

Dynamics of State-Building in Georgia

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It is my pleasure to be here at Harvard to speak about Georgia. It was a great experience for a political scientist to live through recent Georgian developments, but it is also an intellectual challenge to present a coherent picture of Georgian attempts at state-building. It includes several stories, in a sense, because in the period that I will cover, since 1988–89, Georgia had to undergo several rather important transitions that rarely coincide in time in a nation's history, but that did coincide in the case of the post-Soviet republics. These transitions were, first, the break-up of the old Communist system and the transition to democracy, which is itself a very important thing; second, the break-up of the Communist economy, the centralized command economy, and the transition to some kind of market; and third, the creation of an independent state from a Soviet province.

When you try to tell the story of Georgia in these last years, it is really, I would say, three story lines that run parallel to each other but sometimes meet—three different types of dynamics (although I do not mean here the same three problems that I have just outlined that Georgia has faced). One of them is the story of the creation of the new Georgian political elite, the story of the battles between the different political factions of Georgia, of the attempts to build new political institutions, and so on. This is the story of Georgian political life *per se*. Another story is that of ethno-territorial conflicts in Georgia, the conflicts between the Georgian majority, the Georgian political elite, and those political elites and respective ethnic groups that did not want to be part of the new Georgian state and that pursued separate arrangements for themselves, namely the Abkhazian and Ossetian minorities. Then there is a third story, the story of relations between Georgia and Russia. Each of these themes has its own internal logic, so we have to think about each separately.

Each of these stories alone is crucial to our understanding of what has happened in Georgia, and which of these three themes you choose as the leading one depends on who you are and what your perspective is. If you are a Western scholar, you are more often expected, I think, to choose the story of ethnic conflict as the

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leading one. Most Western research projects on Georgia in the last year have been about ethnic conflict in Georgia, and ethnic conflicts are things for which we are sort of famous and interesting; it has become a trademark of Georgia. If you are a Georgian, you are likely (at least that is what I would expect from a lot, though not all Georgians) to choose relations with Russia as the factor that determines everything else. According to this school of thought, you can understand what has happened in Georgia only by looking at specific relations with Russia and how they have developed; you have to demonstrate how ethnic conflicts arise out of this, and how all internal Georgian political conflicts come from this. Contrary to these perspectives, I tend to think that internal Georgian political developments are the leading events, in the sense that they are the key and crucial events for understanding everything else that has happened in Georgia. Thus, I will single out this story line as the leading one, having in mind, of course, that you cannot speak about any of these topics without somehow touching on others.

To speak of some peculiarities of Georgia as compared to other post-Soviet countries, I want to say that Georgia has been notable for especially tense developments in each of these directions. I mean, there were and are problems in all post-Soviet countries, but Georgia has had extremely tense conflicts within each of these three spheres. We have had two ethno-territorial wars that have continued for a long time. Apart from them, we had a coup and sort of civil war (not along ethnic lines), and we have had extremely difficult and controversial relations with Russia. So if Georgia is noted for something, it is noted for very dramatic developments in each of these directions.

Now I will propose some kind of periodization of our political developments. Just naming these periods, or stages, of our development, means mentioning major events that happened in Georgia. I think we have very clear landmarks that divide these periods from one another. The first is the time between 1988, roughly, and fall 1990. This is the stage of the rise of the Georgian independence movement, when this movement gradually came to dominate Georgia's political discourse and its political scene. It ended when one of the coalitions that represented this movement, the Round Table, led by Zviad Gamsakhurdia, became the government of Georgia as a result of democratic elections. The second period is the first attempt, an unfortunate and failed one, to build a nation-state of Georgia. This period covers the rule of Zviad Gamsakhurdia and his Round Table coalition from the elections of fall 1990 to his ouster as a result of two weeks of fighting in December-January 1991–92. The third period is one of disorder, mess, and chaos that resulted from the Georgian coup, or insurrection, when Georgian statehood experienced an almost complete breakdown of state institutions and order. The story continued from this coup through the fall of 1993, and the climax was losing Abkhazia and the anti-Shevardnadze insurrection in western Georgia.

