

## THE GEORGIAN POLITICAL ELITE: MAIN TRENDS OF ITS CIRCULATION

Beka CHEDIA

*Ph.D. (Political Science), Head of Publishing Projects of  
the Tbilisi School of Political Studies  
(Tbilisi, Georgia)*

### ABSTRACT

**T**he author relies on the structure, nature, and values of the Georgian political elite to identify the ways and means through which it is replenished. He arranges the members according to their political clout, compares the central and regional elites, and examines the changing figures of the gender balance. The educa-

tional and professional levels, methods, and traditions of elite replenishment, as well as the conditions in which political careers develop serve as the starting point for assessing Georgia's political context as lacking in political rivalry and stifled by prominent nepotism. The political elite and its interaction with the public elite are also discussed.

**KEYWORDS:** *elite, politics, gender, elections, rule, party, charisma, Georgia.*

### *Introduction*

In Georgia, the political elite is closely intertwined with the business elite, public elite (the intelligentsia), NGOs, and the media. The dividing lines are too vague to arrive at a clear idea about the contours of the political elite. Indeed, what is a political elite? Is it limited to politicians, or does it include all of the actors who are actively involved in the political process and have a direct or indirect effect on political decisions?

As a nation, Georgians are very interested in politics, which means that the circle of people involved in the political process is fairly wide. The public sphere is steeped in politics, which means that all of the actors—journalists and observers who write about politics and experts—de facto belong to the political elite. This makes the structure of the political elite complicated, yet the range of decision-makers (people in power), or those who can have a noticeable impact on decision-making and the political processes (the opposition, the media, NGOs, the Church, etc.) is comparatively narrow.

However, in Georgia, the elite is not limited to the *ruling* elite; likewise, political decision-making does not belong solely to the ruling elite. Journalists, experts, and members of the ruling elite or the opposition can become political entities if and when they find their own niches and their own arguments to help them move into the public-political sphere and acquire direct or indirect means of shaping the political processes.

## The Political Elite: Structure and Nature

In the Soviet Union, legislators were recruited according to quotas: it was decided in advance how many representatives of non-political professions (actors, athletes, and people of creative professions) should be elected to the Supreme Soviets of the Union republics. Independent Georgia inherited the tradition and developed it further. Starting in the 1990s, the parliaments of different convocations invariably included a certain number of people from creative professions and athletes, most of them seen as outstanding personalities and the pride of the nation.

At the first stages of independence, this was hailed and accepted: in Soviet times and in the 1980s and 1990s, people of creative professions and athletes were involved en masse in the national-liberation movement. This means that the new political elite and the replenishment methods are rooted in the past and that the tradition which appeared at that time survived as part of the country's political system.

At that time, the political elite looked like the politically aware part of the public elite: actors, producers, academics, and athletes. Little by little, the public grew irritated with their too active interference in Georgian politics. However, today, some of the non-political figures remain prominent in this sphere and are even elected to parliament.

The deputies of the Georgian parliament (members of the ruling party and the opposition alike) form one of the topmost levels of the Georgian political elite. This is confirmed by their legitimacy (they never miss a chance to remind everyone that they have been elected by the people), their privileges (deputy immunity), and their absolute confidence that throughout their parliamentary term they will remain in the elite. Their responsibilities, however, are less exacting than those of the executive power branch, the members of which might be unceremoniously pushed out. The Constitutional amendments of 2010, which extended the parliament's powers in Georgia's power system, added more consequence to the deputy mandates.

