Networked Apathy: Georgian Party Politics and the Role of Social Media

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Abstract: This article examines the way in which Georgia's political parties use social media. Overall, of available social media, politicians and parties prefer to use Facebook, but they do not take advantage of its various interactive features. Politicians point out that the internet audience in Georgia is not yet large enough for them to pay much attention to on-line campaigning. In fact, the main consequence of social media in Georgia seems to be improved communications between the political opposition and Western partners, who exert a powerful influence on Georgian politics.

Digital and internet technologies are increasingly recognized as prominent tools for social and political mobilization.[1] The 2008 election

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victory of U.S. President Barack Obama appeared to signal a watershed moment as internet technologies—particularly social media—likely played a uniquely pivotal role in marshaling citizen support and financial contributions.[2] The so-called "Arab Spring," a wave of people-power revolutions that swept across the Middle East and North Africa in 2010-2011, is often credited as another case study for the potentially powerful role of social media in social and political organization.[3] This notion is echoed in recent literature showing the potentially significant role that internet technology played in the outcome of multiparty democratic elections in Australia.[4]

Studies of social media and political mobilization in post-communist Eurasia suggest that, in spite of levels of regional internet penetration at least generally comparable to those in the Middle East and North Africa, there is less evidence that internet technologies can currently play as significant a role as in the Middle East and North Africa or in liberal democratic societies. While the use of social media in the 2011 Russia protests highlights social media's ability to amplify discontent, the lack of apparent direct or indirect results undercuts hopes that the "Arab Spring" model of social media-based political mobilization is readily replicable.[5] In fact, internet technologies in some regimes appear to be increasingly as much a means of repression as liberation. "Networked authoritarianism," to borrow Rebecca MacKinnon's description of social media-based repression in China,[6] is observed as an aspect of regime control, for example, in post-communist Azerbaijan.[7]

However, party politics in Georgia offers an altogether different type of test case. While it is a post-communist state with a profoundly personalized political system, Georgia has also historically inhabited the "middle ground" of regime typologies. Though there are indications that

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[2] See David Carr, How Obama Tapped Into Social Networks' Power, *New York Times*. November 9, 2008. http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/10/business/media/10carr.html

[3] See, for example, Habibul Haque Khondker. 2011. "Role of the New Media in the Arab Spring." *Globalizations*, Vol. 8 (5), and Ekaterina Stepanova. "The Role of Information Communication Technologies in the "Arab Spring", PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 159, May 2011.

[4] Rachel K. Gibson and Ian McAllister. 2011. "Do Online Election Campaigns Win Votes? The 2007 Australian 'YouTube' Election." *Political Communication*, Vol. 28 (2).

[5] Markku Lonkila, "Russian Protest On- and Offline: The role of social media in the Moscow opposition demonstrations in December 2011." *The Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Briefing Paper* no. 98, February 2012.

[6] Rebecca MacKinnon. 2011. China's "Networked Authoritarianism." *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 22 (2) (April).

[7] Katy E. Pearce and Sarah Kendzior. 2012. "Networked Authoritarianism and Social Media in Azerbaijan." *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 62: 2 (April).

Georgia may be moving again toward democratization, it has generally fit the "competitive authoritarian" hybrid model proposed by Stephen Levitsky and Lucan Way.[8] And while post-independence Georgian regimes have consistently exhibited authoritarian tendencies to varying degrees, the country has also featured a degree of political competitiveness and pluralism that has set it apart from "classical" authoritarian regimes. Accordingly, Georgia would seem to offer an interesting milieu for the employment of internet technologies and social media as tools for political mobilization.

This article considers the role of digital technology in Georgian party politics by examining social media activity related to the October 2012 Georgian parliamentary elections. The analysis focuses on the role of social media campaigns in the outcome of the election and how they contributed to the success of new actors emerging in the party system.

The methodology is primarily qualitative. We identified eleven prominent political parties in Georgia based on their political activities and successful electoral campaigns. We then analyzed and scored the parties' website and social media content for comparative purposes. Researchers examined information published on party websites regarding: ideology; internal management; strategies for recruiting new members; human resource management and career development policies; public relations strategies; capacity for political analysis; and the way in which political parties registered members, supporters, and their interaction with online users. The researchers also monitored the Facebook activity of the political parties and their leaders and carried out a comparative analysis of their social media campaigns during the 2012 parliamentary election. Finally, we conducted 75 in-depth interviews (55 before the election and 20 afterwards) with social media experts, bloggers, political scientists, and political party leaders.

The article proceeds in the following way. First, we provide an overview of Georgian party politics. Second, we survey the level of media freedom in Georgia. Third, we examine the state of the political parties' web sites. Fourth, we examine how politicians use social media. The conclusion examines the current impact of on-line strategies and their potential evolution.

Overview of Georgian Party Politics

In spite of near-universal support for democratization among Georgian politicians,[9]   inexperience and the lack of a democratic political culture

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[8] Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way. 2002. "The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism." *Journal of Democracy* 13: 2 (April).

[9] S. Tsereteli-Stephens, Caucasus Barometer: Rule of Law in Georgia - Opinion and Attitudes of the Population 27.6. 2011, http://crrccenters.org/activities/reports/.

posed a challenge to Georgia's democratic consolidation. These lacunae are particularly glaring in Georgian party politics. While the typical role of political parties in democratic systems is to articulate and aggregate group preferences—and hold elected officials accountable—a comparable, mature system does not currently exist in Georgia.

