



Roundtable Summary

Prospects for Georgian Civil Society

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Recent events have increased Western interest in Georgia's democratic processes and institutions. Questions have been asked about whether Georgia is truly a democracy, and the West can and should do to strengthen civil society.

The main areas of weakness in Georgia's politics and institutions, and the potential for reform

It is generally agreed that Georgia has strong electoral law. There are, however, problems in implementing the law and administering elections. The opposition does not play a significant role in the process. The opposition have few levers of influence and receive little media coverage. The media is largely controlled by the government at election time. There is now no scope for individuals to stand as members of parliament. Candidates must be nominated by political parties. The use of state resources for the incumbent is widespread. Executive and law enforcement agencies exert direct pressure on voters and opposition candidates. Appeals against abuses are either not heard or rejected by courts.

The role of so-called independent observers has to be bolstered. At the moment many Georgians do not consider them impartial, and the whole system of internal election monitoring is viewed as little more than a rubberstamp for pre-determined results. Much more support needs to be given to the opposition, not least from election administering bodies. An analysis of Georgia's electoral system in a comparative international context should be conducted to establish the weaknesses and strengths of electoral law.

Under Eduard Shevardnadze, Parliament was seen as a centre for independent debate. The level of oversight was far greater at that time. Ministers were called for questioning by Parliament every Friday. This no longer occurs. There is now only one opposition party in the parliament which holds 10 of the 150 seats. MPs have ceased to be accountable to the electorate, they now answer only to the party which nominated them. The Executive has no difficulty pushing legal amendments and legislature through the Parliament. There is no mechanism for public consultation. Parliament plays only a minor role in drafting and debating the budget - it can only provide recommendations and can be dissolved by the President if it does not formally approve the budget.

According to opinion polls, only 14 per cent of Georgians trust the judiciary. Lack of professionalism is serious as most judges come from law enforcement bodies. Though corruption is almost non-existent, many judges are subject to political pressures.

Since the Rose Revolution in 2003, around 10 media organisations have changed hands. Many of the new owners are associated with the government in one way or another. Government policy favours pro-Government media stations. The press in general is extremely weak. A small market and low circulation mean it is difficult to hire good journalists.

The Chamber of Control (the Georgian equivalent of the National Audit Office) is weak and has been almost inactive in recent years. Its mandate is tightly circumscribed. It does not have any control over local government or key central institutions such as the Ministry of Interior or Defence. By law, the tax department cannot be audited.

Local Government suffers from chronic under-funding. The only source of local government income is a 1 per cent property tax. The vast majority of taxes are collected centrally and then redistributed. As a result, local government has little leverage and Tbilisi exercises a high level of control. Local elections are even less democratic than national ones.

In recent years Parliament has effectively ignored the Ombudsman's annual report, allocating less than two hours of parliamentary time to discussing it.

The West has supported Georgia strongly in its recent confrontation with Russia, in part because the country is viewed by some as a beacon of democracy in the region. Given that commitment to these democratic values is contested, where does this leave the West?

Discussion

The recent conflict has provoked strong anti-government feeling in Georgia. What form does the criticism of Saakashvili and the Government take?

One has to understand that feelings among Georgians are extremely ambivalent. Society came together immediately after the war, not around the government but around the state. Georgians face a difficult dilemma. People are trying to find a way to acknowledge that mistakes were made without weakening Georgia as a state. On 7 November, the anniversary of the popular protests which were violently suppressed by the government, there was a much smaller demonstration than last year, although public discontent

is now far higher. This reflects the difficult position the opposition is in. In the final analysis, two territories which most Georgians consider parts of their country have now been lost. The Government has to be held responsible for this. The question is how to do this without weakening the state or appearing disloyal.

What exactly has to be done to strengthen Georgian civil society? And what can be done to strengthen the opposition in Georgia?

The Rose Revolution was undoubtedly a victory for Georgian civil society. But the problem now is that all the main actors who were involved in the revolution are now in Government. Civil society has not been strengthened by the turnover of elites. Specific improvements which could be made include increasing accountability to monitor government bodies; public education about the role of government and the media; initiatives to increase the professionalism of the media. It's not really a question of money. In the past large amounts of money have been given to NGOs which have produced thoughtful reports but achieved little in the way of substantive change.

Can you give a more detailed account of the opposition parties in Georgia.

The Christian Democratic Party (CDP) is the only opposition party now in Parliament. Its agenda is not radical, it emphasises cultural identity and orthodox values. Some think that it has been allowed into the parliament as a 'useful opposition'. Another, more liberal party is the Republican Party. It gets around 2-3 per cent of the vote and has done little to expand its base support beyond loyal intellectuals. Opposition parties face difficulties in Georgia, one of the most important of which is finance. Private sponsorship for opposition parties is lacking. Opposition parties are never given a chance to compete on an equal footing with those in power. The National Movement receives around ten times more airtime than the opposition. The Government does its best to discredit the opposition; for example, it released videos to the press suggesting that the opposition leaders were in the pay of the Russian secret service. The opposition does not help its cause, however, by targeting its criticism against individuals rather than policy.

To what extent do you feel the weaknesses in Georgia's political institutions that you have highlighted contributed to the rash decision-making which precipitated the August war? Might a more democratic government have acted differently?

Yes. If there was greater public policy debate, the conflict could have been prevented.

Should Western aid to Georgia be made conditional on democratic reform?

The indication is that no conditions are currently being attached to Western aid to Georgia. A recent initiative proposed by a Georgian NGO to monitor the allocation of public funds was snubbed by Brussels. It is politically inconvenient to have Georgian NGOs complain about the misuse of public money at a time when the West is donating so much to the country.

Mikheil Saakashvili, in a recent speech in New York, promised to introduce reforms to bolster Georgian democracy. Are there any signs that this has been acted upon?

Since Saakashvili's speech, an independent television company which was previously banned has been granted a license. A second television station has opened itself up as a platform for debate which includes opposition parties. These are positive steps, but given the long list of problems it is not enough.