The 2012 parliament consists of 150 deputies: among them are 32 lawyers, 25 engineers, 14 economists, 14 doctors, 7 historians, 7 athletes, 5 agronomists, 5 actors, 5 philologists, 4 journalists, 4 teachers, 3 chemists, 3 mathematicians, 3 producers, 2 singers, 2 philosophers, and 2 physicists. There is also one political scientist, one sociologist, and one psychologist in the parliament; artists, architects, hydrologists, biologists, commodity experts, theosophists, aircraft mechanics, and firemen are also represented by one deputy from each profession.<sup>1</sup> About eleven deputies have law degrees as proof of their second higher education acquired at educational establishments of dubious reputations: they are athletes, engineers, teachers, or doctors. In most cases, their knowledge of the law is superficial. This means that only one-third of the deputies is professionally competent to engage in parliamentary activities. The chairman of the parliamentary committee for legal questions is a physicist, while the chairman of the defense and security committee is an expert in German philology. The previous parliaments also demonstrated an acute shortage of deputies with legal or economic educations.

Soon after the 2012 parliamentary elections, on the eve of the off-year election to the suddenly vacated majority seat in one of the constituencies, Speaker David Usupashvili bitterly complained to the founder of the Georgian Dream ruling coalition Bidzina Ivanishvili, the then prime minister, about the lack of adequately educated deputies. The prime minister later told the media: "Every day the speaker of the parliament reminds me that I should not add the name of another fa-

---

<sup>1</sup> [<http://www.parliament.ge/ge/parlamentarebi/deputatebis-sia>] (in Georgian).

mous actor or someone similar to the list... In the past, we put the names of our favorites on the election lists and won, but the parliament is formed to pass laws. This means that the deputies should know how to do this.”<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, the law prohibits deputies from engaging in business activities, but many of them have businesses registered in the names of family members. There are 17 official millionaires in the 2012 parliament.

The executive power branch, likewise, badly needs professionals, yet this part of the Georgian elite is normally staffed according to two opposite principles: some of its members are not politicians and do not belong to any of the parties, while others are politicians pure and simple.

According to their official biographies, none of the 19 ministers has previous political experience: three were diplomats, five worked in Ivanishvili's company, while several others have had some brief experience in party work. Three or four of the ministers have extensive political and party experience. There are two football players in the government, one producer, one former prosecutor, one accountant, one professional bodyguard, etc., while two of the ministers were inherited from Shevardnadze. This means that the government, which, according to the Constitution, “shall be the supreme body of executive power to implement the internal and foreign policy of the country” (Art 78), is staffed with figures far removed from politics.

## The Political Elite: Recruitment

One often wonders how people become politicians and join the political elite? Indeed, there are no privileged population groups or aristocracy in Georgia to delegate its members to the elite based on wealth or nobility.

In Georgia, those who want to join the political community need no previous political experience, despite the fact that the country with its 3.7 million-strong population<sup>3</sup> has about 217 registered political organizations.<sup>4</sup> The laws do not limit citizens' political temperament, but the road to the country's political elite does not lie through inner-party competition. No matter how hard they have tried, none of the Georgian political parties has managed so far to create conditions conducive to full-fledged party democracy. For example, after its ignominious defeat at the 2012 parliamentary elections, the United National Movement repeatedly declared that it would institute reforms and conscript a younger generation of top managers. The old leaders, however, managed to keep the unwelcome new people out.

On the other hand, someone might suddenly find themselves at the very top. Until 2012, Irakli Garibashvili, currently the prime minister of Georgia, served in the private bank of Bidzina Ivanishvili, a billionaire and founder of the Georgian Dream political coalition. Some ministers with no previous political record were catapulted to the top layers of the ruling elite. Kakhi Kaladze, Minister of Energy and vice premier, came to power from the football national team of Georgia and the Italian Milan football team. After the 2012 elections, he found himself a member of the ruling elite with no previous managerial or political experience. Today, however, he doubles the posts of vice premier and secretary general of the ruling party.

---

<sup>2</sup> [<http://www.netgazeti.ge/GE/105/News/17711/>], 14 March, 2013 (in Georgian).

<sup>3</sup> [<http://www.geostat.ge/index.php?action=0&lang=eng>].

<sup>4</sup> [<http://napr.gov.ge/p/477>] (in Georgian).

