



Crisis of Inclusive Democracy in Georgia: “One Way Movement” Rules in the Parliament

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A healthy democracy cannot function without an effective political opposition. Opposition is one of the main actors in the distribution of power, which is a fundamental criterion for building a European-style democratic state. At first glance this issue is also part of the agenda of Georgia’s ruling political elite: according to the Prime Minister (PM) nominee Irakli Kobakhidze, *“Our political system needs more consensus and less radicalism”* (1TV.ge 2024). However, conflicting with this, marginalizing policies needed for effective governance proposed by opposition parties has become a traditional feature of the political culture in Georgia. As President Salome Zourabichvili noted in her last Parliamentary address in her current capacity, *“Since gaining independence, none of the governments in Georgia have been able to find a force within it to fully demolish the power monolith”* (Zourabichvili 2024).

This harmful trend is spilling over not exclusively into opposition parties in Georgia but into the broader dimension of Georgian politics. In the wider view, marginalizing the opposition from the political processes is related to deeper problems and completely excludes the possibility of power-sharing as a main principle of democracy. This is an alarming tendency and is particularly evident in the Parliament of Georgia, where even discussion of the political views of the opposition parties is rare, not to mention their consideration in the governing process. As a result, Georgian voters have lost faith in political parties, and for

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their part the political parties in Parliament are becoming dysfunctional. This leads to radicalization of the political environment and creates conditions where the political processes are shifted to the streets.

This policy memo aims at offering discussion to the public of the importance of the opposition in the democratic development of any country, and presents the problems facing opposition parties in the Georgian reality. This paper is based on desk research, statistical data on the initiatives of the opposition parties between 2020-2023 during the present parliament, and in-depth interviews with opposition MPs.

The Role and Importance of Parliamentary Opposition for Pluralistic Democracy

Effective opposition in state institutions is a fundamental component of a functioning democracy. It is important that the agenda for state governance considers the interests of the public to the greatest extent possible and ensures proper representation of every segment of society at the political level (Dahl 1966, Sartori 1976). Additionally, political opposition is the primary mover in criticism of the political agenda, controlling and balancing the government (Konig, Lin & Silva 2023; Buslenko 2019; Stone 2014). Otherwise, the political system can begin to resemble “a caricature of a parliamentary democracy” (Brauninger & Debus 2009).

The opposition must have the viable potential for resistance to properly fulfill the abovementioned functions in the modern state. Based on empirical political research, in parliamentary democracies where the ruling party dominates every institution, the chances of marginalizing the opposition are high and it frequently appears to play only an insignificant role in the legislative process (Brunner 2013). Views are often voiced in Georgia that the opposition has limited capabilities or is inept at putting voters’ interests onto the political agenda using statutory parliamentary instrument procedures (Natsvlishvili 2023). Focusing on “the weakness of the opposition” in general is a part of a widely known strategy by which a competing political force seeks to marginalize and delegitimize the opposition (Kobakhidze 2023a; Gharibasvhili 2023).

At a time when the ruling “Georgian Dream” party commands substantial tools for controlling the political processes, it becomes more difficult for the opposition to achieve engagement. The opposition needs to put in twice as much effort to fulfill its functions

(Natsvlishvili 2023), and this is a major reason for its ineffectiveness. As a result, the interests of voters rarely become a subject of political discussion. The following chapters outline the results of Georgia's flawed multi-party democratic processes as evidenced by analysis of the draft laws presented by the opposition between 2020-2023.

“One-way movement” and Its Rules in the Parliament of Georgia

The work of the 10th convocation Parliament is a clear illustration of the affective polarization in the country's politics, suggesting that in this environment politicians are motivated to deliberately damage a policy alternative or a political idea, regardless of how acceptable the idea is (Samkharadze 2022). The work of Parliament during the last three years has been alarming in this regard – draft laws introduced by opposition parties are being constantly shelved without discussions, using various bureaucratic mechanisms. The views that this is a part of the ruling “Georgian Dream” party's obstructive strategy were first voiced by a member of the parliamentary group “Eurooptimists” – Roman Gotsiridze (Gotsiridze 2023). Judging by their experiences as MPs, the opposition members think that the majority party seeks to ignore the views of the parliamentary opposition and limits the mechanisms for official and public discussions (Natsvlishvili 2023; Gotsiridze 2023; Liluashvili 2023).