Georgian political dynamics appear to approximate that of many other post-communist systems in Eastern Europe, which feature relatively low voter turnout (46.6 percent in Georgia's 2013 presidential election), little interest in political parties, weak partisan loyalty, and minimal connection among parties and civil society.[10] The formal framework of multi-party politics is at odds with Georgia's profoundly personalized party politics, in which stable political constituencies have been traditionally absent. In fact, politics is so personalized that significant divergences in political opinion often go unnoticed.[11] The fact that almost all parties are founded on the basis of a personality or group of personalities helps to explain why there are more than 100 registered political organizations. This vast number of parties often causes the Georgian population to be more inclined to vote for candidates on the basis of personality and charisma—or, alternatively, to simply vote against the current government to express dissatisfaction— rather than because of political issues.[12]

A lack of members and loyal supporters makes it difficult for parties to articulate and aggregate preferences. Some commentators on Georgian politics argue that political parties have not grown out of social cleavages and thus do not represent large segments of society—though they may articulate their sentiments—and are difficult to place on the left-right spectrum of classical political ideologies.[13] Charisma and populism fill the void left by the lack of party structures and programs. Competition among parties is often less about policies and primarily runs along a pro-government/anti-government fault line.

Moreover, Georgian political parties have persistently failed to satisfactorily perform functions that are associated with political parties in established democracies, such as representing groups in society,

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[10] For a detailed account on Eastern European party politics see: Gábor Tóka. 1997. "Political Parties in East Central Europe." In *Consolidating the Third Wave Democracies: Themes and Perspectives*, ed. L. Diamond, M. F. Plattner, Yun-han Chu, and Hung-maoTien, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 93-134.

[11] Ilia Roubanis, Georgia's pluralistic feudalism: a frontline report. July 3, 2009. http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/georgia-pluralistic-feudalism

[12] Konstantine Kandelaki, "Developing New Rules in the Old Environment: Local Government in Georgia," Local Government and Public Service Reform Initiative (Open Society Institute), 265, Available at: http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/apcity/unpan008027.pdf

[13] Max Bader. 2008. "Fluid Party Politics and the Challenge for Democracy Assistance in Georgia," *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*.2:2 (Spring).

aggregating interests, or mobilizing voters.[14] The failure to express clear and consistent policies and the tendency to engage in populist action can also be explained by an inclination in Georgian politics towards a cult of personality.[15] As a result, many politicians appear to prefer an image of strength over reason or consistency. In general, this tendency has made presidential elections a poor stimulant for party politics, since competitions have historically been framed as contests of personality. Instead, parliamentary or local elections are the primary arenas in which political parties compete for votes.[16]

Many of the people we interviewed suspect that the weak links between parties and social and economic interest groups are to blame for parties' generally low level of popularity. Unlike in many western European democracies, for example, trade unions appear to lack widespread public trust in Georgia. According to regular surveys conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI), levels of confidence in trade unions are consistently low, although there is a slight upward trend.[17] In the most recent survey, trade unions (with just 21 percent approval) are the second least trusted institution of the 16 included in the survey—beating only the mafia.[18]

Challenges to Media Freedom in Georgia

In Georgia, the right to access information without political censorship is enshrined in the Constitution as well as the law on Freedom of Speech and Expression, adopted by the Georgian parliament in 2004. The law brought the country closer to European standards because it decriminalized slander and shifted responsibility for the burden of proof entirely onto plaintiffs. However, it could not ensure editorial freedom for television broadcasters.

In the following years, and especially after 2007, the government made repeated attempts to enforce government control over private TV channels and other broadcasters in Georgia. These tendencies were reinforced after the Russia-Georgia war in August 2008, when the government introduced a strict information policy and strengthened its influence over

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[14] Ibid. p.84.

[15] See, George Welton. No date. Evaluating the Failure to Oppose: Political Opposition in Post-Revolutionary Georgia http://www.geowel.org/index.php?article_id=20&clang=0.

[16] For a detailed analysis of Georgian party politics see: Ghia Nodia & Alvaro Pinto Scholbach, eds. 2006. *The Political Landscape of Georgia: Achievements, Challenges and Prospects*, Delft: Eburon.

[17] Transparency International, Georgia Report. The Georgian Trade Union Movement, February 2010.

[18] The church, by contrast, enjoys 91 percent trust and parliament 41 percent. The 2009 figures are a relative improvement. According to the June 2005 survey, Georgians were more likely to consult local mafia bosses for help than their trade union which appeared at the bottom of the survey.

the national broadcasters. During this period, national television companies came under increased pressure from the government, which sought to reduce critical reporting and silence opposition voices. However, smaller TV companies, which broadcast in a limited area, were able to continue their operations as usual, a fact that helped the Georgian government to maintain its image for protecting media freedom within the international community.

Until 2012, the National Communication Commission (NCC) was the government's primary tool to maintain political control over the media. However, it failed to adhere to the principle of political neutrality and abused its power by manipulating the media regulation process. For instance, several new pro-government TV channels (Real TV, Region TV) began to broadcast nationwide during this period even though they had no broadcasting licenses. At the same time, the NCC denied several license applications from private TV companies. Political influence on the NCC can also be seen in the fact that the NCC chairman had business interests in one of the pro-government TV companies and in an advertising company that had exclusive rights to produce and run TV commercials.

Between 2009 and 2012, Georgia's foreign partners (the USA and the EU) and international organizations (OSCE, NATO) as well as national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) repeatedly called for media reforms. Thanks to their efforts and advocacy, Georgia made numerous amendments to Georgian legislation in 2008-2012, including changing the law on broadcasting on April 8, 2011. However, in 2012, Freedom House reported that national television "is widely perceived as biased in favor of the government." The report also noted that TV channels with a limited broadcasting area supported the opposition. The 2012 developments confirmed that the government was not ready to reverse its media policy decisions as it made continued attempts to increase control over information delivered to the Georgian public. Immediately before the election campaign started, the most popular and largest cable TV operators (their owners were widely viewed as being government supporters) excluded pro-opposition channels from their portfolio, significantly curbing access to pro-opposition media for a considerable number of Georgian citizens. In response, several Georgian civil sector organizations launched a large-scale campaign, entitled "This Affects You Too." The popularity of the campaign and international pressure in support of media freedom before the elections led to important amendments to the legislation. Namely, on June 29, 2012, parliament adopted the so-called "must carry, must offer" principle, which obliged all cable TV operators to broadcast all Georgian TV companies for 60 days before the election.