The Georgian elite consists of two different types of people: some have come to stay, whereas others join by chance and leave after a short while. After spending three years (from 2012 to 2015) in his post, the minister of natural resources retired, left the ranks of the elite, and joined his family, who lived in Germany and whom he sorely missed.

The above is partly explained by the fact that Georgia has not acquired a political culture based on the study of and permanent attention to the biographies of politicians. They come unexpectedly into the limelight, then just as unexpectedly leave the stage. In 2008, during the off-year presidential election, Levan Gachechiladze, who ran as a member of the united opposition, scored an unprecedented 25.69% of votes earned in stiff competition. Mikhail Saakashvili had to work hard to acquire an unimpressive 53.47%. Despite his hefty 25.69% of the votes, Gachechiladze stayed away from the 2012 elections and withdrew from politics after the victory of the Georgian Dream to go into a big business project.

Nearly all the big parties in Georgia have youth organizations, yet neither their form, nor structure, nor nature correspond to the task of educating new politicians and the country's political elite. They look more like a surrogate of the Komsomol (Young Communist League) than anything else. On the one hand, society is very skeptical about them, while on the other, these youth wings of the Georgian parties are better described as a youth supplement used for election propaganda (distribution of leaflets, campaign organization, etc.). There are no institutions in Georgia able to make politicians out of young people. Under the Constitution, "Any citizen who is twenty-one years old and has the right to vote may be elected as an MP" (Art 49). This means that not infrequently, people elected to the parliament have no previous adequate records.

After the 2012 elections, Georgian society became even more keenly aware than before of nepotism as a form of recruiting new people into politics. In 2013, Ivanishvili, the founder of the ruling party, who filled the post of prime minister at that time said: "There is nothing wrong in the practice of appointing close people to certain posts. It has its positive sides, and this is done in developed societies, France being a good case in point."<sup>5</sup> It comes as no surprise that in Georgia, with its small population, many people have a large number of acquaintances and relatives, which has made nepotism an inevitable feature of Georgian politics. Between the Rose Revolution and 2012, this problem disappeared as a political trend (individual cases do not count). After 2012, relatives of the prime minister and other ministers flocked into the executive structures, businesses, and the ruling party. In 2015, NGOs tried to make nepotism a criminal offence; they initiated draft laws which the parliament refused to support.

The open type of conscription to the elites is typical of democratic pluralist political systems. An open elite is a typical feature of an open society. In Georgia, where personal trust prevails, this process is closed to outsiders. The bureaucracy, based on personal trust and closely connected with the political elite, is involved in politics. This is unacceptable and explains why new regimes prefer to create their own bureaucracies.

On the one hand, the phenomenon of protectionism and client relations is rooted in the Soviet system. In the 1990s, foreign analysts pointed to it as the most efficient of the informal institutions in the Caucasus. It continued living in independent Georgia; the new Georgian government failed to set up a state bureaucracy based on professional qualities, rather than personal relationships.

Normally political elites are not exported from one country to another. We, however, could watch this when the Soviet Union fell apart and the Soviet elites became the national elites of the former Soviet republics. In 2015, however, a precedent of elite export was created. Former Georgian president Saakashvili and several of his former ministers acquired high state posts in Ukraine. The

---

<sup>5</sup> [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dGkl99ytc8>] (in Georgian).

former president became governor of Odessa on 30 May, 2015; some of his comrades-in-arm, still members of the Georgian parliament elected in 2012, were appointed to high posts in Ukraine.

This post-Soviet Georgian-Ukrainian precedent changed the traditional ways of recruitment, circulation, and replenishment of the political elite.

## To What Extent is the Elite Ready to be the Elite?

The low level of Georgia's political elite is one of the biggest problems of the country's political system, even though different segments of the elite think differently about professionalism and competence. High professionals (financiers, lawyers, political scientists, etc.) prefer to keep away from politics (and careers in political parties in particular), either because they do not want to be drawn into it, or because the high barriers keep skilled and knowledgeable professionals away. In Georgia, the educational level of the elite is lower than the country's average.

