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Polarization and Fragmentation of Georgian Political Landscape: Implications for Democracy

Expert Interview with Dr. Fernando Casal Bértoa

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“Democracy is not a zero-sum game. The opposition also has the right to govern; they also have the right to win... In Georgia, the government should know that opposition is not their enemy or adversary. That’s one of the serious problems of Georgia. And that’s why democracy is not consolidated. “

Fernando Casal Bértoa is associate professor in Comparative Politics at the University of Nottingham. He studied Law at the University of Navarra (Spain) as well as Political Science at the University of Salamanca (Spain). After specializing in Eastern and Central European Studies at the Jagiellonian University (Poland), he obtained his PhD at the European University Institute (Florence) under the supervision of the late Prof. Peter Mair. He was also a Post-doctoral Fellow at the University of Leiden between 2010 and 2013. Currently, he is co-director of the Research Centre for the Study of Parties and Democracy (REPRESENT), member of the OSCE/ODIHR "Core Group of Political Party Experts", and expert of the Council of Europe, United Nations and International IDEA. His work has been published in, among others, Journal of Politics, European Journal of Political Research, Sociological Methods and Research, Journal of Democracy, West European Politics, Electoral Studies, Party Politics, European Political Science Review and Democratization. His latest book, co-authored with Zsolt Enyedi (CEU), is titled Party System Closure: Party Alliances, Government Alternatives and Democracy in Europe (OUP, 2021). He was also been awarded with the 2017 Gordon Smith and Vincent Wright Memorial Prize, the 2017 AECPA Prize for Best Article, the 2018 Vice-Chancellor's Medal and the 2019 CES Routledge Award.

TZ: Dr. Casal Bértoa, let me start our conversation with the issue related to trust in political parties. The recent public opinion polls illustrate that the public's trust in political parties is low in Georgia. What can be the reason for the political parties' lack of credibility in the eyes of the voters, and to what extent does the low level of trust in the political parties hinder the overall democratization process for the country?

FCB: The low level of trust in political parties definitely threatens the democratization process. However, I would like to mention that the issue of decreasing levels of public trust in political parties is common not only for Georgia, but it is a common problem for the whole of Europe, as well. The Eurobarometer also illustrates this issue in its data. Currently, the average level of trust in political parties is around 15 per cent across Europe; however, in some countries it is far lower, reaching less than 10 per cent. This is problematic, especially when we think of representative democracy as a whole system.

In his famous book, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy* (2013), my mentor, Peter Mair, showed what is happening between society and political parties. According to him, there is a mutual withdrawal, as voters and parties are growing apart, leaving the electoral arena. This is happening in Georgia as well. In this country, when party representatives become representatives of the state, they use all possible means to protect their own interests - they give themselves public services, a lot of public funding etc., and the people are excluded. So, when they come to power, instead of dealing with the most problematic issues of society, political parties behave like an ostrich - they take cover in the state and look the other way. This is more visible in new democracies where civil society is weak. Political

parties are an essential part of representative democracy, yet often they do not deliver on their electoral promises, which is why people don't trust them.

In my last [book](#), where we have studied all democracies from 1948, Georgia included, we found that while party system institutionalization is an essential for the survival for democracy, political parties per se are the main determinant of the institutionalization of the party system. We can get a strong party system by having strong political organizations. Also, it is very important that there should be a linkage between political parties and society - with regard to the latter, that is why the Cold War period is called the Golden Age of political parties, because, at that time, we had political parties and we had a connection between society and politics.

TZ: You have mentioned party institutionalization and my next question is about that. One of the critical problems for Georgian political parties is their leader-oriented character. What should be done to establish Western-type institutionalized political parties in Georgia? And what could be the role of international society (the Venice Commission, for instance) in this process? Do you think that international society has any leverage to make an impact in this regard?

FCB: I think the problem of Georgian political parties, as in the case of political parties in the Post-Communist countries, is that they are not socially rooted, they are entrepreneurial parties - created either by the top, or by oligarchs and business people. This is also typical for political parties as splinters from other parties. In these countries, political parties are leadership-oriented because, without the business guys' money, the party itself would not exist. That's why, under

these circumstances, political parties become charismatic more than programmatic, as Herbert Kitschelt says.

In Georgia, one of the problems is also a lack of party ideology. In Georgian political parties, the only difference is who the leader is, and that is extremely problematic. As many scholars say, a value infusion is very important for a political party, because a political party should be considered as a good thing in itself, independently from whoever the leader is, or who makes the decisions in the party. That is why, we need to re-ideologize politics in many countries to combat populism and, in Georgia especially, where ideology plays a very little role.

The role of international organizations and the Venice Commission in particular, is to make institutions strong and resilient. Strong institutions make democracy functional -think of the United States, for example. Making party funding more transparent is important for the institutionalization of the party system and, based on best practices across the world, the method of naming and shaming also works for the institutionalization of a party system. It's like the story of the carrot and the stick - without the stick, carrots would never work. However, unfortunately, many international organizations have a lot of carrot but they do not have sticks. That is why, we see no consequences. Moreover, in Georgia, the government follows the recommendations of the Venice Commission when it's favorable, but when it's not favorable they simply ignore it.

TZ: Dr. Casal Bértoa, you pointed out that in Post-Communist countries, the political parties are created mainly by oligarchs or businessmen. I think it's also very problematic in Georgia and my next question relates to youth engagement in

political parties. The public polls prove that the population in Georgia is willing to see a completely new political party, the so-called "third power", on the Georgian political landscape. However, even in the newly created political parties, we see "the old players in the new form"; most of the new political parties are merely mergers or splinter parties. Despite the fact the number of Western-educated youth has risen in Georgia during the last two decades, we see only a few new faces who want to join political parties or independently establish new ones. What is the problem, why does youth in Georgia not want to participate in politics and to what extent it is possible to motivate them to serve Georgian politics from the political parties?

