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# Can a Third Way Movement Emerge in Georgian Politics?

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Georgia's 2016 parliamentary elections were a major coup for the Georgian Dream party (GD), which won 115 of 150 seats (76.67%). It did so despite receiving the support of only 24.37% of voters<sup>2</sup>, revealing two problems that continue to afflict Georgian party politics: a heavily majoritarian electoral system and an extremely weak political opposition. This policy memo is devoted to the second issue. Despite hopes for a multi-party parliament, the 2016 elections resulted in a supermajority for GD. No opposition party was able to present itself as a true contender.

The opposition parties responded to the disappointing result by reorganizing. On Jan. 12, 2017 a mass of former United National Movement (UNM) members [announced](#) they were quitting to form a new political movement, the Movement for Liberty-European Georgia. Another political movement was born on June 16 when David Usupashvili, former leader of The Republican Party of Georgia and ex-parliament speaker, [announced](#) the foundation of a new political movement – “The Development Movement.”

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<sup>2</sup> Parliamentary elections in Georgia include two components – proportional and majoritarian. In the proportional part of the 2016 parliamentary elections the Georgian Dream party received 856,638 votes – which is 48.68% of voters who participated in the elections (1,814,276) and 24.47% of eligible voters (3,513,884).

Both new parties promise to offer voters a third way between the existing binary of GD and the UNM, the latter having been the only realistic opposition contender in Georgian party politics. Many observers are skeptical, however, believing that prospects of future success are slim and both new parties will have trouble standing out from GD and the UNM.

This memo addresses three important questions. First, what are the factors that encouraged both new players to emerge? Second, how do these new parties justify their existence within the party system? Last, and most important, what can the new parties learn from the past experience of other movements that have tried and failed to offer alternatives to GD and the UNM?

## **Why Does Georgia Need New Opposition Movements?**

The factors giving rise to the new political movements are quite clear:

1. In recent years, a considerable number of voters have expressed dislike of every political party currently operating in Georgia;
2. The parliamentary opposition is very weak; and
3. The opposition political landscape shifted significantly following the 2016 parliamentary elections.

A [poll](#) carried out in April 2017 by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) on behalf of the National Democratic Institute (NDI) revealed that 42% of Georgians feel closest to “No Party.” The same trend was evident in [June 2016](#), four months before the 2016 parliamentary elections, when only 33% of Georgians who planned to vote expressing knowing which party they would vote for. These figures indicate that voters are unsatisfied with the existing parties. There is clear demand for a new political actor in Georgian party politics.

Currently, the parliamentary opposition is at one of its weakest points in the history of independent Georgia. The ruling GD party holds a constitutional majority in parliament, with the opposition holding only 23.33% of seats. This is not an unprecedented situation: from 2008-2012, the UNM held 129 of 160 seats in parliament, leaving only 19.37% of seats for the opposition. Nonetheless, the present frailty of the parliamentary opposition indicates a gap in political life that should be filled by a viable new player.

Following the 2016 parliamentary elections, several leading opposition leaders and a large number of the rank-and-file announced they were leaving their parties. Just two days after the first round, Irakli Alasania, leader of Free Democrats and ex-defense minister, withdrew from the majoritarian runoff and [announced](#) he was quitting politics altogether. Days later, [he was followed](#) by other senior members of the Free Democrats. In November, a number of leading members [quit](#) the Republican Party, including David Usupashvili, Tinatin Khidasheli, and Vakhtang Khmaladze. These shifts were [referred](#) to as the “crisis of the liberal center.”

Other opposition parties were affected, as well. Also in November, former MP Gubaz Sanikidze [announced](#) his departure from the National Forum party, which sat in parliament from 2012-2016 as a member of the Georgian Dream coalition. In December, the famous opera singer-turned-politician Paata Burchuladze [left](#) State for the People, the party he [launched](#) in May 2016. Out of such a volatile opposition landscape, new groupings were bound to emerge.

Nevertheless, bipolarity remains the primary feature of Georgian party politics. According to the results of [municipal elections](#) in 2014 and parliamentary elections in [2012](#) and [2016](#), Georgia has only two viable contestants – GD and the UNM. Voters are looking for something new, but opposition parties have failed to present attractive alternatives. The Movement for Liberty-European Georgia and the Development Movement – both spin-offs of older political parties – are attempts at filling that gap.

That begs the question: do the new groupings have a real chance at success? Moreover, what can they learn from the opposition parties that tried to challenge both GD and the UNM in the 2016 elections?

A March-April 2016 [survey](#) conducted by Baltic Surveys/The Gallup Organization on behalf of the International Republican Institute (IRI) showed that 12% of people planned to vote for State for the People, 10% for the Free Democrats, and 3% of people planned to vote for the Alliance of Patriots. Those preliminary polls weren’t borne out by actual voting behaviour: the Alliance of Patriots won six seats in parliament but both the Free Democrats and State for the People failed to pass the threshold. Besides GD and the UNM, the Alliance of Patriots was the only party that passed the threshold; thus, it’s the most successful alternative to the two larger parties.

