



Why do Georgian Political Parties Struggle to Negotiate? Structural Disincentives to Compromise-Based Politics

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Executive Summary

The recent political crisis following the contested election results of October 2020 drove both the opposition and the ruling party into a deadlock for several months, with respective displays of drastic demands and stiff resistance. The fact that they have gone through several rounds of meetings – albeit only with international facilitation – shows that both sides considered some type of agreement, at least ostensibly. However, the negotiations have on multiple occasions run into a dead-end, and only as a result of significant external pressure did the parties eventually sign the agreement, which came in the form of a document prepared and presented by a European Union representative. Why did Georgian parties struggle to compromise and negotiate even in a context of mutual interest? This brief discusses structural disincentives to the conflicting parties, which accompanied by personal interests, lead to the failure of consensus-based politics. Such contextual factors include extreme political polarization, value underpinning of the conflict, political culture of personalized politics with strong and charismatic leaders, and historical experience of political persecution.

Key Words: Georgian political crisis, political parties, dialogue, compromise-based politics.

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Introduction

Street politics has been a common feature of the past three decades in Georgia, and the 2020 political crisis can be considered another incident within this trend. A refusal of a coalition of opposition parties to accept the 2020 parliamentary election results threw the country into yet another series of confrontations. Despite international observers stating that they perceived the elections to have been legitimate, including the OSCE (2020), the Georgian opposition boycotted the parliament and took to the streets to protest the results. The situation further intensified in February 2021, when the UNM leader Nika Melia was arrested for refusing to pay bail over charges related to protests in 2019. The two rounds of negotiations, facilitated by EU mediator Christian Danielsson, proved unsuccessful. Despite coming together at the negotiating table, neither side seemed willing to compromise over the key demands, including new elections and freeing those detained over politically-motivated charges. Meanwhile, this state of political turmoil was not only threatening Georgia's democratization process, but also damaging Georgia's reputation in the West, and the events became a potential threat to the country's long-sought integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. Only after warnings that European and American officials were running out of patience, and when the EU decided to introduce the principle of conditionality towards Georgia due to its "high frustration", did the parties agree to compromise by signing the proposed document (Eurasianet 2021b). On April 20, first the Georgian Dream government signed the document after its official visited Washington, followed by several opposition parties. However, this is just the beginning, and the parties still have to arrive at the agreed form of its implementation that has already stumbled over several drawbacks (Eurasianet 2021a).

Ultimately, it is the Georgian public that is a victim of the continuous instability and conflict in politics; it is they who are left under the pressing social and economic problems, which have further intensified as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Frustration with the parties is often also reflected in the public polls, where only 18% of Georgians say that they trust political parties (CRRC 2020b). In terms of the recent crisis, in December 2020, a majority of Georgians (82%) stated that it is important for political parties to collaborate with each other (CRRC 2020c). So why do political parties find it so hard to engage in a consensus-based politics and rather struggle to negotiate? This brief discusses several contextual factors that make the dialogue difficult and inhibit compromises among political parties. For this purpose, the following sections discuss multiple disincentives to consensus-based politics in Georgia, starting from political polarization to the type of political conflict, political culture, and past experiences of power transition.

Extreme Political Polarization

Polarization and radicalization have been common characteristics of Georgian political life in the recent past, with a further increase during the 2019 protests (Freedom House 2020). Extreme polarization has been identified as a challenge to Georgia's democratization (DRI 2018; Silagadze and Gozalishvili 2019), which also creates a significant structural obstacle to the solution of political crises.

Georgia's political landscape is mainly divided between the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party and the United National Movement (UNM), a key opposition faction. A key feature of the political division in Georgia is that it revolves around personalities rather than opposing ideologies, since the parties are identified by their leaders rather than their programs. In fact, party programs and foreign policy priorities between the two parties are similar, both falling within the centrist position and prioritizing Euro-Atlantic integration. The Georgian public is similarly unified in terms of ideology (most are socially conservative), key issues (socio-economic) as well as foreign policy direction (Euro-Atlantic integration). In the lack of issue partisanship, Georgians are not divided over policy or ideology, but rather "over partisan political events, politicians and the institutions they run" (CRRCa 2020). Instead of specific ideologies or policies, political parties build their legitimacy upon the flaws of their opponents, and instead of constructive debates over policy issues, they turn politics into personal attacks, while political discourse serves a demonization of the opposite side. The parties often try to discredit each other referring to its leaders as "oligarch" Ivanishvili from the GD and the "criminal" Saakashvili from the UNM. As a result of radical positions, the middle ground is shrinking, turning politics into a zero-sum-game and thus making any consensus extremely difficult. As there is no middle ground, any attempt to compromise is deemed treason. For instance, after the 'The Citizens' party decided to leave the boycott and join Parliament in the beginning of February, the boycotting parties accused its leader, Aleko Elisashvili, of acting in accordance with the GD agenda (Radio Liberty 2021a).