When discussing the logical implications, it is important to look at statistical data. According to the regulations, the Bureau of Parliament has the right to extend the deadline for discussion of an initiative should the initiative not be ready for parliamentary hearing within the set deadline (Parliament of Georgia n.d.). By the end of 2023, only seven initiatives out of 87 presented by the opposition parties became law in the current Parliament: four of the seven were initiated by the “Citizens” party, “Girchi” and “Eurooptimists” had one each, and one was a joint initiative (Table 1). Other initiatives were constantly rescheduled or delayed at various bureaucratic stages – be they committee or plenary hearings.² Committee hearings for some of draft laws have been rescheduled more than ten times (Table 1).

² Methodological notes: (1) The count includes draft law packages that may encompass more than one legislative initiative; (2) Types of initiatives counted are: Draft law of Georgia, Organic draft law, draft of Rules of Procedures of the Parliament; (3) Political subjects that had openly declared opposition to the ruling party were selected for the research. Considering these criteria, the paper does not discuss draft laws introduced by political groups “People's Power” and “European Socialists”; (4) Initiatives by “For Georgia” cover the period since April 2021, when the party officially broke away from the ruling Georgian Dream; (5) initiatives by “Eurooptimists” cover the period since May 2023, when the political group officially broke away from the United National Movement.

Table 1: Initiatives presented by the opposition in the current Parliament; the numbers in parenthesis indicate the number of approved initiatives.

Party	2021	2022	2023	Total
United National Movement	1	7	1	9
Gakharia for Georgia	4	4	1	9
Lelo	3	6	0	9
Citizens	4 (3)	2 (1)	1	7 (4)
Girchi	5	7 (1)	7	19 (1)
Strategy Builder	3	3	0	6
Bakradze, Ugulava, Bokeria	0	1	1	2
Political Group “Eurooptimists”	N/A	N/A	13 (1)	13 (1)
Political Group “Reform Group”	0	0	2	2
Joint	5 (1)	2	4	11 (1)
Total	25 (4)	32 (2)	30 (1)	87 (7)

Source: Parliament of Georgia, Table was created by the author

The data presented is alarming and says nothing positive about Georgia’s “inclusive” parliamentary democracy. While there is no clear evidence that legislative processes are being directly delayed by the ruling party, opposition MPs talk about it more and more frequently (Gotsiridze 2023; Natsvlshvili 2023) and sometimes label it as the “depriving of authority through procedural means” (Khvichia 2023). Since it is mostly Georgian Dream MPs who are appointed to Parliamentary committees and other top positions in parliamentary entities, they can theoretically relax bureaucratic barriers that cause delays in committee hearings. However, as experience shows, the turning discussion of opposition initiatives into legislative acts are rare occurrences in the Parliament of Georgia, even in the best-case scenario.

Opposition Initiatives in the Parliament and the Response of the Parliamentary Majority

Apart from the quantitative data there are numerous qualitative findings on the effectiveness of legislative process in Parliament and the related setbacks. The main goal in

2024 for the Parliamentary majority and the ruling party will be to maintain power. Therefore, it looks as though dominating Parliament procedures and obstructing opposition initiatives will be a primary instrument in the management of the political processes.

The ruling party tries to *delegitimize opponents* and exclude them from active political processes. Clearly, the ultimate goal of presenting legislative initiatives is to approve them and pass them into law. However, when the opposition puts forth legislative initiatives (even when they are not passed into law), it is resorting to the aim of showing the Georgian public that there are alternatives to the policies offered by the Government and that the public can support these alternatives (Groseclose & McCarty 2001). For the Georgian opposition, which does not have the resources to implement policies, involvement in legislative processes, public discussions and the floor on the Parliament are the main mechanisms for it to demonstrate its ideological identity. (Brauninger & Debus 2009). Therefore, it is important for the parliamentary majority that opposition parties' initiatives do not become part of the agenda as this may appear as a success for the opposition in the eyes of the public (Gotsiridze 2023; Natsvlshvili 2023; Liluashvili 2023).