These reforms seemed to have some impact. According to reports published in September 2012 by two international organizations - the

Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) and the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) - the pre-election media environment in Georgia prior to the parliamentary elections on 1 October 2012 was "competitive," albeit "polarized." PACE welcomed the endorsement of "Must Carry" rules that improved pluralism in the country's media environment. The OSCE/ODIHR interim report, covering the period between August 22 and September 5, 2012, found that Georgian media outlets were polarized according to political outlook and lacking in independent editorial policies.[19]

Politicians in Georgia understand the level of influence traditional media retains in the formation of public perceptions. This influence is especially relevant for Georgia where television remains the main source of news for about 80 percent of Georgian citizens residing in the capital and 92 percent of the rural population. Even in Tbilisi, just 11 percent of people surveyed in 2011 said that the Internet represents their main source of information.[20] The 2011 media survey data also indicates that a large portion of the Georgian public is critical of the current state of affairs in the media, as about 42 percent of the Georgian adult population said they thought there was no freedom of speech in Georgia as opposed to 34 percent who said that there was (25 percent did not know or refused to answer).[21] At the same time, there are indications that public sentiment is shifting on this count. In a November 2012 poll conducted by the National Democratic Institute, 43 percent of respondents reported that freedom of speech was improving since October 2012. Another 49 percent said the press freedom had stayed the same. Only 1 percent said the situation was getting worse; 6 percent responded that they did not know.[22]

Nonetheless, open questions remain over the freedom of the media in Georgia. Under such circumstances, unrestricted access to the Internet and the free dissemination of online news are especially important. The Internet provides traditional media and news agencies with an opportunity to disseminate their information online more freely and bypass traditional barriers.

Access to social networks is unrestricted in Georgia and the Georgian government does not censor the internet. This was a contributing factor to Freedom House's decision to upgrade Georgia's internet freedom ranking from "partly free" in 2011 to "fully free" in 2012. Internet freedom was

[19] Central Asia Caucasus Institute, CACI Analyst, September 19, 2012, http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5843

[20] Caucasus Research Resources Centre (CRRC) in 2012, Media Survey 2011, http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/me2011ge/codebook.

[21] Caucasus Research Resources Centre (CRRC) in 2012, Media Survey 2011, http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/me2011ge/codebook

[22] National Democratic Institute – Public attitudes in Georgia, November 2013 http://www.civil.ge/files/files/2013/NDI-November2013-Survey.pdf

a subject of heated public debate in Georgia in 2011-2012. One of the most actively debated disputes was a lawsuit against the Georgian parliament brought to the Constitutional Court in 2011 by the Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA), a domestic human rights NGO. GYLA appealed against the newly adopted law that gave the authorities the power to monitor all internet activities, including private online communication, without a court warrant. GYLA argued that such monitoring was a blatant infringement of the right to privacy guaranteed by article 20 of Georgia's Constitution. After hearing the case on October 24, 2012 (immediately after the new government came to power following the 1 October parliamentary elections), the Constitutional Court ruled in favor of GYLA, emphasizing that the law did not provide any mechanisms to ensure the protection of the right to privacy and prevent unauthorized monitoring of internet activities, including private online communication, by law-enforcement bodies without a court warrant.

Overall, few media outlets provided diversified and politically neutral news for Georgian citizens prior to the 2012 parliamentary elections. Among these relatively free sources were the internet and a number of private newspapers with central and regional coverage, which had editorial independence but limited circulations (2 percent of the population). Accordingly, the next section analyzes some statistical data to show how actively Georgian citizens were engaged in social media prior to the October 2012 parliamentary elections.

Internet and Social Media in Georgia

According to official statistics, Georgia's population is estimated to be 4,497,600 people,[23] more than 1,300,000 of whom had access to the Internet by August 2012.[24] A 2011 report by the NCC[25] found that the number of internet users is increasing by 3-5 percent every year. If this trend continues unabated, in several years, the internet will likely have a noticeable impact on Georgian public life. Experts claim that when at least 50 percent of a country's population – the amount described as a critical mass – obtains access to the World Wide Web, the internet will have sufficient influence to shape public opinion.[26] This is not yet the case in Georgia,

[23] For further details, National Statistics office of Georgia. Main statistics. Population Available at: http://geostat.ge/index.php?action=page&p_id=152&lang=eng

[24] Internet World statistics: Georgia. Available at: http://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#ge (Retrieved 30 April 2013).

[25] Georgian National Communications Commission. Annual Report 2011. Available at: http://www.gncc.ge/files/3100_2949_314871_1.pdf

[26] Nick Anstead and Chadwick Andrew. 2009. Parties, election campaigning and the internet, in by Andrew Chadwick and Philip N. Howard, eds. *Routledge handbook of Internet politics*, London: Routledge, p 56.

where the number of internet users was approximately 29 percent of the country's population in 2012.[27]

Despite the growing number of Internet retail subscribers in Georgia, a limited number of people use the internet every day and are actively engaged in social media. According to the Caucasus Research Resource Centre (CRRC) survey, *Caucasus Barometer 2011*, less than 25 percent of the Georgian adult population uses the Internet on a daily basis. Moreover, 49 percent of the population has never used the Internet, and 6 percent has no idea what the internet is (see Figure 1).[28]