In 2012, with the advent to power of the Georgian Dream coalition, it became clear that its average professional level was much lower than that of its predecessors. Local experts (even those who were very critical of Saakashvili and his team) have admitted that the Georgian Dream falls far behind the professional level of the political elite brought to power by the Rose Revolution, which was much more progressive into the bargain. Bidzina Ivanishvili, the founder of the Georgian Dream, who filled the post of the prime minister for some time after the 2012 parliamentary elections, knew that his parliamentary majority was much weaker professionally than the minority knocked together out of former top bureaucrats of the Saakashvili regime.<sup>6</sup>

It should be said that the Georgian electorate has become much more exacting when it comes to the country's political elite, thanks to the people who, while in power from 2003 to 2012, raised the minimally required educational and professional level. Today, Western diplomas have become an important career driver, a ticket to the corridors of power, a trend among the political elite, and a trigger of inferiority complex among those top officials who have been unable to produce them. They used their posts to acquire allowances on easy terms (or budget funding) to study at Western universities. Not infrequently, having climbed high up the career ladder, members of the Georgian political elite combine civil service with so-called educational holidays to spend a year abroad at master courses and short-term refresher courses, or take advantage of online educational programs.

In Georgia, a deputy or a minister who studies at a higher educational establishment is nothing out of the ordinary. They prefer the United States, Great Britain, and some other European countries to withstand the competition in society, where the number of graduates from the best universities is too high to allow the political elite to feel comfortable. Intellectually, the NGOs leave the political elite far behind in terms of professional and educational level. This explains why those members of the political elite who used to belong to the third sector stand apart as progressive-minded politicians. After the Rose Revolution, there was a much larger number of former NGO people in the ruling elite; their number shrank considerably after the 2012 elections. This means that a place in the political elite offers not only levers of power and involvement in decision-making, but also forces people to raise their educational level. About half of the deputies of the 2012 parliament are graduates from Tbilisi State University, the flagman of the country's educational system.

---

<sup>6</sup> [<http://www.netgazeti.ge/GE/105/News/17711/>], 14 March, 2013.

It is impossible so far to modernize the country's political field and establish a new model of political culture—the professional level of the deputies is too low for that. This explains why the center of gravity has shifted to the third sector. Under Saakashvili, the ruling elite was the main modernizer; the president himself looked like a reformer to the rest of the world (despite the harsh political regime he established in the country). After the 2012 elections, which brought the Georgian Dream coalition to power, the ruling elite was no longer able to carry out the reforms.

The parliament's low professional level is especially obvious when it comes to forming the budget, the duty and prerogative of the parliament in many other countries. In Georgia, the budget drawn up by the cabinet is approved by the parliament. Its members call themselves politicians, who do not and cannot know everything, while members of the political elite refuse to consider themselves politicians.

## The Local Elites

There is no local political elite in Georgia to speak of: the country's political elite prefers to congregate in the capital. The local elites, on the other hand, consist of deputies elected by majority vote, heads of district administrations, and governors. The leaders of the local party cells are nothing more than pawns (including those who belong to the ruling party). Heads of the district police, who have much more clout than heads of district administrations (a tradition inherited from Soviet times), also belong to the district elite (in most districts).

The deputies elected by majority vote are the worst headache of Georgia's political system. Before the 2012 elections, the Georgian Dream promised to replace the majority system with voting by regional-proportionate lists. This has not been done.

Today, 73 out of 150 deputies are elected by majority vote; 77 are elected by party lists. Since the 1990s, many international organizations have been recommending changes, since under the majority system a district with 5,000 voters and a city of 100,000 are represented by one deputy each. Some people say that the majority system interferes with the development of parliamentarism and political parties in Georgia. On top of this, the majority deputies are useless as legislators.