Paradoxical as it is, losing the war in Abkhazia prompted a period of gradual stabilization in Georgia. Different warlords who were really in charge of the country after the coup, were gradually pushed to the margins of political life, and the civil government headed by Eduard Shevardnadze gradually solidified its base, thus becoming a real government. The end of this process is marked by the failed assas-

sination attempt on Shevardnadze in August 1995. Having survived this attempt, Shevardnadze turned it into an opportunity, getting rid of his last armed adversaries. He then finalized his victory in the elections of November 1995. November 1995 ushered in a period of relative stability and normalcy, so you can say that the second attempt at state-building was held to be successful. This is a general outline, a framework of recent Georgian history. Now, I will try to briefly characterize the peculiarity of each of these periods, and this will be my talk today.

As for the period of the rise of the national independence movement, there was one thing for which Georgia was notable more than any other Soviet republic. Georgia was the only place among these republics where the pro-independence movement was dominated by its radical factions. There were radical groups like this everywhere (their trademark was a refusal to take part in any official elections until Soviet rule had been formally abolished), for instance, in the Baltic states: I single them out because Georgians tried sometimes to model their movement on them. But nowhere except Georgia did the radicals become the predominant opposition force. This very much determined everything that happened after they came to the fore. The domination of the radicals explains the extremely confrontational character of Georgian politics and the feature that I would define as revolutionary aestheticism. Political struggle (for whatever cause) was interpreted as a set of heroic-aesthetic gestures, and anything like pragmatism or political calculation was considered to be a disgrace, hence unacceptable. National rejection of any compromise with the projected “enemy” (Russia, or “the Kremlin”) practically resulted in failures to achieve any compromise between different factions of the national-independence movement (whether between radicals and moderates or between various radical groups). It was this confrontational character of political discourse and activities that was primarily responsible for the different kinds of conflicts that eventually developed in Georgia: those between various political groups or factions, which in due time led to a kind of civil war, as well as the ethnic-territorial wars and, in part, especially strong tensions with Russia.

Turning to the period of Gamsakhurdia’s rule, the most important fact about him is, of course, that he failed. This requires explanation. He was a popularly elected president who came to power as a leader of the national independence movement whose slogans definitely dominated the political agenda. Here, one has to keep in mind another feature that was specific to Georgia: at that time, there was really no political agenda in Georgia other than independence and democracy. Unlike the Baltic states, there was no organized political force that would say in public that Georgia should not be independent, or that it is good to retain a Communist state. There was the Communist Party to be sure, but after the massacre of April 1989, when Soviet troops killed twenty peaceful pro-independence demonstrators, it became impossible for anybody to say anything in favor of communism or the Soviet Union in public. One can say that although the Communist Party was nominally in power until fall 1990, the legitimacy of Soviet rule in Georgia really ended in April 1989, and the agenda was being completely and definitely set by the nationalist movement. Gamsakhurdia came to power as the leader of this movement, so his legitimacy seemed to be extremely strong.

Yet it was quite soon that everything ended in a crushing defeat for him. Why? One may refer to many different factors, but I will highlight certain crucial dilemmas that Gamsakhurdia failed to handle. This is important because the government after Gamsakhurdia, that of Shevardnadze, had to face the same dilemmas, but handled them with much greater success. One was the dilemma between democracy and autocracy, and the other was that between idealism and pragmatism. These problems were objective ones, and whoever would be the leader of Georgia has to face them.