Figure 1: Frequency of Internet Use in Georgia in 2011 (percent)
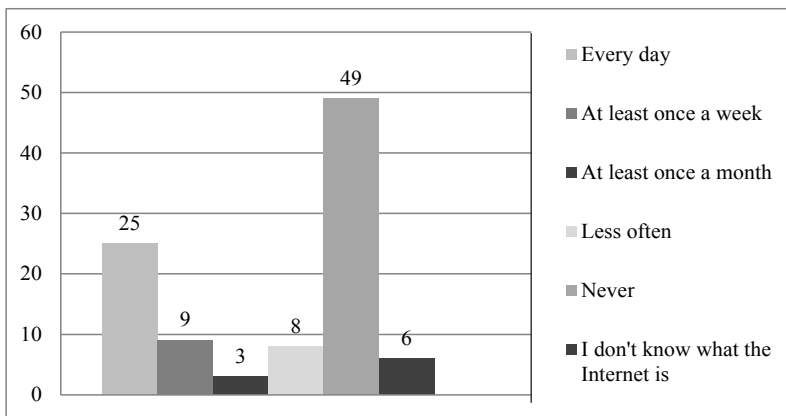
Source: Caucasus Research Resources Centre (CRRC)

Further assessment of the same survey results shows that 34 percent of the Georgian adult population has regular opportunities to use the internet. Taking into account the official 2012 figures that put the number of Georgia's adults aged 18 and over at 3,433,000,[29] it can be concluded that approximately 800,000 users access the internet often, and approximately half of that number surf the web from time to time (once a week or once a month). Among regular internet users (daily or once a week), who constitute 34 percent of the country's adult population, 26 percent said that Facebook was their first choice for socializing online (Figure 2). Thus, approximately 330,255 adult internet users spend most of their online time on Facebook.

[27] Internet World statistics: Georgia. Available at: http://www.internetworldstats.com/asia. htm#ge (Retrieved 30 April 2013).

[28] Caucasus Research Resource Centers. "2011 Caucasus Barometer". Retrieved from http://www.crrccenters.org/caucasusbarometer/ on 15 April, 2012.

[29] National Statistics Office in Georgia, GeoStat data 2012 http://www.geostat.ge/?action=page&p_id=151&lang=geo

Figure 2: Most Frequent Internet Activities – Use of Facebook (%) (The question was asked to respondents who use the Internet)
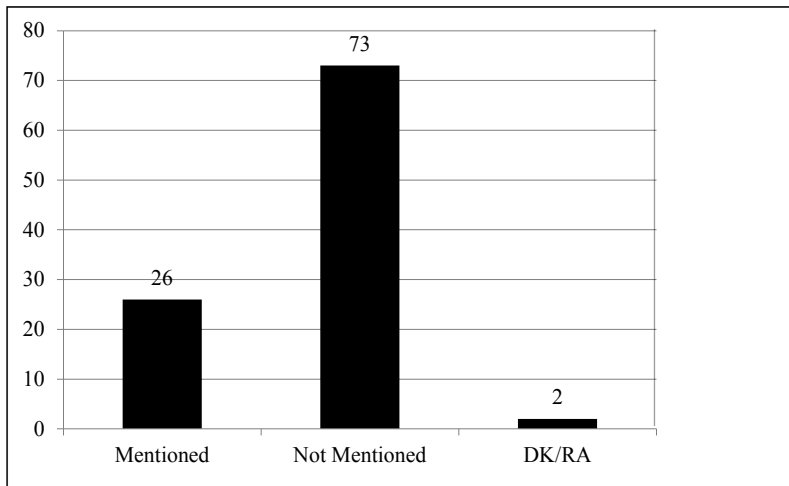
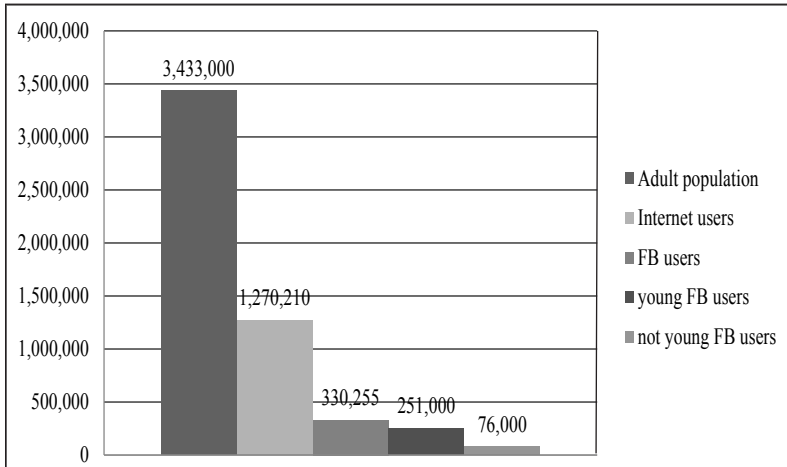Source: CRRC, Caucasus Barometer 2011

The above data allows us to develop a general view about Internet usage tendencies in Georgia and suggests that Facebook is the most popular social network in Georgia. One of the main reasons of its popularity is that it offers a Georgian language interface created for and used by native speakers (the language barrier limits the Georgian public's interest in the internet for other purposes, such as eBay, YouTube, and other sites, though Internet banking services are widely accessed by the public). The share of active Facebook users in Georgia is not high. They represent only a tiny fraction of all Internet users. Of these, approximately 251,000 are from the 18-35 age group and around 76,000 are in their 50s.

CRRC's Caucasus Barometer 2011 allows us to identify the reasons why the majority of the Georgian adult population remains offline (Figure 3). According to the survey results, the main reason is that a considerable number of Georgian residents do not have computers and most of them also lack computer knowledge and skills. In addition, the lack of reliable internet access remains a problem for many Georgian residents, especially for those who reside in rural areas.