On 12 June, 2015, the speaker made public the names of those deputies who had missed more plenary sittings than others: majority deputies were among the ten persistent truants: one of them missed 101 sittings<sup>7</sup> between 2012 and 2015.

On many occasions, they want to have their fingers in all the pies: political, economic, and infrastructural. They interfere, contrary to the law, in what the administration is doing in order to look like “the father of their constituency” in the eyes of the electorate. Today, the post of a governor (head of a region consisting of several districts) is the most prestigious and consequential; it was the starting point of the development of local political elites under President Shevardnadze. For many years, the posts of plenipotentiary representatives of the president (governors) were distributed among former MPs and other active politicians. In 2012, everything radically changed for two reasons: first, under the Constitutional amendments, the right to appoint governors was transferred from the president to the prime minister; second, civil servants with experience in the law-enforcement structures are preferred to political figures. Today, four out of nine governors served in the police and state security structures (some of them were educated in Soviet schools of the militia, KGB, or FBI courses in the United States). Three governors came from the tax police or from the Customs Service (one of them was a famous singer); two governors are unrelated to the law and order system: one of them served

---

<sup>7</sup> [<http://www.liberali.ge/ge/liberali/news/126106/>].

in Ivanishvili's bank, while the other is a professional producer employed by the TV channels that belonged to Ivanishvili's company.<sup>8</sup>

Security and defense officials in the local ruling elites are a novelty for Georgia, even though heads of the local police or secret service (at the ministry of internal affairs level) did rule districts instead of the local administrators. Security and defense officials as governors are a surrogate of the post-Soviet models, especially of the model now used in Russia.

The part of the local political elite elected at the local elections cannot become a real local political elite. There are 71 local elected bodies (Sakrebulo) with 2,083 representatives; there are mayors in twelve cities and 59 municipalities headed by gamgebeli. The Tbilisi Sakrebulo stands apart from the other 70 as the most important.

The capital is home to a third of the country's population, which explains why its sakrebulo is called a mini-parliament. The way its 50 seats are filled is very specific, however it cannot be free in what it is doing: it is supposed to keep an eye on the Tbilisi government, while in fact the mayor's office imposes its rules on it. In the absence of a clear political course, the deputies of the Tbilisi Sakrebulo, the country's political center, belong to the local political elite. Traditionally, political parties consider the Tbilisi Sakrebulo to be a step toward running for the parliament. The political elite (political parties) use the local elections as a dress rehearsal for the parliamentary elections. The mayor of Tbilisi, elected by direct popular vote, is much higher up the political ladder than certain ministers. Several years ago, the mayor was appointed by the government, although his political clout was comparable to that of the prime minister or ministers.

## The Gender Question in the Context of the Male-Dominated Elite

The need to draw more women into politics is strongly felt in Georgia. After 2012, there were suggestions to introduce quotas for women in order to open the doors to the country's political elite. Those who opposed this argued that quotas would infringe on the rights of women: they would be drawn into politics because of their gender not their records, skills, and professionalism. It was further said that quotas might draw accidental people into the political elite. Some of the female deputies of the 2012 parliament were likewise critical: the quotas might put an end to their so-called gender monopoly in the balance of power in the political elite. Today, there are 17 women (11.3%) in the parliament. Georgia ranks 106th<sup>9</sup> in the world in this respect, one step higher than Armenia. In the previous parliaments, the gender correlation was as follows: 1995—16 women out of the total 235 deputies (6.8%); 1999—17 out of 235 (7.2%); 2004—22 out of 235 (9.4%); 2008—9 out of 150 (6.0%).<sup>10</sup>

In 2011, the corresponding law was amended to provide financial incentives to those political parties that voluntarily include candidates of different sexes in their party lists. Initially, the law provided 10% additional funding if the party list was composed of at least 20% women distributed among every ten candidates. In 2014, one more amendment was introduced into this law for local self-government elections: a 30% increase in the supplement from the state budget if the party list includes at least 30% women distributed among every ten candidates.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> [[http://gov.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=GEO&sec\\_id=37](http://gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=GEO&sec_id=37)] (in Georgian).

