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DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING IN GEORGIA AND THE ROLE OF THE RIVALRY BETWEEN THE GEORGIAN DREAM AND THE UNITED NATIONAL MOVEMENT

Orcun Caliskan[1*]

[1]Tbilisi State University, Institute for European Studies, Georgia https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1482-6423 orcuncaliskan@hotmail.com

Abstract: *Over the past decade, the political system in Georgia was marked by a two-party system which was mainly attributed to the flawed electoral system. This led to the prevalence of the political arena being dominated by the ongoing competition between the Georgian Dream and the United National Movement and affective polarization. However, in recent years under the leadership of Georgian Dream, the progress of democracy in Georgia slowed down and there was a rise in authoritarian tactics used by the government to suppress opposition. This study employed qualitative research techniques over a range of primary and secondary sources to explore the role of democratic backsliding, freedom of media, and the incarceration of prominent political figures in the political polarization of Georgia. The study contended that the "winner takes all" mindset of the competing parties began to undermine Georgian democracy and its global reputation as the rivalry threatened Georgia's progress toward European integration. The study concluded that the rivalry and the polarization had significant implications for the future of politics in Georgia and its relationship with Europe.*

Keywords: *Georgia; Affective Polarization; Democratic Backsliding; Georgian Dream; United National Movement*

INTRODUCTION

In Georgia, the issue of political rivalry and affective polarization has been particularly prevalent in recent years, with the main political parties holding contrasting views on a range of issues and being unwilling to compromise, resulting in political gridlock and crises. The Georgian Dream (GD) and the United National Movement (UNM) are two of the dominant political parties in Georgia that have been competing for power and influence since the Rose Revolution. Their ongoing rivalry has played a significant role in shaping Georgian politics in recent times and has its roots in the country's recent past. Their competition for power has been marked by acrimonious and divisive political campaigns at times, contributing to an overall climate of increased political polarization and democratic backsliding in Georgia.

Since the Rose Revolution in 2003, when Georgia decided to eliminate its political legacy of the Soviet Union, only two parties have formed governments in the country. This primarily arises because the parliament's high number of seats is derived from single-seat majoritarian constituencies (Georgian Parliament 2020). These constituencies disadvantage small political parties and fail to reflect the votes proportionally in the parliament. There have been attempts to reduce the single-seat majoritarian constituencies and to introduce a fully-proportional system

(A way ahead for Georgia 2021); however, this has also been another polarizing issue between the ruling party and the opposition.

In summary, the main objective of this research is to analyze the outcomes of the rivalry and subsequent polarization, as well as the democratic regression resulting from media suppression and the imprisonment of political opponents in recent years. The study will specifically focus on the roles played by the two major political parties. Furthermore, this research aims to contribute to the existing literature on Georgia's domestic and foreign policies and the subject of political rivalry and polarization. To achieve these objectives, the study will address the following research questions:

- How does political rivalry contribute to the democratic backsliding in Georgia?
- What are the primary causes of polarization in Georgia in recent years?

DEBATES ON POLITICAL RIVALRY BETWEEN UNITED NATIONAL MOVEMENT AND GEORGIAN DREAM

In recent years, the zero-sum game between the GD and UNM has resulted in significant political crises and a decline in the country's democracy. Samkharadze (2021) argues that the political polarization in Georgia is driven by animosity, the idea that one person's gain equals another person's loss, and personal tactics affecting media coverage. This exacerbates the harmful effects of polarization and poses a danger to progress toward a democratic and cooperative political environment. Meister (2021) indicates polarization as a key characteristic of Georgian politics today and states that the country entered a deep political crisis; following the parliamentary election in October 2020. The rivalry between the GD and the UNM is also interesting because it is not based on ideological differences.

On the contrary, it is driven by the interests of the political elite and their state-capture efforts. Burkadze (2022) argues that political parties lack a defined set of values or beliefs and instead adjust their actions based on what will bring them immediate success, regardless of long-term consequences. Kuprashvili (2019) suggests that ideological differences do not drive polarization in Georgia but manifest as a dynamic where two political rivals form opposing partnerships during pre-election periods, known as "antagonist symbiosis". Meister (2021) proposes that the GD and the UNM have a vested interest in promoting polarization in Georgia as it enables them to mobilize their respective electorates and leaves little room for competing parties.

