

Democratic evolution of Georgia and authoritarian cycles

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Abstract. The role of authoritarian regimes in the development of democracy is assessed negatively. The purpose of the article is to determine the role of authoritarian cycles in the democratic evolution of Georgia, what has not been explored. Methods: case study, sociological, processual, historical –chronological approaches. Findings& Value added: there are three cycles of democratization and authoritarianism in the political development of Georgia. In contrast to the Gamsakhurdia’s regime, electoral authoritarian regimes of Shevardnadze and Saakashvili enhanced democratic potential of it. Democratic development is the process of accumulation democratic resources and the enlargement of democratic potential. The resources of democracy are the instruments of public control over authority, relevant behaviors and values, the totality of which generates the democratic potential of society: political and civil society, electoral system, free media, etc. Westernization of Georgian society is the main source of its democratization. In 2012, a constitutional change of the government moved Georgia into the third cycle of democratization which has not transformed into authoritarianism, due to the democratic potential of society. The paper concludes that the country’s democratic progress continued even in the authoritarian cycles. This research creates new knowledge of the impact of electoral authoritarian regimes on the democratic evolution of Georgia.

1 Introduction

Democratic optimism in the face of strengthening authoritarian tendencies in the world is giving way to anxiety about the fate of democracy. According to some researchers "democracy is under threat globally"[1]. The third wave of democratization was replaced by the third wave of autocratization, which is the source of a new challenge for the whole world: "The decline of democratic regime attributes – autocratization – has emerged as a conspicuous global challenge"[2]. But how does this affect democratic development? Does modern authoritarianism stop democratic development or not? There is a rich academic literature which addresses the issues of authoritarianism and democratization. Most of the scholars negatively assess the role of authoritarian regimes in the development of democracy. They see democratic institutions widely used by modern authoritarian regimes

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only as a means of strengthening authoritarian rule [3]. The answers of above questions are especially relevant for the post-Soviet space where such regimes dominate. The mechanical imposition of transitional schemes on post-Soviet changes, when these events were interpreted simply as the transition from authoritarianism to democracy did not justify itself. Most of the formal soviet republics continued existed under authoritarian rule. Color revolutions called into question point of view that transitions end at the end point of change, either in a democracy or in an autocracy. This situation provided an opportunity for applying a circular approach to post-communist change. Applying this approach Haley saw a cyclic swing from authoritarianism to more democracy and back to more autocracy. He tries to explain such oscillation by patronpresidentialism. But he didn't explored positive impact of electoral authoritarian regimes on the democratic evolution process. Contrary to H. Hale, who simply sees the mechanical repetition of regime cycles in the this replacement of one authoritarian regime with another, we believe that the democratic resources and potential have continued to develop in Georgia even under the conditions of authoritarian cycles [4].

The positive impact of authoritarian regimes on the democratic evolution of Georgia has not been studied. Our article fills this gap. This is why the present article contributes to the studies of problems of development of democracy in Georgia. Contrary to the negative assessment of the role of the contemporary authoritarian regimes in the democratic evolution, which is dominate in the literature, our research show the cases of positive impact of electoral authoritarian regimes on the gradual growth of democracy. To establish the impact of an authoritarian regime on this process we introduce the concept of democratic resources and democratic potential. Democratic evolution is the incremental increase in democratic resources and democratic potential. As Tom Koch points out "But with a bit time and thought it becomes clear that revolutions are rarely the beginning of something new but instead the conclusion of events processes long in the making. Every revolution stands as a point in an evolutionary progression, a radical change with antecedents". [5]. The same can be said about the emergence of full-fledged democracy. Our concepts make it possible to monitor gradual maturation of it.

For our research we choose one of the formal soviet republics Georgia, which became independent in 1991. This country has multiparty system and regularly holds elections of president, parliament and local representative bodies. .Despite this, in more than thirty years of independence, the government was changed three times and only once it occurred within the frame of constitution. Now Georgia is parliamentary republic. The political dynamics of post-Soviet Georgia acquired a pendulum-like character, because it proceeded as alternating cycles of democratization and authoritarianism. Therefore, such dynamics raised the question whether the democratic development stopped under authoritarian regime? That is why the study of authoritarianism is important from the point of view of the development of democracy in Georgia. Our conclusion on the positive role of authoritarianism in democratic evolution applies only towards electoral democracy. In the 21st century, authoritarianism has become so close to democracy that it is sometimes difficult to separate from each. That is why, in our view, "a dichotomous coding of a polity into democracy/non democracy or democracy/dictatorship is associated with some amount of arbitrariness, when making there coding decisions" [6]. Such concepts as 'hybrid regimes', "semi-democracy" "semi-authoritarianism", "competitive authoritarianism", "electoral authoritarianism, "defective democracies" indicate the process of convergence of authoritarianism to democracy. The concept of electoral authoritarianism is more suitable for characterizing the political regimes of Saakashvili and Shevardnadze, although it does not fully cover the features of them. According to Andreas Schedler 'Under electoral authoritarian rule, elections are broadly inclusive (they are held under universal suffrage as well as minimally pluralistic (opposition parties are allowed to run), minimally