Another social network, Twitter, has fewer users in Georgia. In the last two years, only Beeline, a mobile operator with the poorest coverage in Georgia, had mobile Twitter support. In 2012, the top two Georgian mobile operators, Geocell and Magti, followed suit and offered this service. As a result, Georgian customers are now able to send free-of-charge SMS

messages via Twitter to multiple recipients simultaneously. However, Twitter does not recognize Georgian fonts, so it has a rather low popularity in Georgia.

Fig 3: Relative Numbers of Internet users

Source: CRRC, Caucasus Barometer 2011

A comparative analysis of the Twitter accounts of the Georgian president, the leader of the former ruling party, and his opponent, the opposition leader and now prime minister, in the post-election period (after October 2012) can help to assess the popularity of Twitter in Georgia. The Georgian president's account has only 7,221 friends and 59 followers, and most of them add comments in English—there are few comments in Georgian (as of 1 May 2013). Prior to April 2012, the Georgian president had published only 776 Twitter messages that were commented on by some of the followers. In contrast, the Georgian prime minister's Twitter account has 22,132 followers, although it had not been updated since November 2012 (as of 1 May 2013). Before the elections, the former Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili (then the leader of the opposition) had published only some 870 Twitter messages, most of them in English. This means that neither the president nor the current prime minister consider Georgian Twitter users their main target audience. The prevalence of English messages suggests that both tend to use their Twitter accounts to promote their views and ideas abroad rather than at home. As one of the popular party PR group members noted, through tweets, Georgian political parties "target their international partners and foreign friends more than Georgian followers

and party supporters."[30] The Georgian experts who are active in social media and who were interviewed during the research suggested that given its first mover's advantage in 2010-2011, few other social networks will be able to challenge Facebook's popularity in Georgia.

Political Parties on the Internet Prior to the 2012 Parliamentary Elections

Well before the October 2012 parliamentary elections in Georgia, it was no longer a novelty for political parties to have websites. In fact, our survey results show that, by early 2012, the best established political parties all maintained functional websites. Only one major political party, the Georgian Dream party, had no official website at that time as it had not yet been officially founded (it was founded on April 19, 2012).

The survey of political parties' websites revealed that parties tend to publish mostly static and general information on their websites which does not need regular updating. The websites were not helpful in understanding what ideological differences exist between the parties. The sites generally limited themselves to publishing mission statements and a rather general description of the party's objectives and priorities. But generally, there were no policy declarations that reflected the party's ideology or specific program. The Free Democrats stood out among the political parties in that they specified at least some of their sectoral political programs. Beyond that, the Republican Party was the only party to publish its election program online for the 2008 parliamentary elections. In 2006, the site had published a "Republican Choice" policy paper.

While many campaign websites now routinely include interactive features,[31] a survey of Georgian political party websites showed that the Georgian parties are usually passive online and do not use their websites to communicate with members and supporters efficiently. The websites did not provide information about the results of public meetings and sometimes did not offer any opportunity to submit feedback at all. In most cases, the websites provided only a party email address and telephone number as a means of communication, leaving it unclear who was responsible for communicating with potential supporters and members. The website of the former ruling party, the United National Movement, was a clear example of such one-sided communication. As a rule, users were able to send their greetings, but there were no feedback opportunities for questions and complaints.

Levels of participation in online polls were also rather low. Political parties rarely included such features on their websites. For instance, only

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[30] Interview conducted with G.P., male, 29 April 2013.
[31] Ibid, p. 15.

about 900 users took part in an opinion poll on the Labor Party's website in February 2012. The National Forum conducted another poll with a single question: "Do you think it is necessary to change the election law?" which garnered responses from only about 1,600 users.

Only four out of ten political parties provided online party membership application forms on their websites. These parties were the National Forum, Free Democrats, Labor Party, and Christian Democrats. None of them offered registration for supporters and none, including the former ruling party, published information about the number of members and supporters by city or region. Only the websites of the United National Movement, and to a lesser extent, the Labor Party and New Rights had information about the location of their regional offices. All of these features indicate that most Georgian political parties have not viewed information and communication technology as a means of attracting additional supporters.[32]

Parties have not tried to make the donation process more transparent through their websites, which do not provide much data on fundraising. Only the United National Movement and Christian Democrat websites provide data about the names and addresses of donor companies and the amount of each donation. It is noteworthy that financial declarations of Georgian political parties are freely available – they are published annually on the internet and can be accessed by everyone. However, some political parties prefer not to publish such information on their websites. For instance, six member parties of the Georgian Dream coalition received a combined total in donations of 4,607,000 GEL in 2012 (except August-September), while the United National Movement raised 13,434,000 GEL; the Christian Democrats received 961,000 GEL, and the Labor Party was given 337,000 GEL.[33] (The 2012 Georgian budget totalled 7 billion GEL (4.3 billion USD), while GDP amounted to 26.1 billion GEL). A breakdown of the expenditure shows that the political parties directed most of their funds to pay for office rent, communication costs, advertising, and wages. Political associations allocated the biggest chunk of their money, 81 percent on average, to TV political ads, while online ads were at the bottom of their priorities. In fact, only two political parties—the Free Democrats and United National Movement—used internet ads, but on a limited scale.[34] This data indicates that political parties do not pay much attention to their activities on the internet and they do not think that it is worth paying for online advertising in their campaign. According to several well known

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[32] Ibid, p. 28.

[33] Transparency International – Georgia, Finances of Political Parties 2012, April 12, 2012; http://transparency.ge/post/report/akhali-angarishshi-politikuri-partiebis-finansebi-12-4-13

[34] Transparency International – Georgia, Finances of Political Parties 2012, April 12, 2012; http://transparency.ge/post/report/akhali-angarishshi-politikuri-partiebis-finansebi-12-4-13

politicians, and verified through regular polling, the internet in Georgia is still only accessed by a limited portion of the population.