According to Gelashvili (2021), whenever a different political party takes control in Georgia, they reverse decisions made by the previous government. For instance, when the GD came to power, it reversed several actions the previous government took. Meanwhile, the opposition often turns to confrontational tactics, like staging protests or boycotting parliament. However, it is a matter of debate whether this confrontational attitude preferred by the main opposition has a favorable impact in the eyes of the public. For example, De Waal (2022) argues that the main opposition in Georgia, particularly the previous ruling UNM, provides the public with nothing more than hostile rhetoric and criticism of the administration. According to surveys, only 10% of Georgian voters strongly identify with the UNM (National Democratic Institute 2022).

The zero-sum game between the government and the opposition further contributes to democratic backsliding in the country and hinders the progress of Georgia towards its clearly defined European aspirations. According to Samkharadze (2022), this political impasse between the government and the opposition hinders the potential for productive and healthy political discussions in Georgia, making it more complicated to find a compromise. Consequently, Georgia's primary goals, such as moving towards democratization and European integration, become questionable in the long run. De Waal (2022) also argues that for the past few years, the Georgian Dream government in Tbilisi has moved Georgia further from European norms and defied the EU over judicial reform, the conduct of local elections, and the way it handled a pride rally in Tbilisi and there are concerns that GD, wants to turn the country into a one-party state. Even though both parties identify themselves as pro-Western and commit to European integration, there are some differences in their rhetoric towards Russia. For instance, Gegeshidze and De Waal (2021) indicate that the GD adopts a more conciliatory stance toward Russia while the UNM adopts a more confrontational one. The extreme split exists over the extent to which each party is committed to the West and over issues of strategy and perceived geopolitical disparities.

Some argue that this destructive political rivalry has paved the way for smaller political parties in Georgia. For example, Burkadze (2022) states that during a democratic decline, far-right groups grow stronger and expand their influence, often serving the interests of those in power or central organizations such as the Church. They also become more visible by using divisive topics like gender and sexuality to increase political polarization. Additionally, Bertoa and Rama (2021) argue that during the 2016 parliamentary elections in Georgia, anti-political-establishment parties received an unprecedented percentage of the votes, resulting in a spiral of instability and political chaos that was unparalleled since the country's democratization in 2004.

THEORETICAL APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

Regarding the two-party political systems in political science, Duverger's Law is the most popular and widely discussed theoretical approach in the literature, which can be attributed to the works of French sociologist Maurice Duverger. Duverger's Law refers to the majoritarian election systems with a single seat that favors a two-party system. Duverger (1954) argued that smaller political parties are discouraged from competing in electoral systems that prioritize plurality voting as they face significant obstacles in winning seats or representation. Voters may be hesitant to vote for a smaller party whose policies they support because they do not want their vote wasted on a party unlikely to win a plurality. As a result, voters tend to lean towards one of the two major parties, which have a greater chance of achieving a plurality, winning the election, and implementing policies (Schlesinger and Schlesinger 2006). Duverger (1972) did not consider this principle to be completely rigid, proposing instead that a plurality system would slow down the rise of new political forces and expedite the removal of weakening ones, as there have been counterarguments that regional parties can disrupt the principal (Rae 1971; Riker 1982).

However, due to the electoral system that disfavors smaller political parties in Georgia, realistically, only two political parties can gain the majority in the parliament. This duality has also led to an increase in affective polarization, which refers to the difference in how people feel

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positively about their political party and negatively about the other party rather than ideological differences (Iyengar and Westwood 2015, 691), and the divide has been worsened in recent years due to the changes in today's political and media landscape (Iyengar et al. 2019) and the observed phenomenon has been increasing in multiple countries in recent times (Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro 2022). The trend has increased polarization, making it challenging for politicians to agree and find common ground on various issues. Consequently, it is detrimental to Georgia's democracy and its eventual goal of becoming a member of the European family. The detrimental effects of extreme political polarization may vary and can be felt in various areas of life. For example, when political polarization intensifies, it can lead to other abnormal situations, such as the collapse of social and political structures, political unrest, labor strikes, and other non-violent tactics one group employs to harm another. There is compelling evidence to suggest that polarization also diminishes people's willingness to support shared objectives, decreasing the availability of public resources and obstructing the economic progress of developing nations (Esteban and Schneider 2008).