In the revolutionary situation involving the fight for independence, there was no chance for anyone to avoid using some autocratic methods and being blamed for that. But at the same time, there was a consensus that only a democratically elected government could be a legitimate one. The exclusive legitimacy of the democratic idea was not based so much on a commitment to democratic values on behalf of the public or the new political elite, but rather on the general pro-Western orientation of Georgia. There was not much in real life on which the new political elite could base its attempt to build a new society or a new state; there was only ideology, or allegiance to a national project, the idea that Georgia should follow the Western model. Democracy, alongside the nation-state, is another element of this model, so it was taken for granted that Georgia should be a democratic state, a democracy. On the other hand, the logic of revolutionary struggle with a very strong enemy image brought about a siege mentality and calls for unconditional national unity, which legitimized autocratic methods as well.

When Gamsakhurdia was ousted, his removal was legitimated by the claim of the liberal elite that he was a dictator, and this claim was not altogether groundless. His supporters, on the other hand, said that he lost because he was too mild really to crush his opposition. He was a legitimate authority and anyone who fights against a legitimate authority, with illegitimate methods, with arms, should be crushed. But he failed to do that. There was an element of truth in that, too. Of course, it was part of his strange personality that he alienated everyone, or almost everyone who had stood by him, and his character has a lot to do with his failure. But part of the problem with his character was that he could not find the right middle way between the poles of a democratic leader and an autocrat. He sounded like a dictator and did things that provided grounds for accusations of dictatorship; but in reality, he thus instigated stronger resistance instead of building a strong power basis for himself.

A second dilemma was that between idealism and pragmatism. Being a tough one for any Georgian leader, this was particularly challenging for Gamsakhurdia. When he came to power, the radical faction of the independence movement dominated political discourse; but he now was the head of state, not an opposition figure. In his new position, he had to make a lot of concessions and compromises. Once he tried to act in this way, however, he came into contradiction with his previous image. He was elected as a hero, as a person who sacrificed a lot for the fight for independence, who had been in jail and suffered for his cause; a politician who had to maneuver and make compromises did not fit in into this image.

One has to remember that his legitimacy was undermined in the first place not by his being a radical nationalist, but by his not being radical enough. The break-

down of his legitimacy began with the August putsch in Moscow, during which he failed to take the stand that was expected of him. He behaved like a coward. And on the next day, part of the national guard broke away and this was really the beginning of the Georgian *coup d'état*. He was ousted not because he was too radical a nationalist, but vice versa. The people who deposed him were nationalists in their own right, with their often-idealist nationalism and democratic idealism. The claim by the liberal intelligentsia that he was not democratic enough was the idea on which this insurrection against Gamsakhurdia was based. Of course, the people who actually took arms and fought might have their own personal interests in power, and it is extremely difficult to call them “democrats.” But those who had really vested personal interests in getting rid of Gamsakhurdia were too few and weak to succeed without a reasonable element of popular legitimacy and political idealism. Gamsakhurdia failed because he could not live up to his image.

Here comes Shevardnadze and his new attempt to build a Georgian state. The comparison between the two leaders and their records is extremely iron-

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ic: contrary to Gamsakhurdia, with whom it was hard to understand how a person who had been so strong in support and legitimacy came to such a fast and crushing defeat, Shevardnadze had an extremely weak power base initially. He was really invited by a group of warlords who had not intended to give him real power. They only wanted a visiting card in their relations with the West; they knew he had powerful friends and was a famous person there. After Kitovani, one of those warlords, developed an open conflict with Shevardnadze about one year later, he publicly complained that they had invited this guy to handle foreign policy, while now he wanted to meddle in real things, which was unacceptable. But this person who had no power base eventually acquired real power. That’s another paradox of recent Georgian history.

Again, personalities play a very important role in this. If Gamsakhurdia was very good at alienating people and making enemies out of friends, Shevardnadze was the opposite—he was very good at attracting people and making friends (or allies, at least) out of enemies. He really showed himself to be an extremely skillful political gambler.

