THE THIRD SECTOR THAT STOOD NO CHANCE: COLLAPSE OF GEORGIAN CIVIL SOCIETY, OR ELITISM VS. VALUES

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ABSTRACT

The author analyzes the prerequisites and specifics of the development of civil society in Georgia, as well as the contradictions between society and the state and between society and NGOs. He looks at how the attitude of the people in power toward the electorate changes after elections, as well as at the population's feelings about the state and political elites. He also identifies the factors that interfere with the development of real civil society in Georgia and the methods used to shape public opinion.

He focuses particular attention on the "intelligentsia" as a social phenomenon and describes in detail its involvement in political life and in shaping civil society and public opinion.

KEYWORDS: ***Georgia, the state, civil society, elections, intelligentsia, elites, NGOs, the media.***

Introduction

Throughout the twenty-two years of Georgia's independence, civil society has been taking shape along with the new state institutions; not infrequently the civil sector, as an entity of social policy, outstripped the state institutions, however, the country has still not acquired a civil society.

Sustainability of civil society depends on the level of state development; in Georgia, however, the picture was different. Under Eduard Shevardnadze, the Georgian state was weak (or even failed), which explains why civil society looked strong. Under Mikhail Saakashvili, the state gained more strength; after the parliamentary elections of 1 October, 2012, which changed the political regime, the civil sector regained its former vigor.

Meanwhile, the civil sector of Georgia does not express (and has not been doing this for a long time) the interests of the people: it serves the ruling elite, to which at least some of its leaders belong. These "latter-day" political players enjoy what looks like immunity against encroachment on their interests (which they confuse with encroachment on the rights of civil society as a whole). This means that they can count on the support of foreign governments and foreign donors.

The agenda of the civil sector does not fully coincide with the social agenda. We can even say that there are two main players—the state and so-called civil society—which, depending on the circumstances, may compete or cooperate. In both cases, however, their interests do not necessarily coincide with the interests of society at large.

A public opinion poll (with a sampling of 2,509) carried out in 2011 by the Center of Study Resource of the Caucasus with USAID financial support showed that a large percentage of Georgians (35 percent) does not think NGOs are engaged in the right activities.

A large number of the polled were convinced that NGOs pursue their own interests rather than those of society. The respondents were convinced that they should be concerned about employment (69 percent), poverty (38 percent), the availability of health care (37 percent), territorial integrity (30 percent), and inflation (30 percent).

Only a few people noted that NGOs are indeed engaged in important problems, such as the level of education (5 percent), human rights (7 percent), objective elections (5 percent), and a fair judicial system (5 percent).

The majority of the polled pointed to the primary importance of economic issues. The majority of those asked what they expected from NGOs answered: "Active consultations with citizens on the most important issues of public life."[1]

Civil Society vs. Society

The term civil society, which is widely known and widely used elsewhere, has a very special meaning in Georgia: it is mainly applied to NGOs that are mostly concerned about their material gain rather than the interests of society. In Georgia, very much like elsewhere across the post-Soviet expanse, there are international foundations of all sorts pouring money into projects they like most. This means that NGOs are part of the market economy, or they are commercial organizations, even though their legal status indicates the opposite.

The flow of money from abroad dwindled after the Rose Revolution; this went on for a fairly long time: international donors believed that the country had finally embarked on the road to democracy.

In the last two years, the interest in foreign aid was rekindled; however, the money normally ended up in a narrow circle of NGO syndicates specializing in "grant attraction." The content and nature of the civil initiatives are geared toward the agenda of those who give money rather than toward the interests and priorities of the country and its population. This means that NGOs in Georgia are more concerned about issues unrelated to the country's vital interests. In those rare cases when the agendas of society and the civil sector represented by NGOs coincide, the latter pour no heart into it but remain concerned solely with funding.

For example, foreign donors are very interested in all sorts of gender projects in Georgia, defending women's rights in particular. According to the public opinion poll, the results of which were published in March 2012, Georgian women did not complain about infringements on their rights. They are convinced that they are the happiest in the region and argue that they earn much more than women in neighboring countries. This means that the huge grants poured into the protection of women's rights in Georgia are wasted; this also means that donors know nothing about the country's priorities.

The country has real social capital found outside the elite NGOs.

[1] [http://www.crrc.ge/store/downloads/projects/February%202012_NDI%20Survey_Public%20Eng%20vf.pdf].

The Church is the most active entity in the Georgian civil sector, yet inside the country it is seen as a purely religious structure. The Church, however, has one of the main qualities indispensable for an institution of the civil sector: it carries authority with the masses and can rivet public opinion on certain problems of special importance. Moreover, it is the only public institution capable of mobilizing the masses. This has become especially clear in the last few years.

The "green" actions of the 1980s can be described as the best illustration of civilian movements in Georgia, even if the protest rallies against the Khudoni Hydro Power Plant unfolded against the background of the rising wave of the national-liberation movement.