This article has been approached as a single case study research based on qualitative research methods. The study gathered empirical data from primary and secondary sources such as press releases, reports, scientific articles, news articles, electronic sources, interviews, opinion pieces, agreements, and so on. Additionally, quantitative data extracted from the most up-to-date datasets were utilized to provide a clear picture of recent political trends related to political polarization in Georgia. In this context, content analysis and desk research constitute important components of the research methodology.

DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING AND INCREASING POLITICAL POLARIZATION IN GEORGIA RECENT YEARS

Thanks to its integration with the European Union and various initiatives such as European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), Eastern Partnership (EaP), and the Association Agreement in the past decade, Georgia has made significant progress in anti-corruption, transparency, the establishment of effective institutions and implementation of European Union reforms, and these achievements were also universally praised. However, since 2019, the GD government has taken a tougher position against the opposition in the country. It adopted more conservative rhetoric at home and abroad when Iraqi Garibashvili was re-elected prime minister in 2021. In this period, tensions are also observed in the relations with the EU, which is perhaps the biggest stakeholder in the democratic reforms in the country. GD government officials are now publicly criticizing the EU and sometimes even blaming it openly. In addition to these verbal disputes, Georgia's EU alignment rate has decreased in recent years, which has been confirmed in the reports evaluating the partnership agreement by the EU. In this context, unlike Moldova and Ukraine, in 2022, Georgia could not get the EU candidate status and instead left with 12 recommendations for getting the candidate status.

Moreover, in recent years several Western partners of Georgia have raised concerns about human and minority rights issues in addition to the independence of the judiciary and investigations against the opposition that may have been politically motivated. For example, the 2022 report by the US State Department of Human Rights Practices in Georgia highlighted several critical issues. These included concerns over the impartiality of the judiciary, politically

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motivated investigations and prosecutions, unjustified intrusion into personal privacy, severe limitations on freedom of speech and media, violent attacks and threats against journalists, significant impediments to peaceful assembly and association, forced deportation of refugees, and violent crimes targeting individuals and activists who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex (US Department of State 2023).

State capture, the independence of the judiciary, and corruption are also interrelated issues in Georgia. Both state capture and corruption have damaged Georgia's international reputation recently. In 2023, the US Department of State publicly designated four Georgian judges under sanctions due to their involvement in significant corruption. It claimed that the judges abused their positions as court Chairmen and members of Georgia's High Council of Justice (US Embassy Tbilisi 2023). The Georgian government, in response, characterized the decision as completely incomprehensible and unacceptable and stated that it would damage the long-standing friendly relations between Georgia and the US (Georgian FM 2023).

Polarization of Media

The role of the media in Georgia's political polarization is undeniably significant. Today, the media is an area of political division and perhaps the most important political tool actively used by political parties to advance their objectives and undermine their adversaries. In this context, media in Georgia is very much divided between pro-government and pro-opposition organizations. Under the UNM's leadership, Saakashvili's ruling party gradually eroded the independence of the press, resulting in the state's tight control over national TV channels and their news coverage. In this period, most newspapers and broadcasters were firmly under the government's control (Caryl 2012). However, over the past few years, just like the UNM, the Georgian Dream government has started to use various methods to exert pressure on media outlets that strive to maintain their impartiality or support the opposition. As a result, the degradation of free media that represents all segments of society in Georgia has come under criticism (Ambassador Degnan 2023).

In this context, recent verdicts and imprisonments of the heads of the opposition media channels that served as ministers under the UNM's government in the country have also raised questions about whether these prosecutions are politically motivated. For instance, the Georgian government arrested Nika Gvaramia, a Georgian journalist and a former minister under UNM leadership, in July 2020 for allegedly misappropriating funds from the television station Rustavi 2 (JamNews 2022). The former Minister of Defense under the UNM leadership, the founder of the opposition TV channel Formula, was also recently sentenced to pay €5 million to the Ministry of Defense for embezzlement of the funds (Court of Appeal 2023). However, regarding the freedom of media in Georgia, adopting the so-called Foreign Agents Law has been the most divisive topic in the country in recent years. The People's Power political party, which consists of a member of parliaments who left the GD but stayed in the pro-government bloc, announced on 14 February 2023 that they have prepared a proposal to regulate the work of organizations funded by foreign sources and would officially submit it to parliament. The ruling GD has also announced its support for the bill in Parliament (Georgian Dream 2023). On 21 February 2023, after initial criticism, People's Power stated that they would change the law and plan to translate