Thus, by the beginning of 2012 almost all Georgian political parties had their own websites, but, after examining them, it was impossible to define which was more sustainable in terms of institutional and financial resources The content of all the sites was largely static, general, and ideologically vague. The websites were rarely updated or used for the distribution of information.

Political Parties on Facebook

Social media was especially important during the run-up to the October 2012 parliamentary elections in Georgia because the level of media independence in Georgia fell short of international standards during this period. Almost all the political parties that participated in our survey clearly intended to present their programs to a wider audience with the help of social media and social networks. The level of political party leaders' activity on Facebook was also quite high and they followed communication strategies similar to those of their political parties. It was evident that Georgian political parties preferred to promote the personalities of their leaders rather than their political programs, ideologies, or policies. These leaders also have personal Facebook accounts which they use to lead campaigns on behalf of their political parties. This is indicative of the personalized nature of politics in Georgia (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Politics is highly personalised in Georgia (Number of likes, 18.09.2013)
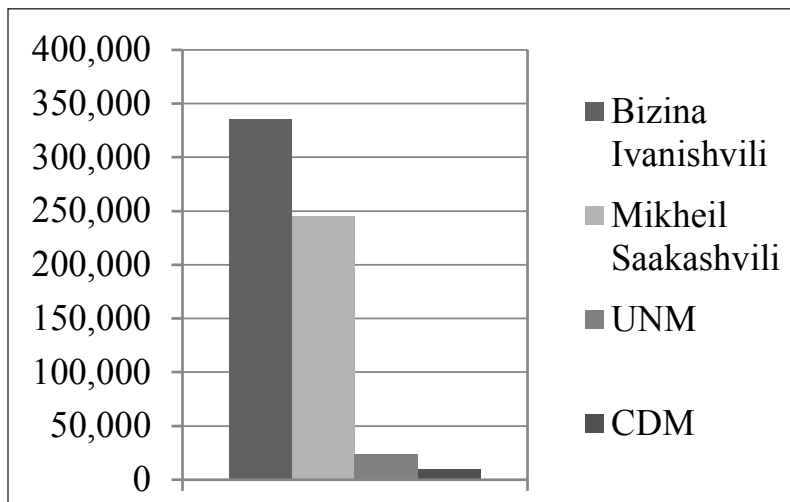
The two most well-known leaders on the political scene, Mikheil Saakashvili (United National Movement) and his main political opponent Bidzina Ivanishvili (Georgian Dream coalition), both had active and well-maintained Facebook accounts: content was regularly updated, campaign tours were extensively covered and photo materials provided. Other political actors—Irakli Alasania (leader of the Free Democrats), Davit Usupashvili (leader of the Republican Party), Davit Gamkrelidze (New Rights Party), Gubaz Sanikidze (National Forum), and Zviad Dzidziguri (Conservative Party) also had active Facebook accounts. As the monitoring showed, the parties with youth-dominated governing bodies appeared to be more aware of the advantages of social media and more motivated to overcome the negative consequences of limited access to traditional media sources. Parties governed by older generation leaders lacked this knowledge and their attitudes were different.

As one interviewee put it: "We, members of the youth wing, pay significant attention to social media, because we think that this is the most flexible and fast way to communicate with young people."[35]

Another expert interviewed during the research noted that Georgian political parties were seen not as organizations with a certain ideology and agenda, but as groups of popular leaders. Financially strong political parties have unlimited access to all available traditional media sources and dominate the market, which gives additional impetus to less well financed political parties to be interested in social media:

"[Facebook] is necessary to disseminate ideas; this is especially true in the Georgian context. Here we have propaganda channels. The [traditional] mass media is controlled by either the government, or an oligarch. Thus, social media is especially important for others, which helps them to share their views and propagate ideas."[36] In short, political parties, which have limited access to traditional media, "try to publish news on Facebook and communicate with the public through the youth."[37]

According to political party representatives interviewed during the research, it is not common for internet users to join political parties via social media. Most newcomers to politics make their choice based on their involvement during electoral campaigns. Social media is more useful for political parties in opening up communication channels with the wider public and strengthening contacts among existing party members.

Information on the campaigns of political parties is usually planned and published by a couple of network administrators working in party structures. Most of them limit their involvement to the publication of news reports/photos of political party events or live stream reports on

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[35] Interview conducted with T.Z., male, June 1, 2012.

[36] Interview conducted with G.G. male, April 28, 2012.

[37] Interview conducted with I.J., male, May 1, 2012.

press-conferences that involve the appearance of political leaders in social media.[38]

Because internet services are quite expensive and less accessible in many rural regions of Georgia, political parties are motivated to develop a more active campaign and help young people residing in Georgian villages to become more actively involved in social networks, including mobile services. Said one interviewee: "We have a project in which we teach youth how to use modern technologies and receive alternative information."[39]

Political party representatives admitted that the reason why political parties have become more actively engaged in social networking is partly due to the fact that foreign experts have promoted the idea among political parties and encouraged them to be active in social media. In recent years, foreign donors have worked actively on capacity building among Georgian political parties. Various democracy promotion organizations, such as the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the International Republican Institute (IRI), and the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD) have been involved in the development of democratic institutions in Georgia within the framework of EU and US state assistance programs.

According to the assessment of these donor organizations, political parties in Georgia face several continuous challenges, including restrictions on media independence and a shortage of funds. Accordingly, they aim to help parties develop structures and capacities that will enable them to improve their performance and to function at a high level. Georgian politicians, members of different political parties, and representatives of youth wings had opportunities to attend trainings, seminars and discussion meetings organized by donors and devoted to social media, blogs, and networking. They were given the chance to establish new communication channels utilizing social media, help the public to receive alternative information, and express their critical views in the social media.

