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# EXPERT INTERVIEW

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## Georgia's Current Path to Democracy: Where Do We Stand and How Should We Improve?

### Expert Interview with Professor Julie A. George

Interview by Nino Samkharadze, GIP Junior Policy Analyst

*"I think the Georgian revolutions aren't good for democracy. You need "boring" institutional politics. You don't need more parties in Georgia. You need better parties"*

**Professor Julie A. George** is an associate professor of political science at Queens College and The Graduate Center at the City University of New York. Her research and writing areas are ethnicity, conflict and state-building in Postcommunist Space, particularly in Georgia and the Russian Federation. She teaches the introductory courses on Comparative Politics and International Relations, as well as on the Politics of Contemporary Russia, Transitions to Democracy, the politics of Ethnic Cleansing and Genocide, International Political Economy and Problems of Postcommunism. Moreover, she has conducted research in the former Soviet Union, primarily in the Russian Federation and Georgia, where she was funded by the Fulbright Association and IREX. Professor George is the author of *The Politics of Ethnic Separatism in Russia and Georgia* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), as well as articles in *Europe-Asia Studies*, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, *European Security*, and *Central Asian Survey*. She has written chapters for inclusion in *The Politics of Transition in Central Asia and the Caucasus: Enduring Legacies and Emerging Challenges* (Routledge, 2009) and *Conflict in the Caucasus: Implications for International Legal Order* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

Professor George was kind enough to join us in an online discussion on Zoom and answer questions about Georgia's democratic decline, the most critical areas facing the country, as well as its country's perspectives in the context of a new US administration. Below is a transcript of our discussion:

*GIP: The Economist and Freedom House reports show an overall decline of democracies throughout the world. Do you see any logical explanations for that? Are we witnessing a global crisis of Democracy as a predictable phenomenon?*

**JG:** I think there's probably not a single one causal layer. My thinking is that the causes of collapses or declines in democracy probably vary across different regime types. So, there are consolidated democracies like the US, for example, or challenged consolidated democracies in Western Europe, that are challenged by far-right parties who want to move the conversation of politics into a much more authoritarian bent. I think the causal factors from there could be any number of things. The kind of weaponization of religious or ethnic or racial differentiation I think is also an important component.

I'm less worried about the western democracies. I think that the institutions that we have are resilient and they should be tested and I hope very much that they prevail. And I think the most recent American election has given us some kind of sensibility that you can have a transition of power that's peaceful. And also, the conversations in Western Europe, for example, are the right-wing parties are kind of losing attraction. They're becoming less popular. So, I think for the Western democracies where you have that institutional strength, this could actually be a good thing because it's disaffected people demanding accountability by their politicians. I mean, that is what democracy is designed to do.

The trick is whether or not the kind of interest in the system can kind of come up with a mechanism to address their concerns -- those are the consolidated democracies. In places like Georgia, in newly consolidated democracies like Hungary

and places like Turkey, the hybrid regimes is where we can observe a more worrisome downgrade. If you look at Freedom House, for example, all of the countries I just mentioned, as well as Georgia, lost points over the last two years. There I think the problem is that they don't have the protection of these institutions and there is no long-standing pattern of accountability to populations.

In these regimes, the problem is the absence of institutions, so the democratic decline is much more problematic in the hybrid regimes. It means that political actors are abandoning accountability or abandoning the notion that they have to satisfy constituents. They are not thinking of their roles in terms of responsibility for governance, necessarily. Hybrid regimes that are backsliding no longer feel that pressure. I think part of the reason why they don't feel that pressure is domestic. You don't have the buildup of a kind of the civil society that can make demands of it. And I think Georgia is different in this regard: civil society is quite vibrant and it's increasing in its vibrancy. But I think also the regional rise of China and Russia as authoritarian alternatives to western power may make leaders of hybrid regimes think there are other alternatives to popular accountability in terms of governance.

