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Rethinking the Concept of Politics and Politicians in a Transit State: Features of “the Political Labor Market” in Georgia¹

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Abstract

The article examines the specificities of political activity in post-Soviet Georgia. It draws attention to how the profession of a politician is perceived in this country. What are the features of the recruitment process to the political elite? Why is the profession of a politician so attractive in Georgia and what contributes to the rapid growth in the number of political parties and political leaders?

This article discusses criteria, conditions, and procedures for establishing political parties, as well as, the techniques that are used by politicians and parties in order to gain the attention of the country’s population.

Keywords: Georgia; Post-Soviet; Politics; Political Parties; Elections; Politicians; leaders; Ideology; Transition; Values.

Introduction

A small post-Soviet country – Georgia - the more experience it acquires in the conditions of an independent state, the more the perception of politics deviates from its traditional understanding. During the Soviet Union and the communist regime in Georgia, politics was associated with a “dirty and dangerous” game. During the first stage of transition and at the roots of independence in the 1990s (when the Soviet Union collapsed), despite the fact that there was no experience of political life in the country, there was not enough knowledge about politics, about the state, about governance, and so on. Politics in Georgia was perceived in a positive understanding, as something connected with the state, with high values, with independence and freedom.

But 30 years later the perception of politics is more and more contrary to its classical understanding. If, according to the theoretical approach, politics is perceived by several parameters, as something related to the governance of the state, as the sphere of public life, as a tool for reaching compromises and resolving conflicts or as a category of competition for power (Heywood, 2015), then in post-Soviet Georgia politics has clearly acquired a new definition; Politics as a workplace.

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The formation of a new understanding of politics is more related to effective employment and making money. Of course, the negative attitude to politics is typical for many countries, including developed democracies. But the example of Georgia indicates that, in the process of transition, and with a high level of poverty, politics, as a sphere of activity, can acquire a non-political form and turn into an ordinary place of work, although with a decent income.

A Profitable and Prestigious Job

Georgia is a small post-Soviet country, which is gripped by poverty and unemployment, there are not enough job vacancies, people have limited prospects for self-realization, there is no real economy, according to official statistics unemployment rate is 17% (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2020a), and in such conditions, politics has become a prosperous and most profitable sector of "business". During the pre-election periods, according to the political tradition of Georgia, the number of politicians and political parties grows significantly, because politics and running for parliament are the fastest way to make money. The fact is that in Georgia there is a very strange system of party financing: in a country where 19.5% of population is under the absolute poverty line (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2019), substantial funds are spent from the state budget to support political parties. Even some parties that do not have representatives in parliament, receive regular funding from the budget thanks to legislative manipulations. According to the law, parties that, as a result of the 2016 parliamentary elections, were unable to overcome the then existing 5% barrier and could not receive parliamentary mandates, but gained 3% of the vote, still received funding for 4 years from the state budget. Moreover, in addition to state funding, parties receive party contributions from their members, and substantial donations from individuals and the campaign. In 2019, the total revenue of only the main 19 parties was GEL 20,739,364 (Transparency International Georgia, 2020). By the standards of a poor country, this is a substantial amount that parties (or rather their leaders) are at their discretion. This is one of the reasons that makes politics in Georgia attractive and profitable for some "political leaders". The logic of financing political parties from the state budget is that in this way the state tries to maintain and strengthen the multi-party political system. However, in reality, the party's funding system pushes people seeking a profitable and prestigious job to create more and more new parties.

Self-proclaimed Political leaders and Boom in Political Parties

Political class in Georgia is extensive: There are so many so-called political leaders that such a small country is no longer able to provide job places for such a number of politicians. Gradually, political

competition turns into competition for job places. When a member of parliament loses his parliamentary mandate as a result of regular elections, this, as usual, is perceived by him as not a political failure, a lost opportunity to serve the state or values, but as a loss of job and salary. New actors appear on the political arena, they create their own parties or unite into existing political organizations. Georgians are an artistic and emotional nation, and in the last 30 years they have mastered the dramaturgy of politics very well. Entering the sphere of politics is pompous: Famous and unknown people (actors, writers, journalists, athletes, businessmen, students, doctors, experts, etc.) announce at an “emergency briefing” that they can no longer tolerate the country's failures and are forced to devote themselves to the sphere of politics. Mandatory properties for such briefings are: status of briefing (emergency) and multi-colored decorations, the flags of Georgia, the EU, NATO, the USA, some European countries, etc. The dramaturgy of the creation of each new party personifies the birth of a new hero against the backdrop of the apocalypse. For Georgian politicians, every election is not just a democratic process of power change, but “a decisive battle to save the homeland”.

The number of political leaders, however, as well as political parties, is growing rapidly from year to year. During the 2016 parliamentary elections, 220 parties were registered in the country. Already on the eve of the 2020 elections, the number of parties increased by 43 and amounted to 263 parties (National Agency of Public Registry of Ministry of Justice of Georgia, 2020), and according to the forecast, their number will soon reach 300. Although, as usual, not all parties participate in the elections, many parties that were created over the past 30 years exist fictitiously or play the role of technical assistant for stronger parties during elections (for instance, they help with their representation at the Central Election Commission, their observers, etc.). For example, during the parliamentary elections in October 2020, out of the existing 263 parties, only 73 parties of blocs expressed their desire to participate in the elections and 23 parties could not meet the corresponding requirements and could not register to participate in the elections while 50 political entities (48 parties and 2 political blocs) took part in these elections (Central Election Commission of Georgia, 2020).

