
The concerns of the United States about antidemocratic political processes in Georgia in 2018-2021

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Abstract

The diplomatic relations between the United States of America and Georgia were established in 1992. The United States supports the Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity of Georgia and its democratic development. The national goal of Georgia is to become a member of NATO and the European Union. In fact, Georgia, as one of the post-Soviet republics, became the best example of democracy in the region.

However, antidemocratic political processes in Georgia in 2018-2021 caused concerns among the US officials and started changing the right democratic way of the country. This research studies the main reasons for the political crisis and strong polarization between the ruling party and the opposition. We are trying to find out the possible consequences of the problem and the impact it can have not only on the future development of the country and the strategic partnership between Georgia and the United States but also on the geopolitical situation in Transcaucasia.

Keywords: political crises, bilateral relations, boycott, Georgia, elections

INTRODUCTION

The South Caucasus or Transcaucasia is a region with a complicated geopolitical situation. It is the place where the interests of big “political players”, the United States of America and the Russian Federation

clash. Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia are former Soviet countries that have different political vectors and goals. (Paul, 2015)

Currently, the region has three “frozen conflicts”, occupied territories, and tense political relations with neighboring countries. (Mukhanov & Skakov, 2021) Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia has chosen its way toward independence and democracy. The national goal of the country is the Euro Atlantic integration, becoming a member of the NATO and European Union. However, the Russian Federation is against the expansion of NATO in the region and it kept enlarging its influence thereby putting more Russian military bases in the South Caucasus (Transcaucasia). (Kasim, 2012) After the Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020, the Russian Federation put its “peacekeepers” there and spread more power in the region.

In 2022, Georgia and the U.S. celebrate 30 years of diplomatic relations. The strategic partnership between these two countries, especially in the field of security, has gotten stronger. After the “Rose Revolution,” many reforms in Georgia showed the best examples of the democratic development of the country in the South Caucasus.

However, recent political mistakes, and anti-democratic processes in the country show authoritarian approaches still exist in post-Soviet Georgia.

The long-lasting disagreement and disputes between the ruling party “Georgian Dream” and many opposition parties led the country to strong political crises and put its future democratic development at risk.

1. POLITICAL CRISIS

The Presidential campaign in 2018 was held under political disagreements between the candidates supported by the ruling party and the opposition. There was a debate over the interference of Russia in the domestic politics of Georgia. (Karpovich & Shakirov, 2021) The tactics of blaming each other in pro-Russian policy became the main reason for protests in the country. The whole society was divided into pro- Russians and pro –Americans. The victory of Salome Zurbishvili caused discontent throughout the oppositional spectrum, considering her as a person who “could be used” by the ruling party as its marionette to follow their political instructions.

The main message of Zurbishvili’s election campaign was to look forward to the future, to understand the role of the President as an above party figure, the arbitrator in political processes, the focus of the country's historical past. At the same time, her words were unclear for the people: "The President should be with the people, but still higher." (Tukvadze, Abzianidze, Ubilava, & Gelashvili, 2021)

However, the results of the Presidential elections did not affect the foreign policy of the country. James Appaturay, NATO Special Representative in the Caucasus and Central Asia visited Tbilisi on December 12, 2018, immediately after the presidential elections in Georgia. He met Prime Minister of Georgia Bakhtadze, Minister of Foreign Affairs Zalkaliani, Minister of Defense Izoria, and the newly elected President Zurabishvili. Issues were discussed related to the Euro-Atlantic integration of the country, ongoing Russian policy “borderization” (i.e. territorial delineation between South Ossetia and Georgia), cooperation in the context of security in the Black Sea, increased support for ongoing reforms in Georgia, as well as the participation of Tbilisi in NATO’s training.