competitive (opposition parties, while denied victory, are allowed to win votes and seats) and minimally open (opposition parties are not subject to massive repression, although they may experience repressive treatment in selective and intermittent ways.”[7] At the same time, these traits are not fully characterized Georgian regimes, where information was freely disseminated, existed freedom of self-organization of society and the activities of counter-elite, the political conflict and protest were legitimized as a form of collective expression of discontent, which was of great importance for deepening democracy, since “protest plays a fundamental role in how the democratization process upholds” [8].

Democracy is not limited to the governing system. It has deep roots in society: "though democracy is often considered to be primarily a governance system, it is tightly entangled with society, economy and infrastructure use [9]. Because of this we studied the westernization of Georgian society to reveal the driving source of democratic evolution, which has not been explored before. Therefore the establishing the role of westernization in the democratic development of Georgia is contribution to the study of problems of democracy in Georgia.

2 Methodology

Case study: Using the case study Georgia had been chosen for the investigation, authoritarian and democratic cycles were identified and the activities of electoral – authoritarian regimes for the development of democracy were studied.

Sociological approach: Based on sociological data, the level of westernization of Georgian society was revealed.

Processional method: Using this method democratic evolution of Georgia had been analyzed as the process of maturation of democratic potential and increasing democracy resources.

Historical –chronological method. Using this method chronological sequence of cycles and their oscillation had been established.

3 Results

3.1 Westernization and cycles of political development of Georgia

Democratic evolution is process of accumulation and maturation of democracy resources, which are the means of public control over government and accountability governance, relevant behavior and values, the combination of which gives rise to a country's democratic potential. For example, political and civil society, free media, electoral system, etc. Their emergence and maturation do not coincide with each other in time, so the growth of democratic potential is also a long-term process. The dominant trend of Georgia's political evolution - the main direction of political development, which shapes the nature of political changes, is democratic. It is the process of transition of the society from the full control of the state to an autonomous mode of functioning. Driving source of this process is westernization of Georgian society.

According to Englehart and Wetzel, the effectiveness of democracy depends on the values that prevail in society [10]. The validity of this opinion seems to be also confirmed by Georgia's experience, whose source of the strength of the democratic trend probably, should be sought in the level of westernization of the society. The proximity of the westernization and freedom indices serves as the foundation for this supposition. In 2018, Georgia's westernization index for 2018 was 62 [11] out of 100, ranking fourth in the post-Soviet space, awhile its freedom index was 64[12]. It was 63 [12] in 2019, 60 [13] in 2020,

58 [13] in 2021 and 58 in 2022 [14]. While freedom is declining, so too is the rate at which it is declining: if the freedom index fell by 3 in 2019–20, it fell by 2 in 2020–21 and stopped in 2021–2022. Such dynamics demonstrate the escalation of the authoritarian trend, which is resisted by the country's enhanced democratic potential and westernization, which indicate the social importance of self-expression as the cornerstone of governance that is founded on responsibility. The Westernization of society underlies its Western orientations. The latest survey of public opinion, conducted by the ‘Edison Research’ shows that the majority of those polled support Georgia’s accession to NATO (85%) and the European Union (90%). [15]. Earlier in March 2023, a telephone survey of the population of Georgia conducted by the National Democratic Institute, also indicated a high level of support for joining NATO and the EU. [16]. Westernization of the society and its western orientation clearly manifested itself in March 2023, when thousands of people rallied outside the parliament building. Then the causes of public discontent were two bills, which were going to be accepted by the ruling Georgian Dream party. They were directed against NGO-s and provided for granting the status of a foreign agent to organizations that were financed by foreign organizations. Therefore, these bills were perceived by society as a refusal to join the EU, which triggered public protests. Mass rallies continued for three days until the government was forced to withdraw its bills.