The rhetoric during the post-election political crisis has been rich with polarized narratives. Both sides denounced the legitimacy of their opponents with negative image portrayals, by demonizing and declaring them as threats to the country and its stability, and blaming each other for acting in the enemy's (Russia's) interests. The GD representatives framed the crisis as radical attempts by the opposition to sabotage the state and blamed the UNM for hindering de-occupation efforts by representing Georgia as a country without unity (Civil.ge 2021b). GD representatives also called some opposition members "criminals" (Civil.ge 2021a) and "so-called politicians who are guilty of different heavy charges" (Radio Liberty 2021b), while Saakashvili's involvement in the process has been used to instill a fear of destabilization and potential revolution. Meanwhile, both sides blamed each other for playing into Russian interests by avoiding any compromise (Interpressnews 2021a). On the other hand, the opposition has put forward the narrative of themselves as Georgian patriots fighting against a pro-Russian government, and thus against a threat to the nation. Nika Melia, calling the government "Russia's fifth column" (Interpressnews 2021b), has stated that party interests have nothing to do with the crisis, rather "the Georgian national movement is on the one side and the interests of occupants on the other" (Interpressnews 2021d).

In cases of extreme polarization, when an out-party is considered a threat to the nation, incumbent parties are more inclined to violate democratic rules, while opposition groups resort to extra-constitutional measures, including boycotts, protests, and quasi-revolutionary activity (McCoy, Rahman and Somer 2018). As a result, the latter no longer believes in democratic ways for removing the incumbent party, (ibid) which has been the case in Georgia. Extreme political polarization has not only been a facilitating factor in starting the crisis but also a huge obstacle to solving the conflict. The rivalry is so extreme that dialogue and consensus almost equals betrayal (DRI 2018). When opponents portray each other as a threat to the nation while the rivalry is also so much about personalities, coming together for a dialogue over a specific issue or a policy is extremely challenging. Those involved found it challenging to compromise, constrained by their own discourses as well as personal confrontations with the opposite side. Eventually, it was external pressure rather than their arrival at the agreement that compelled them to sign the document.

Value Conflict

Value conflicts based on people's beliefs and identities are more challenging to solve in comparison to resource conflicts (Harinck and Druckman 2017). In the context of a lack of clear ideological profiles and electoral linkage (DRI 2018), Georgian parties refer to identities to discredit each other, further deepening the already existing extreme polarization. Blaming their opponents for being pro-Russian – an accusation frequently used to demonize the other side – is often part of Georgia's political exhibitionism, drawing a line between who identifies as European and who harks back to the Soviet mentality, and who also therefore cooperates with the Georgian enemy. Georgian opposition and the government have clashed over these blames since the beginning of the GD's first victory. The opposition has complained that Georgia under the GD government has taken a Russia-friendly course and strongly lobbied for a resolution that established Georgia's pro-Western course as a foreign policy priority. The so-called "Gavrilov's night" in June 2019 was one of the most potent triggers for foregrounding identity-based narratives with its consequences spilling over into the 2020-21 political crisis. Russian Communist party member Sergei Gavrilov's address to the delegates of the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly of Orthodoxy from the Georgian Parliamentary Speaker's chair was followed by a boycott from the Georgian opposition and a rally in front of the parliament building. This event was very much framed as the government inviting the Russian occupiers to take their seat in a prominent government chair, and interpreted as an expression of its pro-Russian sentiments, despite condemnation of the event by GD members as well and several resignations (Civil.ge 2019). The government's decision to violently disperse the rally and arrest the opposition leader Nika Melia for leading the crowd into the parliament building has further contributed to the crisis. The latter case and Melia's refusal to pay his bail fee has become a key factor in the recent political crisis.

This underlying identity-based difference has also crept into the discourse of the 2020-21 political crisis. Even before the elections, opposition representatives already noted that a GD victory would mean a victory of the Russian oligarchs in Georgia, abandoning the EU and NATO

integration goals and entailing further appeasement of Russia (Tabula 2020). The opposition and the protesters alongside the demands of freeing Nika Melia drew parallels between the arrest and the Soviet occupation and have held banners "stop Putin`s dream", "We don`t want a return to the Soviet Union" (Jam-News 2021; Politico 2021) and "freedom to Gavrillov`s personal prisoner" (Interpressnews 2021c). In response, the government has not only denied the accusations, emphasizing that they were the ones driving Georgia close to the EU through achieving visa liberalization and the DCFTA, but they also tried to play the pro-Russian card back by blaming the opposition for pouring into Russian interests by sabotaging the election results and holding protests in the streets (Interpressnews 2021a). It is not surprising that this identity-based framing of the conflict – divided between pro-Russian and backward versus pro-Western and progressive – makes the crisis even harder to overcome. Any compromise from the opposition might sound like a betrayal to its own identity and cooperation with "Russia-friendly" authorities, and the idea that government`s complete removal through new elections remains the only way to ensure "progressive" development of Georgia.