<sup>9</sup> [<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>].

<sup>10</sup> The data has been compiled by the Inter-Parliamentary Union on the basis of information provided by National Parliaments by 1 June, 2015, available at (see: [<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>]).

<sup>11</sup> See: *The Organic Law of Georgia on Political Union of Citizens* (Art 30.7[1]), available in Russian at [<https://matsne.gov.ge/ru/document/download/28324/15/ru/pdf>].

The involvement of women in politics is encouraged at the legislative level, while local activists are still displeased with the small number of women at the local level: there are only eleven women among the 50 members of the Tbilisi Sakrebulo.<sup>12</sup>

In Georgia, 4 out of 19 ministers are women. This figure looks unimpressive, although the ministerial posts they occupy cannot but impress: a woman defense minister in a Caucasian country with a traditional male-dominated political system looks like a breakthrough; the posts of the foreign minister, the minister of justice, and the minister of education also belong to women. Two more high posts—Chairperson of the Supreme Court and Secretary of the Security Council—are occupied by women. This means that women are involved in Georgia's political life and that reproaches about its male-dominated elite no longer hold water.

### *Conclusion*

The Georgian political elite is a fairly complicated phenomenon in terms of structure and ideology. In fact, it has no ideology, a feature inherited from the Soviet past when a party card opened all doors to the top. Not all of those who strove to climb high and those who have climbed high were committed communists. Perestroika and the upsurge in the national-liberation movement in Georgia allowed the elite to discard the remnants of ideology. After the 1990s, the Communists left the Georgian political class and moved into business to become part of the business elite. After coming to power in independent Georgia, Eduard Shevardnadze, former First Secretary of the C.C. Communist Party of the Georgian S.S.R., brought back part of the Communist nomenklatura.

Today, in the absence of political ideology, it is hard to pigeonhole the Georgian political elite. In Georgia, people have not and do not close ranks around an ideology; elites have been and remain the product of a historical stage. In the 1990s, dissidents with no nomenklatura past to mar their images formed the political elite; under Shevardnadze, former Communists who had wisely left their ideology and political values behind moved to the fore to form the ruling elite without an ideology.

Under Saakashvili, the ruling elite demonstrated the greatest ideological bias: it assumed a neoliberal ideology and was determined to modernize the country. The post-2012 ruling elite is amorphous and has no clear ideology, even though small groups in the ruling class and the opposition demonstrate ideological preferences. NGOs, the media, and the expert community, which belong to the political elite on the strength of their political decision-making potential thanks to their roles in shaping public opinion, demonstrate the highest degree of ideologization.

In Georgia, people have no confidence in the political elite. The Soviet formula "politics is a dirty business" is still very popular. Repeated sociological polls organized by all sorts of structures and centers reveal a low and diminishing trust in the political institutions. In 2015, the polls revealed that 91% trust the Georgian Orthodox Church and 82% trust the media, while political parties and other political institutes are mistrusted and are gradually losing their supporters. Fifty-one percent has confidence in the office of the president; 49% trust the parliament; 48% have confidence in the Cabinet of Ministers; 45% in the office of the prime minister; and 25% in the parties.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> [[http://tbsakrebulo.gov.ge/index.php?m=338&faction\\_id=184&fraction=%E1%83%A1%E1%83%90%E1%83%9](http://tbsakrebulo.gov.ge/index.php?m=338&faction_id=184&fraction=%E1%83%A1%E1%83%90%E1%83%9)] (in Georgian).

<sup>13</sup> [[www.iri.org/resource/iri-georgia-poll-georgians-are-less-optimistic-continue-desire-deeper-ties-west-wary](http://www.iri.org/resource/iri-georgia-poll-georgians-are-less-optimistic-continue-desire-deeper-ties-west-wary)].