*GIP: Freedom House as well as the EUI report indicate a decline in Georgia's democracy in 2020. What do you see as the most critical point(s) while assessing Georgia's democratic development so far?*

**JG:** I'll start with a quick answer and then I'll go towards the longer one. The quick answer is the reason why Freedom House's ranking was declining for Georgia this last year was that the most recent elections were just more problematic than any elections since probably 2008, 2004, in

terms of violence, in terms of votes stifling, and in terms of the feeling of surveillance, and so Georgia received a downgrade. It went down a point specifically due to election conduct, not just the campaign, but Election Day conduct. In Georgia, what you typically see with elections is that the campaign conduct is problematic, that there is pressure against opposition candidates, especially for the majoritarian seats, and there is pressure on opposition candidates to back away and not compete. It's hard to determine whether it's centralized pressure. It seems to me that there's a lot of local regional variation in that -- you have this kind of quid pro quo back and forth. Whatever that threshold between this score and that score, something happened in the last parliamentary election that really pushed it down, despite all of the electoral and institutional changes which were meant to make it more democratic. And nonetheless, the Election Day conduct was what seemed to be more problematic than usual.

As for the longer answer for Georgia, I've been thinking about this more in terms of the need to have an agreement between elite actors that democracy is really their best bet for winning in the next round. In order for democracy to work in Georgia, you need a party that's willing to lose. And surprisingly, the UNM was that party in Georgia. We don't know yet if the Georgian Dream is. I've been impressed by UNM's resilience once out of power, although I know the resilience comes from charismatic places as well as programmatic ones, including Saakashvili, in the form of his charismatic self. And then there's also the revolutionary side of UNM, which I think has more appeal to its members than to many of its constituents in Georgia. I think that Georgian revolutions aren't good for democracy -- you need "boring" institutional politics for democracy to work. But the UNM and its message has been surprisingly resilient since for most parties -- both

ruling parties and hybrid regimes -- the moment they lose power, they collapse.

The current Georgian Dream party does not appear to be willing to lose, and I think that is that will be critical for Georgia. If the Georgian Dream can permit itself to lose, then Georgia will have two precedents of peaceful changes of power through elections, and that creates a kernel that can move forward. As long as the Georgian Dream is unwilling to lose then the question is what pressures can be brought to bear to incentivize the Georgian Dream to be willing to lose: they need to be able to come back like the UNM and run in the next election. At a constituency level, they need to be able to have a message, to have a popularity that's beyond Ivanishvili, that's beyond the economic development that they offered once.

One thing that the ruling party needs to do is to actually build a party that can exist beyond a patronage structure. What makes a hybrid regime a hybrid is because it has a patronage structure like an authoritarian system, because it's not constituency based. So, you need to cross that line. I think the Georgian Dream Party needs to party build.

You don't need more parties in Georgia. You need better parties. Politicians don't supply any more than what is demanded, so if the only way for Georgia to get to that condition is the people's demands to be higher and more strident. And the Georgian population, when looking at the public opinion polling, they're apathetic, or maybe just disappointed. Their expectations are not high. Their expectations are impossibly low.

The other aspect is that there's also Western pressure, which I'm sure the West would like to stop applying -- they would much prefer a more domestic-based pressure group. But then, what's

impressive about Georgia that there's so many local organizations, and so I think there's interest in this, they just all happen to all be in Tbilisi and not everywhere else.

*GIP: Georgia is an unconsolidated democracy so far. At the same time, it is an arena where radical nationalist powers fight against the mainstream parties and sometimes even with each other. Given this reality, how Georgia can avoid faltering with its democratic processes? Are there any successful examples? What lessons can be learned?*

**JG:** Georgia is extraordinarily religious. The role of the Georgian Orthodox Church is profound. Those populist messages correspond with the popularity of the Georgian Orthodox Church. Therefore, there is a linkage between the messaging. What's interesting for Georgia is how little of the population supports those populist political parties. As a political scientist, I would have expected that given the power of the Georgian Orthodox Church and the Patriarch, and given the fact that 95% percent of ethnic Georgians identify with the Georgian Orthodox Church that those numbers for the more conservative parties would be higher. In a democracy, I would expect them to be higher – the Patriarch would have more people and members of those parties, because of that linkage. You don't have that in Georgia.

