

Georgia's Double U-Turn and Its Reasons

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This is the first time that the Estoril Political Forum is having a special discussion on Georgia. As a Georgian who has taken part in this Forum quite a few times before, I should probably feel honored, but the reason why Georgia has deserved such particular interest is extremely sad and disappointing. I don't know why exactly the organizers of this Forum decided to focus on Georgia, a country rather far from Portugal, but I can make some guesses. One is that the Georgian case is rather perplexing and difficult to understand; many Georgians, as well as our international friends, reiterate that even a few years earlier, they could not have imagined things going this far. This makes it a complex case deserving our intellectual effort.

Moreover, even though the recent Georgian developments look bizarre, they are also expressions of an international trend and cannot be understood outside the international context. We are living in an era when many things that people found unimaginable ten or five years ago are actually happening. The supposed unimaginability of the Georgian case is hardly unique. What's happening in Georgia tells us something about the multifaceted and often worrying transformations we witness in the broader world today.

I will start by briefly summarizing what is going on, and then share some possible explanations.

A Double U-Turn and Societal Resistance

The recent events in Georgia may be described as a combination of two stories. One is that of the government turnaround. Another is that of the resilience of Georgian society. I will try to tell both in a sequence.

Time-wise, the beginnings of these stories – both unfolding – may be dated to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, even though there had already been alarming signs for some time before.

Georgia, as represented by its government, is undergoing a double U-Turn. One of its dimensions is geopolitical. For decades, Georgia's foreign policy was based on the idea that it is a European country by its identity, that it essentially belongs to the West. This manifested itself in an aspiration to join the EU and NATO, which constituted the backbone of Georgia's foreign policy. All political parties of any significance took it for granted, and in 2017, under the GD government, this aim was even enshrined in the Constitution. Now, the GD government has effectively dropped these aspirations, even though it has yet formally announced doing so – probably because the European idea continues to inspire most Georgians. The government speakers only say they don't like this kind of Europe, but there is no other one for them to join. The government has also never said that Russia is now Georgia's chief ally, for the same reason that saying it aloud would be extremely unpopular with most Georgians. However, there are several indicators that this is so in fact: the message-box of the Georgian government

propaganda largely coincides with that of Putin's Russia (including in the assessment of the Ukraine war); the GD leaders attack western politicians every day and almost never criticize Russia; and Russian leaders and propagandists are the only ones who publicly praise the Georgian government. The GD government also prioritizes contacts with China and Iran, something which is fully compatible with its tacit but unmistakable pro-Russian stance.

The second U-Turn concerns the nature of the political regime. Georgia had never been a full democracy; most analysts dubbed it a "hybrid" or "competitively authoritarian" system. In practice, this meant that on the one hand, Georgia had a dominant party system, that is power was concentrated in a single center without effective system of checks and balances, and political competition was skewed in favor of the incumbent; on the other hand, however, governments sometimes changed, and Georgia had an effectively a free society with active political opposition, genuinely free independent media and vibrant civil society. This made Georgia the freest country in its region. In the last couple of years, Bidzina Ivanishvili decided to end all that. The so-called *Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence* (which the government critics dubbed "the Russian law") defined Georgian civil society organizations as agents of hostile foreign powers (implying the West) and made it effectively impossible for them to get international support; most of the Georgian civil society organizations got paralyzed as a result. Most leaders of opposition parties are in prison, recently released, or have fled abroad to avoid arrest, and the government has initiated a case to prohibit opposition parties altogether. It also initiated a punitive reform of the higher education system to directly control the universities. It uses multiple methods to pressure businesses so that they do not dare to support any independent civic initiatives. The baseline is that the high level of civic freedoms to which Georgians have become accustomed during the last four decades can no longer be tolerated. If the government had its way, Georgia would become a country like Belarus, totally subservient to the will of its secretive dictator, Bidzina Ivanishvili. He does not hold any formal government position but rules through his viziers, whom he enjoys replacing frequently.

The second, parallel story is that of the societal resistance. Since the day following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Georgians have spent an unusually large amount of time protesting in the streets. There were several tides of massive protests, triggered by the feeble and duplicitous reaction of their government to the war, two instances of introducing the "Russian law" (in the spring of 2023, the people actually forced the government to withdraw the draft, but one year later, GD adopted it still). On November 28 of 2024, Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze announced that Georgia was suspending the EU integration negotiations; this triggered a new, especially large tide of protests that has never stopped to this day, though the protests eventually subsided. The government tried desperately to stop all this, using severe beatings, outlandish fines, mass arrests, firings, etc. Even standing on a sidewalk during the protests got criminalized. Hundreds are in prison or have served time. These measures made some people more cautious, but the government still fails to fulfill its aim of returning to business as usual.