Party & Election Bloc*	March-April 2016 ( <a href="#">the survey</a> )	October 2016 ( <a href="#">result of the elections</a> )
State for the People	12%	3.45%
Free Democrats	10%	4.63%
Alliance of Patriots	3%	5.01%

Analysis of the above data highlights a number of factors that are important for an opposition party's success.

### Leaders are important, but we shouldn't overestimate their role

According to [the survey](#) conducted in the months before the 2016 elections, Paata Burchuladze was the most popular leader in Georgian politics, with 75% of people calling him "favorable." Irakli Alasania, was the third most popular politician, with 60% of people favoring him. In contrast, only 26% of people viewed the leader of the Alliance of Patriots, Irma Inashvili, as favorable. Even less, 23%, said the same about the other leader of the Alliance of Patriots, Davit Tarkhan-Mouravi.

Leader & Party/Election Bloc	% of respondents who view them as favorable (according to <a href="#">the survey</a> )	Overall ranking of popularity in the country	<a href="#">% of votes</a> party received in the 2016 parliamentary elections
Paata Burchuladze - State for People	75%	1 <sup>st</sup>	3.45%
Irakli Alasania - Free Democrats	60%	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4.63%
Irma Inashvili - Alliance of Patriots	26%	15 <sup>th</sup>	5.01%
Davit Tarkhan-Mouravi - Alliance of Patriots	23%	18 <sup>th</sup>	5.01%

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\* These three parties are discussed here because: 1) according to [the survey](#) conducted prior to the parliamentary election the Free Democrats and State for the People were two highest-polling third-way parties; and 2) the Alliance of Patriots was the only political organization other than GD and the UNM that managed to pass the threshold in the parliamentary elections.

Having a popular leader doesn't automatically ensure success. The Alliance of Patriots' leaders were much less popular than Paata Burchuladze or Irakli Alasania, yet the party managed to obtain seats in the parliament.

### Money is still important, but not crucial

The State Audit Office of Georgia published a [report](#) on the financial expenditures of political parties during the pre-election campaign. From June 8, 2016 until the election day, Paata Burchuladze's State for the People spent 4,396,452.40 lari; the Alliance of Patriots spent 2,391,046.00 lari; and the Free Democrats spent 1,308,840.53 lari. There is no doubt that financial sustainability is crucial for any political party but high pre-election expenditures don't inevitably lead to success.

Party/Election Bloc	<a href="#">Expenditures</a> from Jun. 8, 2016 until Oct. 8, 2016 (lari)	Ratio of expenditures (in relation to expenditures by State for the People)	<a href="#">% of votes</a> in 2016 parliamentary elections
Paata Burchuladze - State for People	4,396,452.40	100%	3.45%
Free Democrats	1,308,840.53	29.8%	4.63%
Alliance of Patriots	2,391,046.00	54.4%	5.01%

The Free Democrats spent less than one-third of total expenditures by State for the People, yet they received greater support. Moreover, the Alliance of Patriots spent significantly less than State for People, but acquired seats in parliament while State for the People did not.

## Programs and platforms matter, but not too much

Of course, a bigger pre-election program does not automatically translate into a better – or more popular – program. The [election program](#) of the Free Democrats consisted of 12,858 words, while the Alliance of Patriots’ [program](#) – 6,505. (The election program of State for People was not made available). The Free Democrats spilled a lot more ink than the Alliance of Patriots but couldn’t win any mandates in parliament.

Party/Election Bloc	Size of the election program (words)	Emphasis on economy (word formulation - “economy” in election programs)	<a href="#">% of votes</a> in 2016 parliamentary elections
Free Democrats	12,858	112	4.63%
Alliance of Patriots	6,505	5	5.01%

According to [the survey](#), conducted in June 2016, 41% of the population believe a party’s stance on economic policy is the most important factor when voting. That’s followed by party stance on healthcare issues – 14%; and national security – 11%. Thus, economic policy appears to be of primary importance to voters. However, the Free Democrats had a bigger election program with a significantly greater emphasis on economic issues but received 6,633 fewer votes than the Alliance of Patriots.

## Trust and past party performance still matter

According to polls conducted by the CRRC in [November 2015](#) and [March 2016](#), for Georgians, the most important factors to consider when deciding whom to vote for are: “Trust towards specific members of political parties”; and “party’s past performance.”

That is the main lesson: The Alliance of Patriots managed to distance itself from both GD and the UNM. The party has no history of co-operation with GD (as the Free Democrats do) and has never been associated with the UNM (as does State for People). Thus, the party did not carry guilt by association. That’s not the case for the other opposition parties analysed here.