Georgian politicians interviewed during the research admitted that, had they received stronger financial support, almost all political parties would have been interested in establishing much more intensive and viable contacts with voters. One of the experts interviewed also noted that "Saakashvili and Ivanishvili have well paid consultants working not only on the Georgian [social media] market, but they [Saakashvili and Ivanishvili] pay a lot of money to write articles in foreign newspapers."[40]

"I know that the president's [Saakashvili's Facebook] page, whether you believe it or not, works very well. They have brought in foreign experts, consultants, who lead (election) campaigns and conduct strategic planning. This is not necessary in the Georgian context, because we have

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[38] Interview conducted with I.K., male, May 1, 2012.

[39] Interview conducted with T.Z. male, June 1, 2012.

[40] Interview conducted with T.B. male, May 30, 2012.

experienced people in Georgia, who have the same level of experience as foreigners. But we have a tendency in Georgia to trust foreigners more than local experts…and it works well."[41]

Online Feedback, Live Stream, Conferences, Ads, and Likes

An analysis of the political parties' Facebook accounts revealed that the Georgian political parties rarely utilized feedback mechanisms afforded by social media. Parties almost never used social networks for opinion polls. Moreover, they often deleted negative comments on Facebook without responding to them. "[Negative feedback] may be removed, but information is received and reviewed. After we solicited questions for Bidzina Ivanishvili, the received questions were collected, and responses were prepared later,"[42] explained one respondent.

The review of the politicians' performance also showed that in response to any criticism directed at a political party, supporters would immediately set up fake or real accounts on forum pages or Facebook to unleash their rage on the critics. In the words of one interviewee: "If you open, for example, the wall of Georgian Dream and write something which is unacceptable for someone, supporters will 'stone' you. They would certainly remove your comments, and this is true for both sides (for presidential supporters and opposition leader supporters). If comments are not removed, you will be stoned."[43]

During the survey interviews, politicians reported being especially interested in reading negative comments. They said that they all read these comments and only then allowed Facebook page administrators to remove them.[44] However, they were not very active and did not enter into interactive dialogue with their subscribers, even during the electoral campaign for the October 2012 parliamentary elections. Political leaders' Facebook pages used a limited number of applications, such as petitions and online forums. The most popular activities on the Facebook pages of political parties were postings of photos and sharing information from materials broadcast in traditional media. These types of information were formal and official. Accordingly, the most numerous statuses and shared info were on the political subjects that dominated in the traditional media. Political parties devoted limited human and material resources to conducting comprehensive election campaigns through social media. Many political leaders admitted that electoral campaigns conducted through social media were new experiences for them and that they learned to achieve political

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[41] Interview conducted with S.L., male, June 2, 2012.
[42] Interview conducted with T.Z., male, June 1, 2012.
[43] Interview conducted with E.P., female, June 2, 2012.
[44] Interview conducted with N.S., female, May 17, 2012.

objectives through Facebook and other social media platforms' applications only during the campaign.

The procedures followed by organizers during political party leaders' online conferences did not significantly differ from similar conferences organized in traditional media outlets, where moderators would immediately delete negative feedback from personal accounts. Georgian politicians use different platforms for conducting online conferences, but they often face technical problems that make communication more difficult for the public. For example, a Labor Party representative complained about the low quality of services provided by the Ustream.com platform. Because of technical difficulties and low traffic speed, only approximately 100 participants managed to watch and participate in the online conference conducted in 2012.[45]

In general, experts did not see many changes in the approaches to the internet used by Georgian politicians. Until 2008, internet forums Forum.ge, Batumi discussion club, and Planeta.ge were the most active and frequently accessed organizers of online conferences among Georgian social websites. In 2007-2008, they hosted a conference with prominent politicians representing major political parties (Republicans, United National Movement, etc.) every week, providing live streaming and feedback services. However, this practice came to an end in 2012, giving way to a different format of conferences. For instance, Bidzina Ivanishvili preferred to hold press conferences. Accordingly, the Internet newspaper "Netgazeti" hosted live stream conferences twice in 2012 that allowed politicians to communicate interactively with the public.[46]

Political parties with well-organized and efficient press services followed suit. Former President Saakashvili, Free Democrats leader (and now Defence Minister) Irakli Alasania, and Tbilisi Mayor Gigi Ugulava took part in conferences organized by and hosted on the website of the pro-UNM Tabula magazine. The conferences were aired on television. Likewise, former Parliament Speaker David Bakradze himself hosted online conferences on his Facebook account.

In spite of the relative affordability of social media advertising, not all active political parties ran advertisements on Facebook. For instance, the experts interviewed claim that, in Georgia, such ads cost several hundred Georgian lari and can attract 2,000-3,000 users, on average. It is a constant communication tool; the ad is displayed constantly on Facebook pages and targeted to Georgian users. However, the politicians interviewed during the survey noted that the number of users was not high enough to justify the purchase of Facebook ads during the election campaign. "Most individuals registered on Facebook have already made up their political

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[45] Interview conducted with I.K., male, May 1, 2012.

[46] Interview conducted with K.S., male, June 2, 2012.

decision," said one respondent. "A Facebook campaign does not make any difference for political parties as more than 80 percent of their [Facebook] users had already made a decision [six months before the elections] whom to support. Those who receive information from the internet are politically active individuals."[47] Thus, using Facebook ads was seen as being tantamount to "preaching to the choir."[48]

"Likes" are not reliable indicators of popularity. According to interviewed experts, in the Georgian context, fake profiles make it easy to generate fake likes. For instance, during a famous online competition between the personal pages of President Saakashvili and his main opponent, Ivanishvili, each of them received 4,000-5,000 likes every day, which is odd for a country like Georgia, which only has approximately one million active Internet users. In reality, the likes count for nothing unless there is a real user behind each account. It seems to be a common practice for Georgian politicians to generate fake likes. According to some Georgian experts, several American and Chinese companies are known for selling "likes" on the Internet. Thus, "likes" should not be regarded as dependable indicators of popularity.

