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GEORGIA'S ELECTIONS: LESSONS FOR DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS

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The results from Georgia's October 1 parliamentary elections have overturned the conventional wisdom. Contrary to most expectations, the opposition Georgian Dream coalition, led by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, captured a commanding 85 seats in the country's 150-person parliament. For its part, the United National Movement, the party of the still-powerful President Mikheil Saakashvili, is heading into the opposition.

The opposition win, which took all but a few observers by surprise, appears to have undone the stability of the "competitive authoritarian" regime established by the UNM. This turn of events point to major miscalculation by the ruling party and serve as strong lessons for democracy promoters elsewhere in the post-communist space, even if Georgia's own future remains an open question.

In the months leading up to the poll, expectations favored a dominating UNM win. Regional analysts and Western embassies seemed to pivot from calls for a fair vote to appealing to the Georgian opposition to concede in the inevitability of defeat. This emphasis on continuity and stability—rather than on the unfair political environment that had been erected by the then-ruling UNM—not only underscored prevailing international forecasts of the election outcome, but was also a profound misread of Georgian public attitudes. Contra the ruling party narrative of a referendum over a UNM-led path Westward versus a Russia-looking Georgian Dream, kitchen table issues topped voters' concerns and the Georgian Dream was seen as a better bet by the crucial core constituency of rural poor. These voters, until now reliably pro-UNM, were largely left behind by the government's economic development agenda that put a premium on glitz but less attention to the more mundane work of workforce development and facilitating an environment for job creation.¹

Prior to the elections, Georgia seemed to have largely developed a durable "competitive authoritarian" state, which maintained an extensive infrastructure of democratic trappings as a means of burnishing its liberal bona fides in the West. But the model did not anticipate political upheavals of the kind the October 1 election in the end produced.²

¹For more discussion on why so many "got it wrong," see: Cecire, Michael. "Commentary: How the West Got Georgia." *The National Interest*. <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/how-the-west-got-georgia-wrong-7566> (accessed October 14, 2012).

²"Competitive authoritarianism" is roughly coterminous with Freedom House's "transitional or hybrid regime" designation, though the former has explicitly non-teleological connotations. See: Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan Way. *Competitive authoritarianism: hybrid regimes after the Cold War*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Georgia's government seemed the archetype for competitive authoritarian stability with its modernized government and impressive physical infrastructure; neither classically authoritarian nor democratic, it sought to navigate a third course in-between that seemed durable for the long term. But the UNM's economic policy shortcomings, in concert with a variety of other contributing factors, provided just the fulcrum that the newly-united opposition needed to overcome a severely adverse political environment and pull out a convincing win.

Yet, the surprise Georgian Dream win also exposes the uniqueness of the situation. The Georgian opposition, newly-united and financed by a curiously untainted Forbes-listed billionaire,³ was able to overcome a political environment that structurally favored the ruling UNM and achieve victory against strong odds. For embattled opposition democrats across the post-communist space—or worldwide, for that matter—the Georgian case on its face appears to offer few reasons to hope for breakthroughs of their own.

Indeed, the Georgian opposition's multivariate path to success seems hardly replicable outside of Georgia without the benefit of a spare free-spending billionaire, a regime that permits a relatively liberal degree of free expression and organization, and the outsized attention that Georgia's little election generated in Washington and other Western capitals—including disproportionate aid packages and strategic support from Western Europe and North America. At first blush, that hardly seems a scalable blueprint for democratization in places like Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, or Venezuela.

But the idea that Georgia's experience was so unique and so context-dependent as to offer no practical lessons is misleading. Though a confluence of factors did well-align to enable the opposition victory, the Georgian parliamentary elections experience does highlight some key lessons that may apply internationally: leadership, international engagement, and messaging.

LESSONS FOR DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS

Leadership matters. In the ways it counted, Georgian Dream benefited from Bidzina Ivanishvili's large, if reportedly eccentric, personality. Ivanishvili is indeed a billionaire, but the customary use of this qualifier perhaps overstates the importance of the Prime Minister-in-waiting's vast fortune to the opposition's victory. While Ivanishvili's personal riches were indeed a critical factor—it is hard to imagine how an unfunded opposition could have united and galvanized support in the same manner—wealth is hardly a guarantee of success. And perhaps more importantly, how that money is used makes an even bigger difference.