A negative wave of domestic political processes in the country became stronger in 2019 after the incident in the House of Parliament. The oppositional parties protested the visit of a Russian Member of Parliament, Sergey Gavrillov, to the Georgian Parliament to conduct the annual Orthodox Assembly. They blamed the ruling party for a pro-Russian activity that allowed a Russian politician to cross Georgian borders and enter the Parliament; Sergey Gavrillov who took the seat of the Speaker of the Georgian parliament was forced to leave not only the building but also the country. He is a representative of the country, which occupied 20 % of Georgian territories. (BBC NEWS: Georgia protests: Thousands storm parliament over Russian MP's speech, 2019)

Russian politicians cannot ignore the fact that during the years of independence in Georgia, a new national identity based on the priority of Western values and a sharp rejection of the entire Soviet historical experience. That is why the implementation of Russia's policy towards Georgia requires caution, balance, and objective consideration of local conditions.

The protest of opposition was supported by thousands of people outside the Parliament building, which turned into a massive protest in the country. The government explained the incident as a technical mistake, even the Speaker of the Parliament, Irakli Kobakhidze, resigned. However, it did not stop the people who demanded the Minister of Inner Affairs, Gakharia, to leave its post and punish everybody who used inappropriate force against the protesters. This day was called “Gavrillov night” when antidemocratic processes were highlighted.

Anti-Russian attitudes can be seen among the Georgian population. Since the 2008 war, Georgia and the Russian Federation have had no formal diplomatic ties. After crushing Georgia’s army, Russia recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states where it put permanent military bases. Tbilisi and Western allies called Russia’s actions “illegal military occupation.” Therefore, it is easy to understand people’s negative reaction to the visit of the Russian MP to the Georgian Parliament. (ROACHE, 2019)

The political processes caused the concerns of the US and the EU that called the Government to solve the domestic problem democratically. The protests lasted for months; the oppositional parties and people demanded to change the system.

Finally, the head of the ruling party, Ivanishvili, announced the decision of the Government to accept the proportional system of the elections that could stop the protest wave in Georgia. However, Ivanishvili chose Gakharia as the Prime Minister of the country instead of resigning him. The political crises became worse.

2. US SENATORS' LETTERS

In spite of Ivanishvili's announcement to get a proportional system and have a multiparty parliament, the government refused to change the electoral system. They blamed their majoritarian lawmakers for blocking the bill. These political processes in Georgia caused a bad reaction of the USA as anti-democratic steps.

The letters from U.S. officials to Giorgi Gakharia showed their disappointment and critics of those processes.

The letters from U.S. Senators Jim Risch, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Jeanne Shaheen the ranking member of the Subcommittee on Europe and Regional Security Cooperation, to Prime Minister of Georgia Giorgi Gakharia, expressed "concern over recent events that indicate a backsliding from Georgia's commitment to building the institutions of their democracy." "Further, we fear that a lack of progress on reforms and increased tensions within Georgia will only open the door for increased Russian meddling in the country and throughout the region. The longer these actions continue, the more Georgia's security will be jeopardized, and we may be forced to reevaluate our partnership," said the Senators. "An independent, democratic Georgia has many international supporters, and we are eager to continue to assist your country," the Senators highlighted, adding, "however, we are motivated to support Georgia's economic and political development only as long as we can rely on Georgia to be a stable, trustworthy, and democratic partner in this effort." "We sincerely hope that you will work quickly to reverse this decline and fulfill the promises made to the Georgian people," Senator Risch and Senator Shaheen concluded. (Civil.ge: U.S. Senators Risch, Shaheen Concerned for 'Potential Backsliding of Georgian Democracy and Governance', 2020)

"Rep Kinzinger, Gerry Connolly, Rep Eliot Engel, and Rep McCaul sent a letter to the Georgian PM with grave concerns over political targeting & a declining economic trend that spells trouble for Georgia's path towards democratic reform & Western integration," Kinzinger tweeted. (Dumbadze, 2020)

U.S. officials expressed more serious concern later after the Government stopped the construction of the deep-water port of Anaklia on the Black Sea coast. The leader of the ruling party Ivanishvili was even called a protégé of Moscow and puppet of Russian President Putin. "Vladimir Putin's puppet attacked investments and hurt fundamental human rights in Georgia," Pete Olson said. (Georgian Journal: Bidzina Ivanishvili is Vladimir Putin's puppet, says Congressman Olson, 2020)

Anaklia, had a strategic location on the ancient trade route representing a critical transport node on the New Silk Road between China and Europe. Anaklia port's location, technical and infrastructure capabilities will be the primary drivers to attract cargo. (Anaklia Development Consortium: THE ANAKLIA PORT PROJECT, 2022)

This port has great strategic importance for the United States, which we can see in the statement of the former deputy assistant US Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Matthew Bryza:

“I think it will have an enormous impact on Georgia's NATO perspective. It will be used to transport NATO - well, US – equipment, and materiel to Afghanistan...”