The first cycle of democratization (1990-1991) begun with the loss of constitutional status by the CPSU and ended with Z. Gamsakhurdia’s conservative closed authoritarianism (1991-1992). This cycle of democratization was the result of the transformation of liberalization of soviet system- “perestroika”- into the democratization. During the liberalization of the USSR the accumulation of democratic potential of society was started, which was manifested in the development of resources of democracy – autonomous political behavior, free press, political and civic society. But westernization of society was not as strong as it is today, which was manifested in the strong mobilization potential of the slogan “Nation, Fatherland, Religion”. Comparatively weak westernization contributed to the election of Gamsakhurdia to the presidency, who suspended activities of political parties, put his own self above law and constitution, restricted freedom of media, and directed political development towards closed authoritarianism. But accumulated democratic potential got so strong that Gamsakhurdia lost his power in the violent coup d’état.

As empirical studies show, in contrast to the peaceful transition to democracy, violent conflicts negatively affect the institutional quality of emerging democracy [17]. This is also confirmed by the case of overthrow of president Gamsakhurdia. The forced change of the government froze the democratic transition to the stage of liberalization by Shevardnadze's form of transitive electoral authoritarianism, which significantly strengthened the country’s democratic potential: a strong and influential non-governmental sector was created and a new genre of journalism developed - journalistic investigation, etc. Of particular importance was the beginning of the work of foreign foundations, especially the Soros Foundation, which significantly strengthened civil society and contributed to the spread of western values among the population. Shevardnadze pursued course of building democracy in Georgia. His rule corresponded to the phase of liberalization in the transition process from authoritarianism to democracy, which according to transitology, precedes the democratization phase.

Liberalization turned into the second cycle of democratization (2001-2003), when the government lost the local elections, lost its constitutional majority, and Shevardnadze refused to be elected president for a third term. The "Rose Revolution" stopped democratization and took the country into the third cycle of authoritarianism (2004-2012), when electoral authoritarianism was established by president Saakashvili, who concentrated all power in his hands, restricted freedom of media, significantly intensified violence in the

political system. His policy was characterized by internal inconsistency. On the one hand, he strengthened his personal power, but on the other hand, he pursued a policy that was contrary to these. First of all, it was the policy of rapid and intensive westernization of the society, which significantly increased the spread of western values among young people, and European integration policy. He also took step to strengthen political society: state funding of political parties was introduced.

3.2 Georgian Dream party coming to power and further strengthening of democratic potential

In 2012, a constitutional change of the government moved Georgia into the third cycle of democratization. For the first time in modern independent Georgian history, the former ruling United National Movement (UNM) party did not split but instead kept its parliamentary status and strengthened its position in the opposition. The victory of the opposition Georgian Dream coalition was achieved as a result of successful leadership, messaging, and international engagement [18]. Despite the fact that this coalition soon fell apart and the Georgian Dream turned into the only ruling party that still rules, a number of phenomena point to the deepening of democratic development of Georgia.

Political society and inner-party life developed significantly. Party organizations were strengthened, a paradigmatic case of which is the UNM, whose leader, for the first time in the recent history of our country, was elected by mass intra-party competitive elections with the participation of 20,779 party supporters [19]. The UNM acquired the traits of a mass party. The opposition has strengthened considerably. Four TV channels turned out to be in their hands. Georgia became a parliamentary republic; proportional representation was reinforced at the expense of significant weakening of the majority, which significantly strengthened the opposition.

Despite the fact that Georgia's government has not changed since 2012, the third cycle of democratization has not turned into authoritarianism. In our opinion, the criterion for such a change should not be the statistics of government changes, but rather the fact that democratic elections were held, as there are numerous other reasons why the opposition was defeated in the elections in addition to fraud. During the first period of Dream's rule (2012-2016), democratization grew into an electoral democracy functioning under authoritarian pressure. 2012 saw parliamentary elections, 2013 saw presidential elections, 2014 saw Tbilisi mayor elections, and 2016 saw parliamentary elections, which, according to the IRI, represented the will of Georgian voters [20]. The fact that it is getting harder and harder for the ruling party to win elections is another indication of Georgia's growing democratic potential. In the October 2020 parliamentary elections, the opposition parties obtained as many mandates in the proportional elections as Dream party-60. Despite the latter's hard-earned victory in the majoritarian districts, which saw it win only 13 of the 30 majoritarian electoral districts in the first round and 17 in the second, but even then, against the background of a boycott of the opposition, it failed to gain constitutional majority. Besides this, it should be noted, that it had far more supporters than any of the opposing parties. In August 2020, 36% of respondents said they would vote for Dream, while 15% would vote for UNM. Each of the three third-place parties was supported only by 4% of respondents. A balance of power between Dream and entire opposition existed prior to the elections, and this balance of power was reflected in the proportional elections. At that time, according to our calculations based on IRI data, the total number of supporters of all opposition parties stood at 37%, just slightly higher than the number of Dream supporters (36%) [21]. Low trust ratings for their TV channels greatly undermined opposition forces. For instance, in August 2020, 40% of people trusted the state TV channel Imedi, 16% trusted the opposition TV channel Mtavari Arkhi, 5% trusted TV First, and 1%