Few remember now, but Ivanishvili is not the first or even the richest billionaire to support the Georgian opposition in post-Soviet Georgia, as Columbia University's Lincoln Mitchell correctly notes in a recent (and much-recommended) panel discussion on Georgia's post-election future.⁴ Arkady "Badri" Patarkatsishvili, the late Georgian media tycoon, has claims to both these distinctions as an active supporter and financier of the Georgian opposition up until his death in 2008. Patarkatsishvili, whose estimated net worth at death was in the \$12 billion range—almost double that of Ivanishvili—was somehow decidedly less successful in galvanizing public support. Unlike with Patarkatsishvili, Ivanishvili's money was less a campaign tool than a force multiplier. For his part, Patarkatsishvili relied upon and funded a class of opposition leaders that often squabbled with one another rather than present a united front against the UNM. The brief moment when it did unite in November 2007—which featured extensive opposition rallies that were brutally dispersed by the government—was the closest that opposition ever came to unseating Saakashvili.

By contrast, Ivanishvili chose not to outsource the fate of the opposition to the cadres of professional oppositionists like 2008 presidential candidate Levan Gachechiladze and pro-Moscow ex-speaker Nino Burjandze. Instead, and unlike his camera-shy reputation, Ivanishvili himself burst onto the scene in fall 2011 and announced his own intention to lead a new opposition coalition.⁵ In what then seemed like an odd tactical move to many, Ivanishvili

³ Like many who made fortunes in Russia in the 1990s, Ivanishvili's wealth is often assumed to have been acquired questionably. But despite a concerted search by political opponents, no specific evidence has been released to implicate Ivanishvili in any malfeasance or wrongdoing. This lack of "dirt" is considered unusual among Russia-monied oligarchs.

⁴ Mitchell, Lincoln. "Billionaires in the Georgian opposition." Address, Georgia After the Elections: What Happens Next? from Harriman Institute, Columbia University, New York, NY, October 12, 2012.

⁵ Ivanishvili has claimed that—in the face of UNM government pressure, which had a reputation for its informal control over

turned his criticisms not only on Saakashvili and the UNM but also other elements of the opposition—many of whom had gained reputations as disaffected former *nomenklatura* badly outclassed by the UNM's sleek brand. And while Ivanishvili's new coalition was certainly a diverse bunch, its vanguard led by Ivanishvili himself, former UN Ambassador Irakli Alasania, retired AC Milan soccer star Kakha Kaladze, and the universally respected former foreign minister Tedo Japaridze broadcast a new brand of opposition that contrasted with the staid, Soviet-hued one it displaced.

While the particulars of Ivanishvili's strategy may not be easily replicable in other countries seeking forward progress in their attempt for democratic transition, the net result of Ivanishvili's actions show that leadership, and not necessarily money, is the decisive factor. Gachechiladze, Burjanadze, ex-prime minister Zurab Noghaideli, Labor Party leader Shalva Natelashvili, and others of the old guard had little credibility with the Georgian public and could not rally the opposition in the way Ivanishvili did.

International engagement matters. Robust international, and especially American and other Western, attention to Georgia played a critical role in assisting with the transition process. Though much of the international community expected a resounding UNM win, its emphatic calls for a genuinely free and fair process—and the deployment of a robust international monitoring apparatus to back it up—made extensive vote rigging and some of the more blatant types of fraud harder to engineer for the ruling UNM.⁶

Strong and sustained Western engagement, with particular interest in the quality of Georgia's political institutions, created breathing room for a more competitive electoral environment. And while the Georgian opposition undoubtedly benefited from Georgia's critical geostrategic location and the uncanny fascination it evokes in many Western capitals, so too did the UNM, which continuously sought to incubate a form of clientitis among its international counterparts both in Tbilisi and abroad. Nonetheless, the UNM's acquiescence to defeat might well not have occurred in the absence of strong Western leverage. The October 1 election may not have been entirely free and it may not have been fully fair, but Georgia's elections show that just the ability to meaningfully compete—which Georgian Dream did successfully—can go a long way.