In the meantime, the political agenda, the mentality, and the expectations of the public changed a lot, and this was very important for his success as well. While Gamsakhurdia was brought to power in the period of romanticist revolutionism, Shevardnadze had to deal with the new mind-set for which stability and order became the major political values. This change was not something peculiar to Georgia, but the great shock of the coup and the following breakdown of legitimacy fostered it very much. Shevardnadze quite skillfully appealed to these values in his fight against his adversaries.

Another thing that paradoxically helped him was losing the war in Abkhazia. He had always kept saying that if Georgia lost the war in Abkhazia, he would resign and that his forces could not afford to lose Sukhumi. To be sure, it was a big shock for Georgia to lose Abkhazia, and to have over 200,000 refugees as a result of it. It was not only losing Abkhazia that was a shock, but making concessions to Russia in its aftermath. This war is a very complex thing and it could be definitely the topic of another talk, but at least for the Georgian public it was primarily a war with Russia. The majority of the Georgian public believed that, as a matter of fact, it was Russia who waged war against Georgia, making use of local separatist forces. The rationale of that war appeared to be punishing Georgia for its pro-independence orientation. Joining the CIS does not mean much in real terms, because the CIS does not involve too much that is real. But Georgia's joining the CIS, which happened immediately after losing the war in Abkhazia, was perceived in Georgia as a sort of dismantling of the national project. It implied giving up—it was just kneeling down and asking Russia for pardon. Thus, after that, Georgia's signing of the agreement on Russian military bases on its territory, which is of course a much more substantial concession than joining the CIS, was accepted much more easily because the first recognition of fundamental defeat, the dismantling of national project, in essence was believed to have already occurred, and this was the joining of the CIS. So after taking this defeat in Abkhazia, and defeat at the hands of Russia, symbolically giving up the national project, you have Shevardnadze's gradual rise to power, real power, not nominal power that he had possessed before that.

To understand this paradoxical development, one has to have in mind, first, that losing the war actually shattered not so much Shevardnadze as those paramilitary formations or groups that claimed to be the Georgian army, and that had actually fought the war. They shattered themselves in a material sense because they lost their arms and people and everything. But they also lost legitimacy; they were the primary losers of the war, and this helped Shevardnadze.

First, Shevardnadze got control of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which he did not control before fall 1993. Having this ministry as a base of support, he used the slogan of order, which was extremely popular, and for very good reason, because the country was a mess and had suffered from very high criminality for several years. He gradually played one person against the other, managing to weaken and eventually to imprison his major adversaries. Of course, it was an immense task, as one can imagine—the several layers of conflict that he had to handle at the beginning. There was a Georgia that had very difficult relations with Russia. There was a Georgian political elite at large that had to handle this conflict with the ethnic separatist elites of Abkhazia and Ossetia. It was the part of the Georgian elite who ousted Gamsakhurdia against those people who supported him. Within this victorious part of the political elite, there was a coalition between Shevardnadze and Ioseliani, the leader of the powerful Mkhedrioni militia, which went against Kitovani and other warlords. And then, of course, there was some bottom-line conflict between Shevardnadze and Ioseliani as well. He had to make all kinds of very sophisticated Byzantine political steps, to make

friendships and break them in time, and he succeeded. It is still a kind of miracle for me how he did it, but he did it.

He was, of course, very lucky as well, especially to survive the assassination attempt in August 1995. That attempt turned out to be so fortunate for him that, of course, many people claim it was he himself who organized it. I am not an expert on ballistics and the like, but at least those experts with whom I have talked do not believe that it was possible. If he could really organize that much, then he really is a genius and so he deserves what he has.

As a result, we have this sort of “return to normalcy” period. I think that it is only over the past several months that one could say that Georgia is a sort of state. Now it is not only a legal entity in international relations, but it meets at least some qualifications for statehood. Number one, of course, is that the government enforces a monopoly on the legitimate use of force, which is, as you know, the classic Weberian definition of the state. After more than 200 members of Mkhedrioni were imprisoned during fall 1995 in the aftermath of the assassination attempt, the Georgian government first became able to enforce this monopoly. I don’t mean, of course, the break-away regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but that part of Georgia that is under the control of the central government.