In this way Georgian Dream avoids the *potential reputational damage* that could be caused by debating with its opponents. It is important for the ruling party to leave as little space for the discussion of alternative policy ideas as possible - to maintain an image as the only acceptable power and an irreplaceable one in the eyes of the voters (Groseclose & McCarty 2001). This especially applies to sensitive topics on which the views of the Government and wider public do not concur. Such topics include European integration strategy or [the government's] positioning in relation to Russia (Silagadze 2023b). In this case, discussion with the opposition (even when a given opposition initiative is not widely supported), may become an additional reputational burden for the party. While fighting this battle, the dominant party damages the healthy political process and the interests of the wider public in at least two different ways.

Firstly, *the bases for delaying the opposition's initiatives lack substance and content*: regardless of political sensitivity, draft laws presented by the opposition are rarely discussed during committee hearings. According to opposition MPs, even when the opposing parties may agree on a specific initiative, the draft law may still be shelved, since the main criteria is the authorship by opposition MPs (rather than a substantive or content-related disagreement) (Liluashvili 2023; Gotsiridze 2023).

As the opposition MPs note, an illustration of the situation has been the draft law banning the use of pyrotechnics, initiated by “Lelo” member Ana Natsvlishvili and opposition MP Armaz Akhvlediani in March, 2023 (Parliament of Georgia 2023). According to the authors, they thoroughly considered the financial and monetary risks that could delay the approval process. For instance, the draft law made allowance for the time needed to give the individuals involved in the business adequate time to avoid financial loss (Natsvlishvili 2023). However, in fact, when the holiday season in 2023 came the initiative had not even been discussed, let alone approved. In response, the then-leader of the “Georgian Dream” – Irakli Kobakhidze - stated that even though “*the party agrees on strict limitations on the use of pyrotechnics, the majority will not support “Lelo’s” initiative*”, because “*Lelo” is an anti-state power and [Georgian Dream] will not support any of its initiatives*” (Kobakhidze 2023b). Similar instances look more and more like attempts to sabotage legislative processes to serve the narrow interests of the ruling party. This may result in topics important for the public safety and welfare being dropped from the political agenda and result in damage to the public’s interests.

Additionally, ignoring opposition initiatives could result in damage to issues important for the country. Considering the scenario described above, it is even less likely that the opposition will be able to control the government in politically sensitive areas, such as European integration and the reforms necessary for democratization. According to MPs, in 2023, three years into the work of the current parliament, opposition’s initiatives on fundamental issues, such as the fight against corruption, effective functioning of the justice system (“For Georgia”), threats coming from Russia and related to occupation (faction “UNM”), have not even been discussed.

Particularly noteworthy is the initiative to declare a two-year moratorium on the sale of real estate to Russian citizens introduced in 2023 by the “Eurooptimists” MP Roman Gotsiridze. The draft law was delayed multiple times and is not even yet being discussed (Parliament of Georgia 2023). According to Gotsiridze, “when the initiative was registered, Russian citizens had only purchased 8 000 apartments, while today [date of the statement] this number is already 13 000” (Gotsiridze 2023). This demonstrates that in some cases these bureaucratic battles against opposition initiatives may harm the state at national level and increase the risks associated with the massive influx of Russian citizens into Georgia (Kakachia & Kandelaki 2022).

Clearly, this is not to say that the ruling party should accept initiatives from opposition parties with unconditional benevolence and always give its support and approval to their draft laws. However, this level of ignorance and the marginalization of the opposition's views and political interests point to a crisis in Parliamentary democracy and ineffective governance, and make the functioning of the Parliament of Georgia look like a sham. The government, as well as the Parliament as an institution (including parties and other bureaucratic entities), must accept the idea that the opposition is a part of the political system that was granted legitimacy by a significant number of Georgian voters. Therefore, the opposition is reflecting their interests at a legislative level, and ensuring active discussion is one of the pre-conditions for a functional democracy.