In addition, according to some media reports, in 2012, public servants and employees of state-run organizations were ordered by their superiors to establish at least ten accounts each to generate a large number of likes for the president's page. In the same vein, when Speaker Bakradze launched a virtual election of the parliament speaker, according to media reports, students of at least one Georgian school were asked by officials to visit and "like" Bakradze's page. As a result, this campaign received negative feedback and lost users' trust.[49] Similar cases were reported by the experts interviewed during the survey. Most of these experts shared the view that "likes" do not define the degree of popularity of Georgian politicians and do not characterize the performance of politicians.

As explained by one interviewee, "The government ordered civil servants to 'like' certain Facebook pages [several years ago]... I am worried because we are talking about 'liking' not institutional FB pages but individual ones. For example, [civil servants were ordered] not to like the FB page of the Ministry of Education but education minister Dmitri Shashkin's page."[50]

Several experts also recalled an example in which Georgian politicians used children for political purposes. This mainly occurred in the framework of the ruling party's activities. Usually, political party members

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[47] Interview conducted with L.V., male, May 17, 2012.

[48] Norris, P. 2003. "Preaching to the Converted? Pluralism, Participation and Party Websites." *Party Politics*. 9(1):21-45.

[49] Interview conducted with S.L., male, June 2, 2012.

[50] Interview conducted with D.K., female, April 24, 2012.

ask children to create fake pages and "like" one particular page, as in the above-mentioned Bakradze case.[51]

Discussion and Conclusion

Georgian political parties seem to prefer Facebook to any other social network available in Georgia. However, data on social media monitoring shows that parties do not use the potential of social media efficiently. The results showed that GD and the UNM, the two largest political parties, used social media features and platforms more than other political actors. Despite this finding, there were no clear signs that parties used social media as an established political communication strategy. Interviewed political elites reported being skeptical of the role of social networks and their potential to help win more supporters and increase their ratings. Some parties claimed that online political activity, either on Facebook or other social networks, was simply a waste of resources because it could not and would not help to win more votes. Television and visits to constituencies to speak directly to the people were identified as the only efficient ways to sway neutral voters.

The empirical investigation demonstrated that Georgian political parties fail to utilize the full range of application options for communication offered by social networks. Parties use social media mainly to distribute information rather than generate new voters through communicative styles that engage discussion and dialogue. However, social media's lack of observable effects on the election may be a consequence of the primarily passive manner by which social media are employed by political parties in Georgia.

While internet technologies did not appear to have any marked direct effect on the 2012 elections, the use of social media and the internet may have contributed indirectly to GD's upset victory. For the first time, a critical mass of opposition-leaning literature and opinion was readily available, in clear international English, for journalists, analysts, and opinion-makers abroad to examine a more nuanced perspective of the internal political situation.[52] Given the outsized influence that Western official opinion plays in Georgian internal politics, this may have contributed to both the electoral upset and the relatively peaceful transfer of power. In some ways, Georgia's experience in 2012 somewhat tracks with Michael Xenos' and Patricia Moy's observation of the limited direct, but more marked contingent, effects of internet use on the 2004 U.S. presidential elections.[53]

[51] Interview conducted with A.T., female, July 5, 2012.

[52] Michael Cecire. 2013. "Georgia's 2012 Elections and Lessons for Democracy Promotion," *Orbis*, 52:2..

[53] Michael Xenos and Patricia Moy. 2007. "Direct and Differential Effects of the Internet on Political and Civic Engagement." *Journal of Communication*. Vol. 57: 4.

The likely advantage conferred to GD through increased use of internet technologies, even if indirectly, may illustrate the potential for social media to play a more prominent role in Georgian politics for smaller, less well-resourced political parties than GD or the UNM. Rachel Gibson's observation of the Green Party's force-multiplying use of internet technologies in the 2008 Australian elections would appear to lend further credence to this notion.[54] Although not discussed by informants, political parties' and activists' reticence to make greater use of social media may be related to concerns about press freedom. Revelations following the 2012 election showed that the Interior Ministry had erected a robust surveillance apparatus that monitored phone, text, and internet traffic.[55] The existence of such a system was widely rumoured ahead of the 2012 election, which may have depressed public and opposition inclinations to utilize internet technologies more fully in the election campaign.

Nonetheless, Georgian political parties appear to use internet technologies and social media as a matter of course rather than as a proactive means to appeal to the public. And when social media is utilized by political parties, it is done so in a way that is largely passive and fails to take advantage of the interactive potential of social networking. This would seem to largely echo the use of political social media practices in post-communist Ukraine, where political parties' use of internet technologies are assessed to be mostly passive.[56] This is significant, considering Ukraine's relatively comparable hybrid regime model, although Ukraine appears to be on a downward trajectory, as Georgia would appear to be progressing in important respects. Further investigation of the Georgian case looking at the October 2013 election and, potentially, the upcoming 2014 local elections—which will likely assume more meaning with ongoing decentralization reforms—could illuminate the relationship between social media usage in democratizing hybrid regimes. Further studies of social media usage in Georgian politics would also benefit from the use of automated analytical tools to better quantify social media metadata, such as through the use of keywords, metatags, and "hashtags," to name a few.

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[54] Rachel K. Gibson and Ian McAllister. 2011. "Do Online Election Campaigns Win Votes? The 2007 Australian "YouTube" Election." *Political Communication* 28: 2.

[55] See Civil Georgia, Interior Ministry Called to Remove 'Black Box' Spy Devices from Telecom Companies. May 25, 2013. http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=26111.

[56] Tetiana Katsbert. 2009. "Social Media and Ukrainian Presidential Elections." *Digital Icons*, Vol. 1: 2.