There are also some attempts to raise taxes, a function that is also one of the features of government of the state. Of course, two or three years ago the government would not dare to ask for taxes because it did not exist, and why should anybody pay for government if there is no state? Now there is relatively great progress, keeping in mind that it is easy to have progress when one is starting from almost zero. But there is definite progress in the sense that there is some state budget. While last year’s state budget was 53 percent foreign credits, loans, and grants, there was still some budget and there were some state revenues that the Georgian state itself raised. This represents great progress.

Another new thing that exists now, unlike two or three years ago, is some kind of economic policy. Before, Georgia was the most free market in the world because there were no restrictions on anything at all. Now there are some restrictions, such as, for instance, that we have one currency. You can trade only in that currency, and it is quite stable. Of course, it is stable because of IMF loans, but you can have IMF loans and still not have a stable currency. The Georgian government has succeeded in taking advantage of this loan and enforcing monetary stability.

One of the features of political normalization is that, as a result of the last elections, moderate forces definitely dominate the political scene. Neither neocommunists nor radical nationalists made it into the parliament. There are now three parties in the parliament. The ruling one is Citizens’ Union, or Shevardnadze’s party. First, it was only a movement in support of Shevardnadze, without any political agenda other than the support of Shevardnadze. Now, within this party, there is a core group of people who are not former nomenklatura; most of them are former Greens, or people from other young and new political elites who are trying to make the organization into a real party with a real agenda centered around making Georgia a Western-type state. And they are actually now making the parliament the most viable working institution in Georgia, a competent insti-

tution in its own way. There is also a relatively small nationalist opposition faction. It is the National Democratic Party that used to be a radical one but has now become a fairly moderate political force. The third one is the Union of Revival of Georgia, a regional party from the Ajarian Autonomous Republic, that, however, claims it is going to become a national force. Communists and radical nationalists (followers of the late president, Gamsakhurdia) still play certain roles, and I think if we had really fair elections, both of them would make it into the parliament, overcoming the 5 percent cut-off. Despite clear violations in a number of regions, however, the Georgian elections were considered to be reasonably free and fair, at least by the standards of the region. The result is that we now have a reasonably moderate, stable parliament that is oriented to making Georgia a Western-type democracy.

If we speak about democracy, Georgia is, of course, far from meeting full democratic standards. Like most post-Communist countries, it has some of its elements but lacks others. Most Western experts who travel in the Caucasus say that Georgia is a freer place than its neighbors, although this may not be a particularly high measure. I can say that after years of turmoil and mess, one could expect worse because there was much pressure to have an iron hand to introduce law and order. I think Shevardnadze should take some credit not only for succeeding in his fight against different warlords, but also for winning without becoming a real dictator, although he is sometimes accused of that, too. I cannot be sure that he is a committed democrat; but it is very important that he has a certain prestige, a certain background, which is not only the background of a Communist leader of Georgia, but also of a person who in some sense is responsible for destroying the Berlin Wall. Having an international image as a democrat, he wants very much to live up to it, first, because he likes it, and second, because it is a very important part of his political capital.

One more recent development is that the economy is becoming the major political issue. When you speak professionally in an American political science environment, you are supposed to speak a lot about the economy and how important it is for politics. Of course, there was some economic element in the background of Georgian political developments, but it did not dominate people's minds, and definitely was not the central thing on the political agenda. Georgia did not have a division between left-wing and right-wing political parties in the conventional sense because the issue number one, almost the sole issue in Georgian politics, was the relationship with Russia. The kind of relations with Russia you supported defined where you stood politically. It may be the foremost feature of "normalcy" that the economy has become the major political issue in Georgia. New political divisions that are developing now depend on one's stand on economic issues.