FCB: Youth see political parties as corrupt and hopeless businesses. This is a common problem, not just in Georgia, but you can find this in many Western European societies - in Georgia it is just more visible. Political parties need to adapt to the new world, however, instead of meeting the new requirements of society, they simply started behaving like business cartels. Only the new populist parties seem to have adopted a more modern approach and have taken advantage, for example, of new technologies. But the problem for why the youth do not want to be engaged in political parties is that there is no internal democracy or transparency in them.

As scholars show, political parties do not realize that a strong organizational structure is good for parties themselves as it helps them to institutionalize. The reason they do not realize this is because most political leaders still have a short-term agenda. If we think about the development of political parties, they need to have long-term goals. [In the article](#) which I recently published in the Journal of Democracy, I tried to present an

argument on the importance of the regeneration of political parties to combat populism. The regeneration of political parties happens when political parties adopt long-term prospects.

Political parties have an educational role as well. I think parties have unfortunately forgotten about their educational function. In old times, political parties became entrenched in society via their educative function - people used to learn to read either in the church with the Bible or in the parties popular clubs' where they learnt to read the program or the Communist Manifesto. This was a politization via education.

I think political parties need to use new technologies to socialize youth. However, it is important for them to use these technologies without disregarding, of course, the elderly. Parties need to create a balance between the elderly and youth. The problem is that some parties focus only on traditional methods. I think the parties need to open up and become much more meritocratic. Young people need to see that there are opportunities in political parties and that they would be promoted on their merits according to the principle "if you work well, you go further".

TZ: Georgia is characterized by the highest level of political polarization seen across Europe. The electioneering tactics of hate speech and the negative political campaigning against opponents used widely by the political parties critically underly the polarization existing in the country. The last political crisis in Georgia illustrated that voters in the established political parties are accustomed to the "zero-sum" game offered by their favourite parties and it can also be said they like that approach. Under those circumstances, what can be done by political parties to contribute to an end of the polarization that they themselves have started,

and when considering the rational interests of the established political parties, how realistic is the view that they might provide a completely new approach to criticizing an opponent?

FCB: You correctly mentioned this as political polarization, not ideological polarization. The political polarization comes from the entrepreneurial character of political parties or from the charismatic leadership we have already talked about. I think that through negative campaigning, political parties are focusing on themselves rather than on policies. The long-term compromises on important policies can be achieved by avoiding attacks each other and discussing pros and cons of their policy proposals. That is an essential conception of democracy. In Georgia, a zero-sum game is very popular, unfortunately, and this is the one that creates polarization. Focusing on policy rather than on their short-term goals or on people is the only way to end the polarization in this country. If political parties focus on their long-term goals, they will discover that there are lots of social groups in the country waiting to be mobilized. Political parties, who popularize the trend of negative campaigning, have to understand that they may not be successful today.

When we speak about negative campaigning, it is also worth mentioning that not only are parties problematic but so is the election management body as the controversial results of elections often provides a solid source of mutual accusations between political parties. Additionally, proper monitoring by the media is another problem; the media has an essential role in this issue. However, currently, in Georgia, media is incentivizing polarization because the major media outlets are controlled by the two main parties. I think, like everything in life, there is no single solution and we need a combination. It's a bit like with Covid,

where you cannot use one vaccine to cure the disease and you need to use maybe two or three from different companies to boost the resilience of organisms to the virus.

TZ: My last question is about political competition and its implication for political will. The literature shows that in transitional countries, the reason why the political elite do not have the political will to combat corruption or to establish the rule of law is low levels of political competition. Precisely, because of the low levels of political competition, the political elite does not fear losing elections due to their bad performance. In Georgia, we have the problem of political will when it comes to combating corruption and the establishment of the rule of law. Could you provide more insight on the implications of political competition on political will?

FCB: Most post-Soviet countries face the problem of “state capture”. State capture happens when the political sphere is occupied by oligarchs and they make a decision in politics and not political parties. If we understand competition as intense, fierce fights, and debates, in this regard, there is competition in Georgia. However, in the sense of providing political alternatives, we can say that there is not proper political competition in the country, as the same guys win again and again. Political competition is essential for democracy, as the government domination in terms of lack of changes has proven that it not only allows the incumbents to manipulate the vote or increase patronage, but it limits the quality of democracy in the long-term. Remember, as Lord Action once famously said “power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely”. When one political party holds power for a long time, corruption and state capture merge, because, in this case, the

incumbents not only do not respect the rule of law, but they think they are the law.

Opening up space for different parties would raise possibilities for political competition in Georgia: democracy is not a zero-sum game. The opposition also has the right to govern, they also have the right to win. Persecuting Saakashvili and his party is what Georgian Dream has been doing after coming into power. We should not forget that Saakashvili was forced to leave the country immediately after the new government came to power. The problem with this attitude is that if one day United National Movement returns to power they will do exactly the same with Ivanishvili or Georgian Dream’s other members. Therefore, in your country, Georgian Dream does not have any incentives to relinquish power, as they know that when they will be in the opposition, they will be prosecuted - just as they did with their predecessors.

In other countries, Tunisia, for example, the opposition was also prosecuted, but the new government chose a more lenient approach in their transitional legislation. They prosecuted only those who had committed dreadful crimes and tortured people. Currently, Tunisia is the only democracy within the Arab Spring countries. So, sometimes you need to create conditions for political competition. In Georgia, the government should know that opposition is not their enemy or adversary. That’s one of the serious problems of Georgia. And that’s why democracy is not consolidated.

TZ: Dr. Casal Bértoa, thank you so much for your time and a very interesting and engaging conversation.



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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.

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