the US Foreign Agents Registration Act directly and register it in parliament within a few days (People's Power 2022). It is important to note that the People's Power Party was established by the three MPs who left the ruling GD in the summer of 2022 to speak more openly and immediately criticized the EU over its "pointless" candidate status and accused it of trying to draw Georgia into a war with Russia (Kincha 2022). Some claim that the People's Power is an attempt by the ruling GD to shift the blame for the increasing anti-Western rhetoric for domestic politics and make the GD look more moderate *vis-a-vis* relations with the West. For instance, a recent study conducted by CRRC Georgia portrayed the GD as less extreme than its breakaway faction, People's Power, and boosted the governing party's popularity (Turmanidze 2023).

In this context, the controversial draft law proposed by the People's Power aimed to register non-commercial legal entities, broadcasters, legal entities that alone or jointly own a print media outlet operating in Georgia, and legal entities that own or use, jointly or with others, an internet domain and/or internet hosting that receive more than 20% of the annual total revenue from a foreign power. Therefore, many NGOs, media outlets, and even religious organizations operating in Georgia will have to register as foreign agents or face fines (People's Power 2023). Opposition and many media outlets in Georgia call the draft law "Russian Law" as it resembled the same foreign agents' registration law introduced in Russia.

On 7 March 2023, the Foreign Agent Law passed the first reading at the Georgian Parliament despite the objections of the United States (US Deeply Concerned 2023), the EU (PACE Rapporteurs 2023), and many of its Member States. The EU authorities repeatedly emphasized that the Law is incompatible with Georgia's EU aspirations and that its promised EU candidate status jeopardized its European path (EEAS 2023). The Law also sparked large protests outside of the Parliament in Tbilisi, and Georgian riot police were deployed to disperse the protesters. The violent crackdown on the protesters has also been widely covered in the international media.

Remarkably, Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili also slammed the Foreign Agents Law as it would restrict freedom of speech and damage the democratic transformation of the country (President 2023). Additionally, the president clearly stated her intention to veto the law in case it is adopted by the parliament (Kincha 2023), even though the parliament had the authority to override her veto if the majority of the MPs supported the Law for the second time. However, due to the successful first reading in the parliament, the protests took a violent turn in the capital Tbilisi on the night of 8 March 2023, with thousands of protesters actively clashing with the police until the next morning. The next day the Georgian Dream announced that it would not support the Law on Foreign Influence. Naturally, the announcement has been met with skepticism from the opposition claiming the GD would pass the Law after the protests subside. However, the Parliament held an extraordinary session the next day, and the opposition MP votes rejected the draft law, whereas GD MPs abstained. Unsurprisingly Georgian PM Irakli Gharibashvili blamed the opposition for protests saying that the protests were orchestrated by destructive, anarchist, and extremist forces in coordination with the UNM and even accused some protesters of dressing as Satanists (PM Garibashvili 2023).

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Imprisonment of Political Opponents

The imprisonment of important opposition figures in recent years has also started another political polarization process in Georgia. The polarization on this issue peaked with the arrest of former president and UNM party leader Mikheil Saakashvili following his return to Georgia after a long break. Former president Mikheil Saakashvili, who developed closer ties with the Euro-Atlantic Community (Lomia 2020) left Georgia in 2013 after he was charged with embezzlement of public funds and abuse of power and became a Ukrainian citizen in 2015. Just as Bidzina Ivanishvili was expelled from Georgian citizenship under the UNM's rule, Saakashvili was stripped of his Georgian citizenship in this period. He served as Odesa's governor in Ukraine, was later stripped of Ukrainian citizenship, and became a political fugitive in the Netherlands. His Ukrainian citizenship was restored later under President Zelensky.

On 01 October 2021, just on the eve of the local elections in Georgia, Saakashvili announced that he had returned to Georgia via social media post promoting the Georgian authorities to start a nationwide manhunt for the former president immediately and arrested him on the same day (Georgia Arrests Ex-President 2021). Naturally, the imprisonment of former President Saakashvili has gotten much more international attention not only because it is a high-profile case that involves Georgia's first president, famous for changing Georgia's orientation towards Euro-Atlantic Alliance but also because it involves much drama like the hunger strike and serious deterioration of the health of Saakashvili in such a short period. Leaked hospital footage of Saakashvili showed the former president as frail and barely able to walk, and his lawyers claimed that Saakashvili could die if he did not get the necessary medical attention (McFaul 2023).