One might ask: What do the protesters hope to achieve? At first, many hoped that mass protests would bring down the government. It is much more difficult to expect this now. However, there may be two reasons for this persistent defiance. One is the recognition that the option of "normal", constitutional confrontation with the incumbent power is now closed, so

street protest remains the only available way to confront the regime. Moreover, people assume that stopping now would imply giving up, accepting the normality of the regime. Until people continue to protest, Georgia is not like Belarus.

Fundamental vulnerability of hybrid regimes

What lessons may one draw from the Georgian story? I will share three considerations, though there may be many others.

I mentioned that many describe the current developments as hitherto “unimaginable”. This is because many democracy activists, as well as foreign experts and diplomats, took the existing, relatively high level of civic freedoms in Georgia for granted and assumed that full dictatorship in Georgia was impossible; the only legitimate topic for discussion was how to achieve full-scale democracy.

This was naïve. Worst-case scenarios should never be discounted. Many referred to Georgia as a “country in transition” (or, even more misleadingly, a “transitional democracy”). This implied democratic predestination of sorts: supposedly, Georgia could have no other path than that towards Western-style democracy; it was only impeded because it happened to be unlucky with its leaders. But from today’s perspective, one might rather say that it was the other way round: Georgia had been relatively lucky with its leaders until Bidzina Ivanishvili emerged on the scene.

To return to the somewhat vague concept of a hybrid regime, it usually denotes a “dominant power system” with few effective institutional safeguards (whatever is written in the Constitution and laws). If so, what prevents it from going all the way to full autocracy? The “hybridity” leaves space for a meaningful challenge to power, making the position of dominant leaders precarious and vulnerable, as Eduard Shevardnadze, Mikheil Saakashvili, or, more recently, Viktor Orbán could say from their own experience. Why not destroy the challengers altogether, as Putin, Lukashenko, or Ilham Aliyev did? Why would one take chances with even partial democracy?

For various reasons, neither Eduard Shevardnadze nor Mikheil Saakashvili (very different from each other as they were) went the whole way towards establishing a full dictatorship. Both of them had some autocratic traits and occasionally mistreated their opponents, but they did this within limits. One can argue why: maybe they cared too much for their reputations in the West or in the enlightened part of their societies. Be it as it may, Bidzina Ivanishvili does not have such scruples. His worldview has been shaped in the jungle of the 1990s Russian business world; he hardly understands what Western democracy is about and what makes it tick. Whether or not he is directly manipulated by Putin, as many Georgians believe (I prefer to avoid speculation on this topic), his mindset is certainly Putinesque. For both Putin and Ivanishvili, Western democracy is about appearances and hypocrisy, a smoke-screen for Western imperialism; only naïve losers believe in the reality of democratic norms. Both share the view and make their propagandists reiterate that “color revolutions” in Georgia or Ukraine were staged by the West using local activists as their puppets. It is also very much possible that Ivanishvili truly believes in a deranged conspiracy theory of the “global war party”, a hidden

mastermind of the West that tries to drag Georgia into a war with Russia, and works on staging another revolution in Georgia to get rid of Ivanishvili, the sole true defender of Georgia's interests. This makes any critic of Ivanishvili a Western stooge who has to be destroyed.

Hybrid regimes are much more vulnerable to autocratic leaders than established Western democracies. Whatever concerns people may have about the decline of democracy in the West, so far, no truly consolidated Western democracy has gone fully autocratic. For a long time, Hungary had been a negative cause celebre, but its last elections demonstrated the resilience of democracy in this country as well. Hybrid regimes lack such safeguards against aspiring autocrats, as the Georgian example has sadly shown. Still, the story is not over in this case either: Ivanishvili is certainly trying to go full Belarus, but so far, he has not succeeded.

The linkage between democracy and geopolitics

If hybrid regimes are defined as hanging in the balance between democracy and autocracy, the geopolitical environment is part of that balance. Democracies are not established only because this political regime is superior to its alternatives (though I believe it is). The power and prestige of the democratic world, mostly represented by the West, is a huge factor. If the West is powerful, there are greater incentives to emulate its norms and institutions – or at least keep some democratic appearances.

It cannot be a coincidence that Bidzina Ivanishvili's government started its sharp U-turn away from the West and from democracy immediately after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, even though he had been inclined in that direction also before. But what is the specific logical link?