Political Culture and Historical Experience

The political culture of personalized politics with a strong and charismatic leader stems from Georgia's Soviet heritage, and is indicated as one of the driving factors of political polarization in Georgia (DRI 2018) that also inhibits a compromise-based approach. Georgian society`s inclination for charismatic leaders who also fit within the "father of the nation" idea (Chedia 2014) incrementally include the idea of a strong leader. 50% of Georgians think that the government should be like a parent, in comparison to 41% who state that a government is like an employee (CRRC 2020b). The effect of Soviet-style leadership is perhaps also responsible, and this striving for a leader with a strong hand also stands behind the fact that 45% of Georgians have a positive attitude towards Stalin (DW 2013). Within such a culture, every party perceives themselves as the exclusive owners of the truth. There is always difficulty in recognizing defeat and victory and governing factions rarely shy away from using strong responses towards the opposition, not to mention avoiding compromise. In fact, there are rarely any cases when Georgian authorities gave in to the protestors' demands, with the exception of Eduard Shevardnadze during the Rose Revolution. Even in the latter case, a complete loss of legitimacy and extreme external pressure were probably stronger drivers of the decision. Thus, in the context where the 2020 election results are recognized as being legitimate by Georgia`s partners, the government not only considered compromise as a sign of a weakness but also used suppressive methods, such as the imprisonment of opposition members. Only strong external pressure for a dialogue drove the government and the opposition to finally sign the agreement document.

In addition, Georgia's past experience of utterly annihilating the defeated political side in the context of the country's weak institutions has created a perception of "a political witch-hunt" (DRI 2018), which particularly leads the incumbents to fiercely resist any change that could lead to losing power. The UNM started its abrupt economic reforms and modernization process alongside the detaining and charging of former government officials with accusations of abusing power and illegally amassing fortunes. Some businessmen and former politicians who were affiliated with the Shevardnadze government were singled out for retribution (Rimple 2012).

Similarly, the Georgian Dream government was accused of selective justice after the transition of power from the UNM in the 2012 elections. GD has instituted criminal proceedings against a number of former UNM ministers, as well as the former mayor of Tbilisi, and President Saakashvili after the end of his term in the name of "the restoration of justice". This movement has been criticized by Georgia's international partners as indulging in-politically motivated acts (Council of Europe 2014). Weak state institutions and a tight grip over the justice system usually allows an incumbent government to have an uninhabited free rein in attacking their opponents. Such an experience turns any crisis in Georgia into a zero-sum game where in any defeat, especially if a compromise is seen as such, loser not only loses their power but might also faces persecution. Therefore, every side will try their best to hold onto power or fight more fiercely to obtain it. This could also explain why the opposition insisted on new elections and a chance for a complete removal of the incumbents, while the government has categorically prevented the possibility of hosting new elections.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Multiple contextual factors inhibit Georgian political parties from forming consensus-based politics, which is also intensified with mutual personal animosity between the ruling and opposition parties and their founders. Extreme polarization, wherein parties pursue personalized rather than issue-based politics, and further deepening of the political conflict over identity lines, coupled with a political culture of authoritative leaders and a fear of persecution after losing power, all act as disincentives to compromise and establish cooperation-based politics in Georgia. Such frequent clashes also lead the Georgian public to become further detached from politics, since they have had enough of political crises and turmoil. It should not be surprising that only one in five Georgians trust political parties (CRRC 2020b) and they might lose interest in elections as a means of power transition considering how rare such cases are in Georgia. The Georgian public are rather more concerned about issues such as unemployment and poverty, while political parties continue to wrestle over their personal interests. Unless the latter manage to overcome the constraining factors to a dialogue and start acting in the public's interest, Georgia's democratic development will remain a mere hope.

For the ruling party:

- Take a more rigorous focus on the content of its activities, rather than continue accenting the "criminal past" of the UNM;
- Avoid negative language oriented on personalities – insulting or blaming specific party members;
- Evaluate the post-parliamentary election crisis thoroughly and prepare for the upcoming 2021 elections accordingly in order to avoid another political turmoil;
- Rethink the value of compromise in Georgian politics and continue working on further compromises to be fulfilled as promised;
- Ensure the fair power sharing while working on crucial reforms – Judiciary as well as electoral reforms - in the Parliament;
- Initiate and Implement reforms to strengthen independent institutions, e.g. judiciary.

For the opposition:

- Show a sign of will to cooperate while working on the reforms in the Parliament;
- Avoid negative language oriented on personalities – insulting or blaming specific party members;
- Pursue issue-oriented policies while working on reforms in the context of sharing the balance in the Parliament;
- Avoid an uncompromised de-legitimization of the political processes advanced by the ruling party in the name of “fraud elections”;
- Prepare a strong strategy to attract the electorate prior to the 2021 self-government elections based on the issue-based campaign.

For the European Union and the USA:

- Continue observing the inter-party relations, cooperation and fair power-sharing in the Parliament;
- Measure further perspectives of building the consensus-based political culture in Georgia and plan and follow the next activities accordingly;
- Use political conditionality more proactively both against the government and the opposition;
- Publicly discourage personalization of Georgian political discourse and negative language directed at individual representatives of parties;
- Publicly encourage issue-based campaigns and politics in both the government and the opposition.

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