And in this case, actually the patronage structure of the Georgian Dream Party helps. The far-right wing parties don't have the hold that they have because people don't automatically organize themselves politically through parties. Those parties don't do well in Georgia yet; it's a problem on the democratic side, but I think it's also a salve in a way, because these messages are probably going to get expressed in different ways. It won't be in parties but it may be in protests. And so it's

going to be an institutional test – it's going to be a test of the police forces in the judiciary. How are they going to respond to this? Are they going to enforce the country's legislation against violence?

There is also the importance of watchdog groups and people just relentlessly putting pressure on exposure and transparency, so that the police are no longer incentivized to do whatever they want. They have to now be incentivized to do things according to the law. I think that's going to be the trigger. The power of populist groups is to create systems of impunity for action. So, the critical point, I don't think, is the party, just because party politics in Georgia is so weak. The critical point is the courts and the police. And I don't have a lot of short-term hope for that.

*GIP: Should we see the ethnic nationalism in Georgia as a challenging factor for democratic processes? And in this context, how do you see the degree of inclusiveness of the different cultural groups in Georgia's life? And what can be done to ensure ethnic or religious minorities' representation?*

**JG:** I have been looking at CRRC datasets and it's actually quite fascinating, because there are questions in some recent surveys that are meant to trigger intolerance, so we can measure it. The design lets us observe when Georgians are being intolerant or when people the survey respondents are being tolerant. And one of them was about one of the things we learned from the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia: “Do you agree or disagree? One of the things you learn from the conflict was that that outsiders cannot be trusted.” And so, people who agree to that are less tolerant or it's meant to measure fear-based intolerance. A lot of Georgians said, yeah, this is one of the messages that we learn. But then there was another question –which I think of as the tolerance question – that

said, "one thing that we learned from the conflicts is that we need to be more tolerant of ethnic minorities in Georgia." And most people said yes. So, you have this this dual nature of tolerance in Georgia. And that gives me a great deal of hope.

I think Georgian history makes it hard for Georgians to be as tolerant as their imagination of themselves: of what it means to be Georgian is to be very hospitable, to love diversity, to be part of this mountain community, and a diverse society where you have all these different people...but for some Georgians, it's also important that those people have to understand that Georgians are better or that that they're the guests of Georgians. I think for democracy to work in Georgia, Georgians have to reconcile themselves with this myth and recognize that the ethnic minorities are not guests: they are Georgian citizens. Citizenship necessitates tolerance for their political views and their right to dignity, and all of those other things that are enshrined in the Georgian constitution.

It is harmful to a tolerance project to have perpetually brutalized and repressed minorities who will numerically always lose. I think it's something that Georgia's going to struggle with for a really long time because the minorities in the so country are proportionally small. If you had a larger one, you know, like in Ukraine, this would result in major dialogue because they're empowered. I think the problem for Georgia is that the numbers are such that there's no way to empower those minority voices where they get to be heard, and so it's easy to drown them. It requires a cultural decision or a kind of a moral decision that's difficult for a majority to make.

*GIP: How might Georgia's ambitions of Westernization and democratization be influenced by the Biden's administration's approaches towards its strategic partners? How*