In 2012, this movement regained its former vigor; today, people protest against the Khudoni Hydro Power Plant and other power plants detrimental to the country's eco-system. In addition, the civilian protests unfolding among the local people in particular were generated by the fact that the hydro power plants threatened some of the nearby settlements scheduled for scrapping. On the whole, unlike in European countries, in Georgia the public has not yet matured enough to concentrate on anything other than political issues. All civilian issues invariably acquire political dimensions and lose their initial non-political angle.

The same is happening with the youth and student movements. Georgia has not yet acquired a powerful student movement able to deal with everyday matters. In 2000, a huge crowd of several thousand gathered in front of the Tbilisi State University to demand that annual exams that needed to be passed from one year to the next should be abolished. This paralyzed traffic in the very center of the Georgian capital.

Nothing much has changed since that time. In 2012, student groups insisting on lower payments for higher education resumed their activities; they proceeded from the argument that they pay too much for the inferior quality of the Georgian education they receive. So far, the Georgian students have not succeeded.

In Georgia, the civil movement is still associated with protests and, infrequently, with ideas. There are people who want to introduce trams as an environmentally clean means of transport. They never (or practically never) protest—they merely insist on their initiative. Civil responsibility means that people are concerned about public, not only personal, wellbeing.

The recent construction boom in Georgia stirred up civil protests against mayor's offices and private companies interfering in the historical appearance of cities and towns, particularly with respect to monuments and objects of cultural and historical value; people do not like it when changes are made to the urban landscape and all sorts of monuments erected in Tbilisi and other cities.

Civil society is increasingly resolved to oppose all kinds of cultural experiments, even though more likely than not disagreements slide back into a discussion about Soviet and new Georgian culture or the generation gap. It should be said that so far civil groups have not yet saved a single architectural monument, apart from the building of the former Museum of Marxism-Leninism which had avoided scheduled rebuilding. The Mirza Shafa Street, one of the oldest in Tbilisi, was not as lucky.

Civil movements in Georgia can mobilize themselves to address the most urgent issues, but they are too inconsistent, too impatient to be engaged in prolonged actions, and too badly organized. For example, the recreation zone with a tennis court in the very heart of Tbilisi lost its unique trees. The people who had used the court united to protest against the planned construction project; the people who lived nearby remained indifferent. This means that today few people have recognized that they should be involved in civil movements; in other words, there is still no solidarity in Georgian society.

Ilia Chavchavadze, a prominent Georgian public figure who lived in the nineteenth century, said in his time that it was sad to hear so many people say "I" and very rarely "WE."[2] This applies just as much today as it did in Chavchavadze's time.

[2] [www.presage.tv/?m=bp&AID=6976].

Georgian sociologists are convinced that certain cultural factors stand in the way to civil society forming in Georgia. So far, civil activities are limited to traditions and rituals, such as marriages and funerals, etc., while people neglect everyday problems, such as well-swept common yards or common staircases and entrance halls in residential buildings. Several years ago, the Tbilisi mayor's office responded with a program of Community of Apartment Houses to mobilize people to address these and similar problems; after a while, it degenerated into a purely bureaucratic effort.

The low level of social capital in Georgia is explained by the prolonged feudal period.[3] Indeed, for centuries, the monarch was seen as a person (father) who looked after the people (children); in Soviet times, it became even more obvious. For many centuries, Georgians expected the state to look after them. This explains the low level of social capital in the country. According to recent opinion polls, about half of the Georgian population still expects that the state will look after them.

The far from simple situation in the country is another reason for the inadequacy of the civil sector. There is no middle class in Georgia to formulate civil initiatives and support them financially in other countries. According to the Gini coefficient, Georgia belongs to the group of countries with no (or a very small) middle class. In this respect, it is close to Latin American countries.

There are two reasons why Georgian businessmen prefer to spend money on entertainment and amusements rather than on civil movements.

- First, investments in the latter are not as "profitable" as in the former.
- Second, financial support of a civil initiative can create problems with the state (or, rather, the people in power), which explains why businessmen prefer to demonstrate caution.

There is another reason: so far, there are no businessmen in Georgia rich enough to waive the chance of becoming richer and concern themselves with the state of civil society instead.

An Alien State and an Alien Civil Society

The state of civil society depends on the quality of education; therefore, Georgian NGOs are not prepared to part with their civilizing role. At this juncture, we should remember that the civil groups, associations, etc. that emerged in Georgia were first seen as vehicles of Western values.

In the 19th century, Georgia lost its statehood for several centuries to come: it was part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. The first independent Georgian state—the Democratic Republic of Georgia—was short-lived: from 26 May, 1918 to February 1921. This explains why Georgian society had no fully shaped awareness of being citizens of their own state: in the post-Soviet period, Georgia remained their Motherland, but did not become a state.

The process of shaping civil awareness among the Georgians, therefore, has not been smooth and far from easy. Stephen Jones of Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts, who has been studying Georgian politics for twenty years, pointed in one of his publications to "the unbridgeable chasm between governed and governors"; he remains convinced that the people, unable to fully associate themselves with the state, remain highly mistrustful of such institutions as the parliament and presidential administration.[4] This means that Georgians are patriots rather than citizens of their state.