Making the Parliamentary Democracy Work in Georgia: What Is the Power of Powerless?

Political polarization is of growing concern even in developed democracies. However, the features of polarization are more damaging and uncompromising in Georgia, as is demonstrated by the case of the Parliament of Georgia. The Parliamentary majority has a superior number of bureaucratic and political instruments to successfully avoid the inclusion of the opposition's ideas and views in the political agenda. When there are multiple barriers blocking the opposition's healthy institutional competition with the ruling party, the country is left with limited opportunities to build inclusive democracy. To end this stalemate, it is necessary that both parliamentary majority and opposition take important (sometimes compromising) measures.

To find ways to overcome this bureaucratic stalemate, the opposition is taking certain steps. The parliamentary group "Eurooptimists" registered an initiative to change the unsubstantiated delays and postponement of draft law discussions (Netgazeti 2023b; Parliament of Georgia 2023). Even though the authors of the initiative do not expect any show of goodwill from the parliamentary majority towards this, (Gotsiridze 2023), approval of this initiative and the elimination of additional bureaucratic barriers in the next session of Parliament would be important. Additionally, it is imperative that the opposition's role in the distribution of power in Parliament be increased. To do this it is important to consider best international practices and allow opposition representatives to chair parliamentary committees (TI საქართველო 2022; Liluashvili 2023). As a result, the parliamentary

opposition would be given tangible leverage to put forth its own initiatives in political debates.

Academic literature also offers some insights into the overcoming of one-party domination in the political process. With limited parliamentary leverage, it is important for the opposition to turn to an “*Agenda-setting phase*” of political activity (Seeberg 2022; Brauning & Debus 2009). As noted, it is logical to think that at institutional level it is important for the ruling party that the opposition should not win any positive attention from the voters and it [the ruling party] may be using multiple tools to achieve just that. Therefore, individual opposition parties must come up with a strategy to win mass attention for their initiatives and incite the public to demand that parliament includes these in the political agenda, regardless of the authorship. To construct a successful “agenda-setting phase”, it is important to address two areas: internal opposition and public support for given topic.

Attaining intra-opposition support and increased cooperation are among the most frequently voiced recommendations when it comes to strengthening the opposition. If one opposition party openly and vocally supports another opposition party’s initiative, the trust, force and legitimacy of this initiative is automatically increased in the eyes of the voters, and the parties will be able to combine the support they can win from several different segments of society. Meanwhile, this increases pressure on the parliamentary majority (in terms of avoiding unwanted political conflict), not to mention increasing the opposition’s comparative importance quantitatively (more votes in favor of a specific initiative) (Dahl 1966). Additionally, if the parties are able to apply resources in this area, “draft law campaigns”, such as regional meetings and public discussions on legislative initiatives, may become an effective mechanism for gaining public attention and exercising pressure.

Parliamentary Majority VS Opposition Initiatives

The distribution of power and inclusive democracy face significant problems in the Georgian reality. Presented policy memo analyzed the environment in the Parliament of Georgia, demonstrating the fundamental gaps in Georgia’s democracy. While a strong opposition is a central component for building a Western-type democratic state, legislative work in Georgia demonstrates that the views of the opposition parties, and therefore a significant part of society, are practically ignored in the legislative process. While the government talks of the need of consensus and less radicalization in the Georgian political

system (1TV.ge 2024), facts demonstrate its lack of goodwill in this regard. Even though criticism of the opposition parties' weak strategies is often legitimate, there are also signs that the government is trying to effectively boycott the opposition and disenfranchise a segment of the voters. This environment reduces the public's trust, not only in the workings of parliament, but also in the parties, and can, on precedent, encourage the radicalization of the opposition and transition of [political] processes to the streets. As a result, in the larger perspective, the outcome is a constantly radicalized, destructive, political environment, devoid of substantive debates, significantly distancing the country from Western-standard political culture.

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