As a result, the EU and the US (Agenda 2021) called for Saakashvili to be released from prison or sent to treatment abroad for adequate treatment (European Parliament 2023). However, the GD did not heed these calls, insisting that it was a sham staged by Saakashvili and the UNM and that the former president had received the necessary treatment. In 2021, the President of Georgia, Salome Zourabishvili, declared that she would never pardon Saakashvili, thus closing the way for this crisis to end with a presidential pardon before it evolved into a crisis that damaging Georgia's reputation in the international arena (President Zurabishvili 2021). However, it is also interesting that recently she criticized the court's decision to reject the deferral of Saakashvili's sentence or his release for treatment on health grounds saying the decision condemned Georgian people to be a hostage of the situation (President Zurabishvili 2023). Following the court's decision, the UNM also announced a parliamentary boycott and a series of nationwide protests (UNM 2023).

However, while arresting the country's former president for the abuse of power is one thing, arresting the main opposition leader, the primary political opponent of the ruling party, casts a much darker shadow on Georgia's democratic credentials. The Georgian government arrested Nika Melia, the Chairman of UNM, who had served as the party's leader until 2023, after the police forcefully entered the UNM headquarters in February 2021. He was charged with allegedly inciting violence during anti-government protests in 2019 (Khurshudyan 2021). The arrest led to international condemnation by Brussels and Washington, and consequently, the UNM chair Nika Melia was released from prison only after the EU posted his bail (Dartford

2021). Meanwhile, other small political parties in the Parliament cannot avoid being the target of GD. In 2022, three deputies from three different parties were stripped of their mandates, with the votes of GD further weakening the opposition in the Parliament (Grass 2022).

Overall, the imprisonment of key figures or active opposition politicians contributes not only to Georgia's already tense political environment but also further damages Georgia's international reputation and jeopardizes its inevitable path toward the European Union. It can also be considered an extension of the vicious rivalry between the UNM and GD that plagued Georgia for more than a decade. Unfortunately, the zero-sum game between the GD and the UNM ignores the interests of Georgia and its people. Instead of burying the hatchet for the greater good, the politicians continue to demonize each other, further increasing the polarization in the country (PM Compares 2023).

CONCLUSION

Although it has been reformed several times recently, the electoral system in Georgia still contains many single-seat majoritarian constituencies that serve the two-party system as envisioned by Duverger's Law. In recent years, Georgian Dream's unwillingness to introduce a fully-proportional election system that possibly would cost it to lose MPs in the parliament has triggered a series of political crises between the ruling party and the opposition. Moreover, the winner takes all mentality adopted by the political parties in Georgia resulted in increased affective polarization and serious democratic backsliding in recent years. Suppression of the free or opposition-sided media organizations, imprisonment of prominent political figures, and slowdown in the EU reforms are all the result of the political rivalry in the country.

However, corruption and state capture remain significant challenges for Georgia, and there have been serious allegations of corrupt practices and state capture within the Georgian Dream government. These allegations have been the subject of ongoing debate and controversy. Georgia needs to continue its efforts to address these issues and ensure that its public institutions are accountable and transparent; otherwise, the country's international reputation, hence the ongoing EU integration, will suffer.

The increasing trend of anti-Western rhetoric is another worrisome development contributing to further polarization in the country. There is an increasing attempt from the ruling party members to label anyone who criticizes the government or is associated with the opposition as a foreign agent. Georgian Dream's open support for the foreign agents' law led to violent protests in the capital. In light of these findings, it is also interesting that the main opposition party UNM is still far behind Georgian Dream in recent polls. UNM's past anti-democratic practices under its government still impact the Georgians voters' preferences. Overall, the rivalry and ensuing political polarization threaten the foundations of democracy in Georgia. Therefore, Georgia's recently recognized European path remains under threat. It is unlikely all the issues aforementioned in the study will be resolved under a compromise between the Georgian Dream and the opposition by the year's end when the EU decides about Georgia's candidate status.

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