and promote good governance and development through policy research and advocacy in Georgia.



საქართველოს პოლიტიკის ინსტიტუტი  
GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS

Georgian Institute of Politics  
Tel: +995 599 99 02 12  
Email: [info@gip.ge](mailto:info@gip.ge)  
[www.gip.ge](http://www.gip.ge)