Though not every country can take international engagement for granted, it is incumbent on democracy-promoting Western governments and nongovernmental organizations to cultivate a brokering role in non-democratic states. At the same time, opposition groups might seek to emulate the Georgian opposition's focus on achieving competitiveness rather than outright parity—a level inherently disallowed in non-democratic polities—and identifying ways to attract and sustain international attention.

While Georgian Dream's public relations apparatus was qualitatively less impressive than that of their rivals in the UNM, the coalition's emphasis on publishing consistently and regularly in clear, international English made it simple for journalists, analysts, and policymakers in the West to get the story from the “other side.” A political movement needn't invest millions in blue chip strategic communications firms to achieve the same result.

Campaign messaging matters. To their credit, Georgian Dream did not allow itself to be defined by the UNM's characterization of the coalition as a shadowy, Kremlin-orchestrated fifth column. Instead, Georgian Dream stuck to a core message of economic development and jobs and did not get pulled into the downward spiral of constantly defending against charges of secret pro-Russia sentiments. While the coalition did issue regular pronouncements reiterating its pro-West stance—remarkable policy consistency in a campaign that was mostly anything but on both sides—its primary campaign message stayed focused on domestic issues, which both overwhelming statistical and anecdotal evidence showed were Georgian voters' top issues.

Another area that could have posed a fatal distraction was the unbalanced electoral environment. While the

the economy—he was forced to choose between leaving the country or going into politics, and chose the latter. See: Buckley, Neil. "Georgia's Billionaire Premier." *Financial Times* (London), October 26, 2012.

<http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/57de74bc-1e37-11e2-8e1d-00144feabdc0.html> (accessed October 26, 2012).

⁶ The role of internationally-funded nongovernmental organizations played a crucial role. Transparency International was able to uncover and disseminate instances of fraud. See: “Fraudulent protocol decides majoritarian race in Sighnaghi, TI Georgia finds.” Transparency International Georgia. <http://transparency.ge/en/post/general-announcement/fraudulent-protocol-deci> (accessed October 14, 2012).

opposition was diligent about underlining the disadvantages it faced in its uphill battle for parliament, it did not make the mistake of putting it forth as a central campaign theme. Previous opposition leaders, by contrast, made UNM structural advantages and allegations of fraud the centerpiece of their messaging, which found little traction outside of some quarters of the urban elite and their own patronage networks.

Critically, Georgian Dream was able to balance a large and sometimes self-contradicting coalition and still maintain a main focus on those domestic issues that most resonated with voters. While questions of Euro-Atlantic integration and the quality of the electoral process burned in the minds of Western analysts and diplomats, Georgian Dream targeted its real audience—the Georgian people—with the issues that mattered most to them. Though controlling campaign messaging is something that can elude even the best-oiled campaigns in developed liberal democracies, the Georgian election shows just how major a difference it can make for an out-gunned and ideologically fractured opposition front.

THE FUTURE OF GEORGIAN POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

For the West, the Georgian elections also elucidate areas that demand improvement. Most glaringly, Western observers' widespread confidence of an impending UNM victory and, in some quarters, acceptance of UNM campaign propaganda as fact illustrates the dangers of overly-personalized relationships. This tendency was even on display after the election results were finalized, as Western friends of the outgoing government took to the op-ed pages and social media channels to hail the UNM's concession as proof of a level playing field, in spite of extensive conclusive evidence to the contrary.

By the same token, the Georgian Dream victory should certainly not be seen as a final triumph of democracy in Georgia, however attractive a narrative it seems. As momentous an occasion as Georgia's first peaceful, legal transition of power by the ballot box is, it should not be confused as the culmination of some teleological journey. Many questions still remain: will the Georgian Dream, a highly factionalized coalition at best, survive its victory? Will the UNM, which has been perpetuated more by access to patronage than defined and consistent ideology, itself survive? And more importantly, will whatever emerges from this electoral context and future politicking be representative of voters' wishes?