I can think of two linkages. Firstly, Ivanishvili believed that Russia would easily win the war and that the West would not be able to defend Ukraine in any meaningful way. If this were true, Putin would become an unchallenged leader of the post-Soviet space. In such a world, standing up to Russia would be unreasonable: a harsh punishment would inevitably follow. Ivanishvili propagandists routinely blamed Ukraine for the war – Zelensky brought it upon Ukraine, he said, as Saakashvili had brought the Russian invasion upon Georgia in 2008. However factually and morally wrong such assessments might be, this logic could be pervasive for many: small guys are supposed to be subservient to stronger ones; in the region, it was Russia, not the West, that was strong. No wonder that Ivanishvili decided to put his stake on the winner. Many fans of Realpolitik would consider this a natural political course. The second U-turn logically follows from the first: if Georgia is in the Russian sphere of influence anyway, what's the point in keeping democratic appearances? Putin-style autocracy is evidently much better for keeping power indefinitely.

To be fair, in the first days of the war, many people in the West did not believe in Ukraine's ability to withstand the Russian aggression either. But quite soon things started to change. Nobody knows what the outcome of the war might be, but so far, it has left Russia a weaker, not a stronger player in the region. Both South Caucasian neighbors of Georgia, most notably Armenia, pursue policies that are more, not less, independent from Russia. Ivanishvili's geopolitical calculations appear to have proven wrong.

However, Ivanishvili may still not share the above analysis – especially because it goes against his gut instincts. Moreover, the Russian invasion in 2008 left behind a strong enough element of fear for Ivanishvili to manipulate it. Most analysts agree that the remaining level of genuine support for the GD is predominantly motivated by the belief that, under the circumstances, the policies of appeasing Russia, personified by Ivanishvili, constitute a safer bet. Coming to power of the pro-European opposition is likely to increase tensions with Russia. The belief that Russia is still winning the war while the West is weak and non-committal continues to be a central part of the GD propaganda.

The second link could be that the war undermined Ivanishvili's ability to keep the appearance of a balanced foreign policy, something he had tried to do before with a modicum of success. The European *Zeitenwende* that followed the Russian invasion pushed Ivanishvili to choose sides, something he hated to do. He preferred to keep good relations with the West, but not at the expense of annoying Russia. When the EU opened the path to EU membership for Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, which it had hitherto blocked, Georgian society welcomed this decision as the fulfillment of its dreams, but it was also rather bad news for Ivanishvili's regime. Until the visa-free regime with Schengen countries remained the top achievement of Georgia's European policies and there was no prospect for much more, Russia was not really bothered. But membership was a wholly other matter – that implied both antagonizing Russia and more meaningful steps towards democratizing the system: both extremely unpleasant and dangerous for Ivanishvili. For the above-mentioned reasons, Ivanishvili could not say all these things openly (though some of his propagandists did); it was at this moment that he effectively shifted to a course of breaking with the West, even though the government continued to keep up appearances for some time.

Society: Rich in spirit, low in institutions

The third observation concerns Georgian society. Foreign observers often ask: if the Georgians are so overwhelmingly pro-Western, why do they tolerate an obviously anti-Western government?

In particular, how come the GD still managed to win the October 2024 elections? There are two answers to that question. One is that the election was not free and fair and did not reflect the true preferences of the electorate. Combined support for four opposition blocs was probably higher, as measured by both pre-election surveys and the most reliable Edison Research exit poll, which had proven the most accurate in several previous elections. The GD used all the tricks in the book to skew the result in their favor, including intimidation and vote-buying during the pre-election period, as well as multiple voting on election day. This led many pro-democracy activists to conclude that electoral change of power was no longer possible in Georgia; hence, only methods of civil resistance remained valid. The opposition decided to boycott Parliament, though later one of the four main players, *Gakharia for Georgia*, changed its mind and took up its parliamentary mandates (even though its leader is in emigration due to a pending arrest warrant in Georgia).

The wisdom of the parliamentary boycott may be questioned. However, there is a deeper problem behind this. Yes, elections were not fair, but one cannot deny that the GD still has considerable support. Apart from the mentioned fear of a war with Russia instrumentalized by the GD, a perceived lack of a credible alternative is another significant factor. Paradoxically, this perception is spread not only by the government but also by its critics.

Many activists, especially young ones, like to stress that their protest is “non-partisan” and that they would not accept leadership from political parties in the protests. This is a serious challenge. While the Georgian society shows a commendable spirit of resilience in defying the increasingly autocratic regime, it demonstrates a degree of immaturity in its nihilistic attitudes towards political parties. This is not a specifically Georgian feature. Low trust in political parties is a global trend, but it also correlates with the decline in the quality of democracy. However, the degree of this mistrust is much more pronounced in Georgia, and it creates a vicious circle: the unpopularity of the political parties contributes to their weakness, while their objective weakness provides grounds for dismissing them as losers. If one were to look for the general structural reasons that have prevented Georgia from consolidating its democratic institutions over the last three decades or so, the weakness of political parties and party systems may be the most obvious.