Anaklia Port would help bring Georgia closer to the European Union by expanding the volume of trade through the Black Sea and Turkish straits, which in turn will weaken the economic influence of the Russian Federation and its ability to control Georgia.

“The port will also establish Georgia as a stronger global trading hub, which will be great in terms of strengthening its sovereignty and independence and general security”. (Tavberidze, 2019)

3. POLITICAL BOYCOTT

In 2020 parliamentary elections in the country showed the hope of having multiparty Parliament in Georgia, unprecedented in the South Caucasus.

As expected, the outcome of the parliamentary elections in Georgia was a political crisis, with problems related to a World pandemic and a deep recession in the economy, according to political scientists, which could have unpredictable consequences. The opposition hoped for a change of power and the formation of the first history of the country's coalition government. However, “Georgian Dream” again won the elections and took many seats in the Parliament - 60 out of 150. The opposition did not accept the results of the elections. They accused the authorities of massive falsification of the voting results, even though observers present at the election from the EU countries and the USA considered the elections quite fair and competitive.

The response of the opposition was the refusal of 51 deputies, representing opposition parties in parliament, from their mandates and the requirement to recognize the results of past elections as invalid.

“But the thousands of protesters who marched in Tbilisi rejected the result and called for the resignation of both the police chief and the election commission...Eight opposition parties have already said they would boycott parliament over the results of the vote.” (BBC NEWS: Georgia protests: Tbilisi police fire water cannon at demonstrators, 2020)

The boycott of the opposition put the Georgian authorities in a difficult situation. Generally, the Parliament, in which only one party is represented, can work as the Georgian Dream has legislature with a simple majority. However, in order to solve many issues such as electoral reform requires changes to the

country's constitution, for which it is necessary the constitutional majority, which the leading party in the newly elected Parliament does not have. Moreover, the Georgian parliament can be in international isolation, since parliamentary delegations must include representatives of the opposition. It makes the work of the parliament complicated and deteriorates the international image of Georgia. (Baldinger, 2020)

With the mediation of the ambassadors of the United States and the European Union, Georgian Dream immediately began negotiations with the opposition. However, five rounds of negotiations did not allow the reaching of a mutually acceptable solution. (Civil.ge: U.S. State Department on 'Democratic Developments in Georgia', 2019)

It is obvious that the opposition does not trust the authorities, and the authorities do not believe in the unity of the opposition and it seems that both sides are not ready for a compromise. Georgian political experts think that the continuation of the confrontation may lead to a critical weakening of the state. They call on the parties based on the interests of the nation, find a formula for a consensus and transfer political processes into a parliamentary format.

The United States expressed its concern regarding this issue and US Ambassador to Georgia Kelly C. Degnan stated that "the leaders of all political parties should be guided in their actions not by personal ambitions, but the interests of the country, and that there are enough problems in Georgia, which need to be solved not outside, but in parliament. The Georgian people in various polls declare that for them the main problems are jobs, high prices, and poverty. The urgency of solving these problems should push the parties to compromise." (U.S Embassy in Georgia: U.S. Embassy Statement on Georgia's Parliamentary Elections, 2020)

On February 8, 2021, the founder of the leading party, Bidzina Ivanishvili, who was considered the "shadow ruler" of Georgia, announced his retirement from politics, considering his mission accomplished. He removed M. Saakashvili and his "groups" from the authorities. According to Ivanishvili, he left the country with "peace, an open pluralistic democracy, freedom of speech, balanced power and an independent judiciary"

In late February, police raided the party headquarters of the opposition United National Movement (UNM) in Tbilisi, to arrest its chairman, Nika Melia. The raid and arrest, which were live-streamed and video-recorded by people outside the building put the country deep into political collapse. Given Melia's longstanding role as a thorn in the side of the ruling Georgian Dream party, his detention appears to be a politically motivated performance of power to intimidate the government's critics. This action provoked outrage in Georgia, the European Union, and the United States, where members of the U.S. Congress and human rights organizations have expressed concern. (Stronski, 2021)

As a sign of disagreement with this decision, Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia resigned. The new Prime Minister is Irakli Garibashvili; the opposition considers his nomination by the "worst choice" of the ruling party.