The Free Democrats [were in coalition](#) with GD from 2012-2014 with Irakli Alasania serving as defense minister in the GD government. Prior to the 2016 parliamentary elections, State for People [formed a coalition](#) with other parties led by former UNM members. Moreover, audio recording of a phone conversation between Paata Burchuladze and Nika Gvaramia, the head of Rustavi 2 TV and a former UNM government official, was [leaked](#) to the public. Consequently, Georgian voters have doubts about the independence of these actors, and it hurt them on election day.

### **The Newcomers: The Movement for Liberty-European Georgia and the Development Movement**

Both political movements that emerged in 2017, the Movement for Liberty-European Georgian and the Development Movement, will have to make great efforts to gain public support and frame themselves as competitive alternatives to GD and the UNM. Prior to discussing each party's potential and ability to learn the abovementioned lessons, it's worth looking at their key members.

The key members of the Development Movement include former Republican Party leaders David Usupashvili, Vakhtang Khmaladze, and Tengiz Shergelashvili. In addition, leaders of the National Front party – Revaz Shavishvili and Kakha Shartava – have also joined the movement. The new political organization has apparently struggled to recruit new faces. Thus, one may question its sincerity due to the past cooperation between its key members and the current ruling party.

In terms of recruitment, European Georgia is not particularly different from the Development Movement. Each and every leading member of European Georgia is a former member of UNM. As a result, many believe the party will only address voters who previously supported the UNM, and thus will fail to provide an alternative to the existing political parties.

Also worth noting is the newcomers' ability to learn from parties that had previously attempted to alter the political platforms of GD and the UNM. Both new movements have popular leaders. According to a [survey](#) conducted in February-March 2017, Movement for Liberty-European Georgia leader David Bakradze is Georgia's most popular opposition politician and the fourth-most popular overall. Similarly, leader of the Development Movement David Usupashvili is the second-most popular opposition

figure and the fifth-most popular overall. However, the cases of State for the People and the Free Democrats demonstrate that popular leaders are no guarantee of success.

Then, there's money. As both movements are yet to be tested in elections, it is difficult to analyze their finances. Undoubtedly, no party can succeed without financial sustainability. However, the case of State for the People demonstrates that money alone can't ensure success. Consequently, political organizations must focus on obtaining financing but should also place great emphasis on financial transparency.

Platforms are also very important. The newcomers will likely have similar platforms: the Movement for Liberty-European Georgian [stands](#) as a center-right party and the Development Movement [stands](#) in the center. The Development Movement has not offered anything concrete yet, but Elene Khoshtaria, the mayoral candidate for the Movement for the Liberty-European Georgian, has already [promised](#) to raise pensions. That policy may appear incompatible with the party's professed ideology. However, due to poor economic conditions in Georgia, it is possible that no political actor has the luxury of rejecting social policy. Nonetheless, political platforms and promises are important to voters, but are not of primary importance. If they were, the Republican Party would have succeeded in the 2016 parliamentary elections because it had one of the most comprehensive [election programs](#) and, according to [a recent policy brief](#) by Levan Kakhishvili, it sincerely followed its professed ideology. Thus, other factors are more important to voters.

The newcomers must concentrate on gaining the trust of the people. They must persuade voters that they offer realistic alternatives to both GD and the UNM. That is impossible without distancing themselves from both parties. Many believe the new movements will struggle to do so, due to significant doubts about sources of funding and past ties with GD and the UNM, respectively.

Thus, the primary objective for European Georgia and the Development Movement is to gain public trust and persuade the people that they are truly independent political actors. They will have to work hard to do so; neither party is well-positioned to learn the lessons of past opposition movements.

## Conclusion

The main challenge in Georgian party politics remains the lack of viable political opposition. An alternative to both Georgian Dream and the United National Movement hasn't yet emerged. The new opposition political projects, led by ex-UNM leaders and former Republican Party leader David Usupashvili, respectively, aim to fill that gap. Both parties, however, will have to make efforts to distance themselves from GD and the UNM. The future success of both depends largely on the ability to gain the trust of the public.

Having charismatic and popular leader, financial sustainability, and a strong pre-election program are all important for electoral success. That being said, any party that wants to emerge as a third way force in Georgian politics must concentrate on trust and integrity. Both the Movement for Liberty-European Georgia and the Development Movement, or any newly emerged political actor would benefit from considering the following recommendations:

- Finances are important, but transparency about the sources of funding is also crucial;
- Platforms and programs are important, but they mean little when the people don't trust the party to implement them;
- Parties must be prudent when cooperating with other parties and forming coalitions. Being a party of principle is important for voters;
- Campaigning only during the months before an election doesn't do enough – parties should consider a “permanent campaign” strategy; and
- Parties shouldn't try to address each and every social group in society; being all things to all people is impossible. Instead, they should identify their core constituency and represent it at the political level.

## GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS (GIP)

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