### *Georgia can use President Biden's new Democracy Promotion Agenda?*

**JG:** I think there are a number of things. One, Biden's administration is taking a page from the kind of Clinton handbook as opposed to the Obama handbook in terms of foreign policy, and in terms of engagement with creating democracies worldwide. The departure of American troops from Afghanistan tells me that what they're doing is creating a nimbler body that doesn't have as much of a global focus and is focusing on areas where they can actually achieve results. Georgia is one of those areas. Georgia is probably the best area in the former Soviet Union. (Outside of the Baltic states, which have already moved on). If I were a clever Georgian strategist sitting in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I would be thinking to myself, 'How do I convince the domestic actors in Parliament and in other sides of the executive branch to create pathways for to showcase that we're a good investment for success and that we're likely it achieve success?'. Now, I think that person in the foreign ministry has to be very careful, because one of the things that shows democratic success is the willingness for a ruling party to lose. And so that means that the country needs to showcase that it's willing to lose, which is a very, very hard thing to do for a patronal party which may not survive an electoral process, because if they do lose, then there's nothing to come back to. I mean, the interesting thing about UNM is that it's coming back to compete in elections time after time. It means there was something other than the patronage structure to give it momentum. The problem for Georgia is trying to find a strand of interests that will compel interested members on the domestic side of that agenda, that showcasing democracy is very good, but to also reflect upon the importance of it. Actually, showcasing a willingness to step down is necessary - or maybe a willingness to suffer political setbacks-- because



the biggest crisis for Georgian democracy right now is an oligarchic party that dominates legislative politics and dominates executive politics and judiciary politics.

Judicial reform might be one way to do it, and to showcase the enforcement of laws that might work against the immediate interest of the ruling party. There is a need for signals to be sent that it's a worthy investment. At the GIP conference this year, I was asked from the audience if it is appropriate for the US still to invest in Georgia, and my answer was absolutely yes, because you've had all this money invested in Georgia and now it's backsliding. If ever there needed to be more investment, it's now. I feel that very strongly because there has been so much trouble in the region. The neighborhood where Georgia sits is just different than it was a decade ago, and it's much more precarious. I think the important thing for Georgia is to make an argument with the Biden administration that despite that precarity and despite the neighborhood, the investment is worthwhile and that there's something there of interest for the US in that region and that Georgian democracy is key to achieving those interests. The West has invested so much in Georgia; the US in particular has a soft spot for Georgia for whatever reason. I find it fascinating that whether it's Biden, McCain or Clinton, it's striking how bipartisan the love for Georgia is in the US. It's not a politically divisive point. It's a place that people really want to support.

*GIP: What could be done to mitigate the polarization in the Georgian political landscape and by whom? How can consensus-based politics be promoted in Georgia?*

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<sup>1</sup> The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2020) "The Future of Georgia 2020." Retrieved through ODA <https://caucasusbarometer.org>

**JG:** I actually don't think Georgia is polarized: the term polarization implies that there are divisions between political actors, their visions of the future work against one another in a zero-sum way and that most people in society are on one side or the other, with little to united them. Of course, opinion polls vary, but leading up to last year's elections, the Georgian Dream polled around 30% and the UNM around half of that. A recent survey conducted by the CRRC asked Georgians about that party that was closest to them, and 22% indicated GD while 10% indicated UNM.<sup>1</sup> These were the most popular parties. The plurality of Georgians claims to be dissatisfied with all parties. This is not polarization. This is an absence of policy-based politics in Georgia.

There are no parties in Georgia that function as parties of interest. And that means polarization due to party interests cannot exist, so I don't see it as polarization. One view of the current situation is that one of GD's main missions was to destroy the UNM party and to make it so that they would never win again. The problem with that, of course, is that it is fundamentally anti-democratic. You can't get rid of your largest opposition party and call yourself a democracy. I think what we see is not polarization, but an ambition to destroy one party and one party trying to survive, however it can. And you know, what's interesting about the UNM is that while it is surviving, it is surviving in a number of ways. One of these is a kind of revolutionary environment in which it really flourishes, which is fairly problematic, but consistent with the promises of the charismatic Saakashvili, although he himself is unpopular. Based on public opinion polls, both Ivanishvili and Saakashvili are equally unpopular and so there's not a lot of trust there. And on the one

hand, it's a rejection of a charismatic leader, which I think is a good thing because it forces people to think about their interests rather than personalities, and interests can build constituencies and have lasting effects on political stability (if they're allowed empowerment and expression). But on the other, it doesn't give the UNM a lot to work with. It's interesting; the UNM

is trying to make a comeback. They've got policy issues and they have those things organized in the framework of their platform.

But I don't think Georgian politics is polarized. Party politics right now in Georgia is about a contest to govern and destruction of the loser.



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