trusted Formula [21]. The 2021 municipal elections may not have been completely fair [22], but they nevertheless showed the strength of Georgia's democratic potential: Dream only succeeded in winning in 20 cities after the second round[23]. Although it received 46.65% of the vote in the proportional component, and the UNM only 30.7%, our estimates based on IRI data show that eight opposition parties together with the UNM received 48.48% of the vote, which exceeded Dream vote percentage [22]. The public resistance to the adoption of two above mentioned government bills and their subsequent withdrawal also indicates the strength of the democratic potential of the society.

4 Discussion

Georgia's democratic evolution is founded on an ongoing, persistent development of democratic potential that remained even throughout times of authoritarianism. Gradual increase of democracy resources constitutes the content of this process. Westernization is the source of this development. It is the backbone of democratic trend of democratic evolution of Georgia, which dominates over the authoritarian vector of its political development. Georgian experience shows that positive impact of authoritarianism on democratic evolution is depended on the type of authoritarian rule. Electoral –authoritarian regimes promoted development of democratic potential of Georgia, but as Gamsakhurdia's case showed, movement toward the closed authoritarianism stops it. Western orientations of political elites of the two electoral authoritarian regimes and their policy of EU integration, also western oriented counter-elite determined positive role of these regimes in the democratic development. These conditions promoted western influence on the society and decision making process. Shevardnadze was himself democratic and western oriented leader. He was one of the leaders of “perestroika” and formal minister of foreign affairs in the Gorbachev government. He greatly valued his image as a democratic leader. His refusal to run for a third time for a presidency proves that he really was a democrat. Lack of the consensus in the Georgian society, the division between adherents of Gamsakhurdia and Shevardnadze, determined the emergence of electoral authoritarianism regime of Shevardnadze. Saakashvili was western educated and western oriented politician, but less democrat than Shevardnadze. But the orientation towards NATO and European integration, mass political protests, forced him to make concessions on the democratic demands of the internal opposition and his western partners. Westernization of society and its democratic potential permanently resisted the tendencies of concentration of power in the hand of political elite. This determined oscillation between democratization and authoritarian cycles of political development. Electoral authoritarianism legitimized direct actions which compensated for the relative weakness of the representative organs. It forced governments to back down.

Formation of democracy in Georgia is evolutionary process and associates with corresponding changes. As Anna Luhrmann and Staffan I, Lindberg, noted “our approach better capture the empirical reality-in particular during recent decade-that regime changes is typically gradual and slowly leading to hybridization into electoral authoritarianism. Instead of sudden, dramatic transitions”. [2] Therefore they use the direction of those change to delineate waves of autocratization. The same can be said about the transformation of an electoral –authoritarian regime into a line of democracy. But we prefer to talk about more than just about the direction of change, but the vector of change, which represents the strength and direction of change and directed to democracy. As showed Lucia Cianetti, James Dowson and Sean Hanley (აქ ვნახბოთ მახვილია?), the regression of democracy in CEE revealed the shortcomings of the institutional approach to the study of democratization and put on the agenda the need for an interdisciplinary

synthesis.[24]. The same problem exists in the field of studying the democratic development of Georgia. From the very beginning of the study of the political dynamics of post –Soviet Georgia, it almost did not go beyond the boundaries of political science, which significantly weakened the understanding post-communist politics. In our study, with the introduction of such an explanatory variable as the level of westernization, we tried to provide an interdisciplinary synthesis of political science with sociology. In our work, little attention has been paid to external influence on the democratic development of Georgia, interaction of external and internal factors, the role of the economy in the development of democracy, the role of the political elite in democratization, individual cycles of democratization and authoritarianism. Each of them requires special studies and is relevant for understanding the formation of democracy in Georgia.

5 Conclusion

As Georgian experience showed, under certain conditions, authoritarian regime may play the positive role in the evolutionary process of democratic development. It is depended on the totality of such variables as: type of authoritarian regime, political orientations of political elite and counter-elite, level of westernization of the society and political influence of the Western democracies.

Electoral authoritarian regime, relatively high level of the westernization of the society, western oriented elite and counter elite, Western influence on them may direct the evolution of political regime towards the democracy, which is the process of the accumulation of democracy resources and strengthening the democratic potential of the country.

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