On the latter question, political scientist Ilia Roubanis' now near-legendary characterization of the Georgian political system in 2009 as "pluralistic feudalism" remains a fair descriptor.⁷ Whether and, if so, how Georgia manages to evolve from this system—with its constant clash of personalities and their clients—into an identifiable form of representative democracy is a particularly compelling question. Ivanishvili, who has repeatedly stated that he will step away from politics after just 18 months on the job, probably leaves himself only enough time to solidify his coalition and pursue a slate of new legislation, but perhaps not enough to establish himself as a Georgian Dream patriarch. If Ivanishvili keeps to his promises, and considering many of his cabinet picks' solid stature in their own right, Georgia might have a chance to jettison the baggage of its political system's quasi-feudalistic moorings.

There are other interesting developments: six UNM parliament deputies who won single-mandate districts have decided not to caucus with their fellow party members. While UNM spokespeople have complained that Georgian Dream is trying to bribe their way into a constitutional supermajority, the likelier explanation is that these deputies, including an ethnic-Armenian deputy from an Armenian-majority region in Samtskhe-Javakheti, are positioning themselves as legislative swing votes. With six votes, the minimum needed to form a parliamentary grouping, the independent MPs have formed their own parliamentary bloc.⁸ Evidence of the growing independence of single mandate "majoritarian" deputies bode well for voter representation; party machinery may have secured votes before, but October showed that the voters themselves are in charge.

Western friends and partners of Georgia should encourage positive development in Georgia and hold the new government to its commitments. And moving forward, engagement remains as important as ever. Not just to hold the new government to its promises, but to help in consolidating the gains realized by the October elections and

⁷ Roubanis, Ilia. "Georgia's pluralistic feudalism: a frontline report." openDemocracy. <http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/georgia-pluralistic-feudalism> (accessed October 17, 2012).

⁸ "Former UNM members to create new faction in the Georgian parliament." Georgia Online. <http://georgiaonline.ge/news/a1/politics/1351571619.php> (accessed October 29, 2012).

ensuring that democratic practices are cultivated and institutionalized for the long term.

BREAKTHROUGHS

Overall, the Georgian elections do illustrate that while competitive authoritarian regimes can be stable for prolonged periods, their very nature also makes them susceptible to challenge. Maintaining even “Potemkin” facades of democratic institutions can provide just enough space to exploit for would-be democratizers to survive openly, however uneasily. While one of the greatest challenges for democracy promoters will be translating the lessons of the Georgian elections to varied international contexts, the Georgian Dream victory shows that it can be done.

It is essential that the West continue to ensure competitive contests, even if true balance cannot be attained, and maintain a pragmatic view of political realities. Despite the opposition’s fundamental makeover with Ivanishvili’s entrance—and the extent by which opposition fervor swept regional strongholds of UNM power—Georgian Dream was treated little differently than its antecedents, which had lacked the organic support or capacity that Georgian Dream wielded. At the same time, Western engagement—through democracy promotion efforts and international pressure on UNM leadership—did manage to play a crucial part in making a transfer of power possible.

It remains unclear whether or not the October elections represent a lasting break-through towards a democratizing path, or just another chapter in the Eurasia region’s long history of unkept promises. But for now, Georgia’s political model appears to have been resuscitated and may hold some promise. A bright spot in an otherwise dour firmament of democratic stagnation and regression in the post-communist space, it is especially important to learn the lessons from this experience and build on them—in Georgia and elsewhere—to restore momentum to democratization and progress. To that end, the West should offer Tbilisi a definable path towards Euro-Atlantic structures and continue robust aid for Georgia’s economic and political development. By keeping its promises to Tbilisi, the West can signal its seriousness about global democratization while laying the foundations for democratic consolidation, through concrete incentives, in Georgia itself. If the West can keep both Ivanishvili and Saakashvili to their commitments in the critical year ahead, an important democratic breakthrough could be consolidated, with powerful implications for transitions throughout the post-communist region and beyond.

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