Such a number of parties in the country with a population of only 3,716, 900 (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2020b) demonstrate the shortcomings of the country's political system. The state itself encourages the emergence of new political parties and this contributes to chaos in the “political labor market”. This was facilitated by new amendments to the constitution and electoral legislation, approved by the country's parliament in June 2020, specifically for the 2020 elections. Amendment that lowered the electoral threshold from 5 to 1 percent (Constitution of Georgia, Constitutional Law of Georgia, 2020) provoked the emergence of new political organizations and new politicians. For small and weak parties (both newly created and existing ones), a new window of opportunity has

opened up for comparative success in the parliamentary elections. During the parliamentary elections in 2016, only 2 large parties received deputy mandates but in the conditions of a low electoral threshold, in 2020 parliamentary elections, 9 parties received parliamentary mandates. The results of this election showed how government and law are contributing to the emergence of new parties and politicians. It turns out that many new parties emerged after the constitutional amendments.

Criteria, Conditions, and Procedures for Establishing Political Parties

What is needed to create a political party in Georgia? This requires bringing together only 300 people to participate in the work of the founding congress of the party (Organic Law of Georgia On Political Associations of Citizens, 1997). In such a traditional country as Georgia, where family ties, neighbors, friends or classmates are very strong and they are always ready to help, there is no problem to gather 300 founders of new political party. The party itself should have at least 1,000 members (Organic Law of Georgia On Political Associations of Citizens, 1997) and this is not a problem. Every citizen of Georgia who has reached the age of 18 and has political ambitions or wants to find a good job has the opportunity to create his own party without difficulty. The most difficult component for creating a political party in Georgia is creating a party name. The names with combinations such as national, democratic, right, left, centrist, and other traditional designations of the party have long been taken by other political parties. In Georgia, there is an abundance of exotic names for political parties.

To create a political party in Georgia, there is no need to have a political ideology, political views or programs. Having a political ideology for many Georgian parties sounds offensive ("a patriot should serve the people and should not limit himself to ideology", they argue), and many politicians in Georgia do not understand political ideologies, and it is easier for them to argue that their ideology is "saving the country".

In Georgia, it is impossible to distinguish parties from each other and parties are forced to resort to marketing methods: memorable logo, loud slogans, or the color of the party. Some parties (for example, the ruling party, "Georgian Dream") choose blue, some - yellow, or green. This is very similar to the branding style of the banking sector, when each bank is associated with a specific color. Instead of the competition of doctrines or ideas, parties try to promote their color: activists everywhere in the country waving balloons of their own color, politicians speaking on television emphasize the colors of their party with the help of clothes, accessories and if the color of their party dominates in public places it is considered the key to political success.

In the absence of ideologies, politicians are forced to take the model role of historical figures. Some consider themselves adherents of the course of the medieval kings of Georgia, others identify

themselves with public figures of the country that made a significant contribution in different epochs of the country's rich history.

Politicians consider such communication with society to be more effective. It is easier for them to tell the people (who know and adore their history well) that “I will carry out such a policy as Queen Tamara or King David”, rather than explaining ideological values, programs, doctrines. Many politicians simply do not know how leftist views differ from rightist ones and prefer to position themselves on the political market not as carriers of some kind of ideology, but simply as folk heroes and messiahs.

Non-traditional Forms of Recruiting into Politics: Latest Trends

In Georgia, the process of recruiting into politics, entering the sphere of politics is very different from the paradigm of Western democracy. Since 2012, a completely new procedure for entering politics has appeared in Georgia, which has not been practiced by more than one country before. Especially, during the October 2020 parliamentary elections, the ruling party organized a competition for future members of parliament. Potential parliamentary candidates from the ruling party had to take tests and go through the interview process. Such recruitment was more like hiring employees for a corporation or government agency rather than future members of parliament. Moreover, after such a careful selection, an exam was arranged for future politicians in real conditions: they were given the task to participate in the body of debates with political opponents of the authorities and thus prove their skills as politicians. Another new trend in political recruitment was identified in Georgia during the 2020 parliamentary elections: If politics has already turned into a good business, into such an area of activity where there is no need to have knowledge, experience, political values, etc., politicians, leaders of political parties, are increasingly involving their own children in politics. During the parliamentary elections of 2020 there was such a tendency for a significant influx of politicians' children into the political parties. According to this new trend, the children of politicians do not take secondary positions in party structures but automatically receive the status of a “political leader” and run with their parents for parliament.

Concluding Remarks

On the one hand, in contrast with many other post-Soviet countries (where the state strictly controls the sphere of politics, for example, in Russia and Central Asian countries), political activity in Georgia is not subject to state control, which is definitely a good precondition in the process of democratization of a post-Soviet country. On the other hand, the absence of a tradition of political

life, the presence of a low political culture and a mercantile understanding of politics, contributes to the creation of an unprofessional political class that has very little to do with the values of higher politics.

This situation harms not only the political process, but can also hinder the democratization process. Thus, the political class formed, undermines confidence in the sphere of politics, which is no longer seen as a mechanism for the distribution of power and values but as employment opportunity for ambitious people. On the one hand, without the economic development of Georgia, politics will always be the most attractive sphere of activity in Georgia. Only the real economy can become an alternative to the overloaded political labor market. On the other hand, for a correct understanding of the profession of a politician and political activity, it is necessary to increase the level of political culture and political education not only among the political class but also in the general population.

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