Probably, the Georgian authorities considered that the isolation of Melia, on the one hand, would be a serious warning to the opposition and proof that the Georgian Dream intends to “put things in order”, on the other hand, it will deprive the street protest movement of its main leader. (BBC NEWS: Nika Melia, Georgian opposition leader, is arrested at party HQ, 2021) However, the consequences of this step could be just the opposite. Immediately after the arrest of the leader of the UNM, people began to gather in the center of Tbilisi.

CONCLUSION

The Political crisis and antidemocratic processes in Georgia started with the Presidential elections in 2018. It got worse later in 2019 continued by a massive protest of people caused by the visit of a Russian politician. A series of political events divided a political arena into two parts: the leading party and an all opposition spectrum. The US officials played the role of mediators to solve the problem, however, after many attempts and rounds of dialogues, the oppositions kept the boycott and left their mandates.

Domestic political crises can negatively influence the country’s development and integration. We hope that the United States will not change its foreign policy towards Georgia as its number one strategic partner in Transcaucasia, especially after the Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020 when Russia put its “peacekeepers” and got more power in the region.

The United States will probably continue supporting Georgia to help it become more independent and stronger; however, Georgian politicians should find consensus, stop polarization, and care more about the future of the country than focusing on their political views and principles.

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შეერთებული შტატების შეშფოთება ანტიდემოკრატიულ პოლიტიკურ პროცესებზე საქართველოში 2018-2021 წლებში

მარინე ჩანგიანი

ამერიკისმცოდნეობის დოქტორანტი, ჰუმანიტარულ მეცნიერებათა ფაკულტეტი, ივანე ჯავახიშვილის სახელობის თბილისის სახელმწიფო უნივერსიტეტი, საქართველო

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აბსტრაქტი

ამერიკის შეერთებულ შტატებსა და საქართველოს შორის დიპლომატიური ურთიერთობები 1992 წელს დამყარდა. შეერთებული შტატები მხარს უჭერს საქართველოს სუვერენიტეტსა და ტერიტორიულ მთლიანობას და მის დემოკრატიულ განვითარებას. საქართველოს ძირითადი ეროვნული მიზანია გახდეს ნატოსა და ევროკავშირის წევრი. ფაქტობრივად, საქართველო, როგორც პოსტსაბჭოთა რესპუბლიკა, რეგიონში დემოკრატიის საუკეთესო მაგალითი აჩვენა.

თუმცა, 2018-2021 წლებში ქვეყანაში მიმდინარე ანტიდემოკრატიულმა პოლიტიკურმა პროცესებმა ამერიკის შეერთებული შტატების ოფიციალური პირების შეშფოთება გამოიწვია და ქვეყანა არასწორი პოლიტიკური მიმართულებით წაიყვანა. ეს კვლევა სწავლობს პოლიტიკური კრიზისისა და ძლიერი პოლარიზაციის ძირითად მიზეზებს მმართველ პარტიასა და ოპოზიციას შორის. ჩვენ ვცდილობთ გავარკვიოთ პრობლემის შესაძლო შედეგები და რა გავლენა შეიძლება ჰქონდეს მას არა მხოლოდ ქვეყნის მომავალ განვითარებაზე და საქართველოსა და ამერიკის შეერთებულ შტატების სტრატეგიულ პარტნიორობაზე, არამედ ამიერკავკასიის გეოპოლიტიკურ მდგომარეობაზე.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: *პოლიტიკური კრიზისი, ორმხრივი ურთიერთობები, ბოიკოტი, საქართველო, არჩევნები*