The obvious alienation between Georgian society and the state cuts both ways: the state, in turn, does not trust its citizens.

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[3] An analysis of the situation in Georgia supplied by the Institute of Social Studies and Analysis, July-September 2011.

[4] [http://www.cicerofoundation.org/lectures/Stephen_Jones_Georgia.pdf]; [http://www.voanews.com/georgian/news/interview-Stephen-Jones-137618598.html], 18 January, 2012.

Eduard Shevardnadze wrote at one time that it is impossible to uproot corruption in Georgia: the tumor has spread far and wide in the nation's body.

Mikhail Saakashvili, in turn, was frequently displeased with the mentality of his fellow Georgians. He was resolved to make "new Georgians" out of the old Georgians and reshape their mentality to make them similar to those who lived in Northern Europe and cut Georgian society according to West European patterns. This brings to mind the Bolsheviks' project of Homo Soveticus.

Bidzina Ivanishvili, who was appointed prime minister after the parliamentary elections of 1 October, 2012, pointed to the very low political culture of his fellow Georgians.[5] The irritated public retorted that the political elites waste no time in laying the blame on society. Immediately after the elections, the top crust forgot their election speeches in which they put their trust in the people's "wise choice" and pretended to be unaware that the people and their choice are the only source of power of those in power.

Before the elections, the Georgian political community does not hesitate to praise the "wise people," "politically mature society," "the Georgian people who see everything," "society which is never wrong," etc. After the elections, popular wisdom and social maturity are forgotten, while the "source of power" becomes a target of incessant criticism.

Prime minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, for example, announced that after the presidential election he would abandon civil service to become a public figure and work toward creating a "critical mass" of civil society in Georgia; he wanted the population of Georgia to become citizens of Georgia. The government can only be effective in a state in which society is patterned on Western samples. From this it follows that the electorate should demonstrate responsibility at the polls and keep the government it elected under permanent control.

He had the following to say about his planned early resignation: "Origins of the civil society have been existed in Georgia for a long time, but it was not possible to bring it quantitatively and qualitatively to the European level… Today lots of citizens are part of non-governmental organizations, expert community and media, who are seriously influencing public opinion and formation of the opinion through their publications and speeches. But often lack of qualification or/and conscience is often felt, which causes inconsistency and superficiality on fundamental issues, mixing up private with public. As a result it becomes impossible to maintain right orientations and standards."[6]

The liberal (tiny) part of Georgian society is predictably bitingly critical of the retrograde majority still tending toward Soviet patterns of thinking.

In 2013, the Georgian media published the results of a public opinion poll that shocked the progressive part of Georgian society. A year earlier, the Carnegie Endowment polled people in Russia, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan to find out what the public thought about Stalin. "An extraordinary 45 percent of Georgians have positive attitudes toward the dictator," the report said and added: "However, for Georgians, Stalin is much more a national icon than a political model."[7]

The results triggered a discussion about the values of ordinary Georgians and whether the political elite would succeed in drawing closer to the West in a country where 45 percent of population regarded Stalin as a "national icon."

It should be said that the Georgian elite would like to keep the people isolated from social activities because many people, the elite members argue, cannot think along modern lines, which means these members of the elite should first enlighten them. The so-called elite of civil society (which belongs, in fact, to the political elite) exploited Stalin's popularity to argue that the Georgian people

[5] [https://www.facebook.com/OfficialBIDZINAIVANISHVILI].

[6] [http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=26408].

[7] [http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/03/01/stalin-puzzle-deciphering-post-soviet-public-opinion/fmz8#].

could not be trusted with the country's future and that decision-making should belong to well-educated and properly enlightened supporters of Western and European values.

"Experts," "Intelligentsia," and Moral Authorities as Public Opinion Leaders

The collapse of communism and the Soviet Union created a lot of interest in social and political sciences (absolutely neglected in the Soviet Union) in Georgia and across the post-Soviet expanse for that matter. In Soviet times, practically all departments of philosophy at universities and other higher educational establishments had chairs of Marxism-Leninism and scientific communism. In Georgia, these chairs functioned at history departments, the graduates of which were appointed as secretaries of the C.P.S.U. district committees.

In the 1990s, all the former Soviet republics started calling them chairs of political science. Those who, in Soviet times, had defended theses on Marxism and the Great October Socialist Revolution all of a sudden developed a no mean interest in liberalism and capitalism. Georgia and all the other post-Soviet republics acquired a large number of independent centers of sociological studies and political science that take no commands from the state.

Today, young Georgians prefer political science, journalism, and international relations as their chosen professions; this means that all the big universities offer courses in these and related disciplines.

Many of those who air their views on political developments in the Georgian media hold diplomas in physics, chemistry, etc. The public may be wondering how they are receiving diplomas of experts in political science and from whom?

Immanuel Kant described any individual who publicly expresses his opinions as an intellectual. In Georgia, however, the dividing line between common intellectuals (if they are intellectuals) and political scientists (experts) has practically disappeared: anyone sharing his/her opinion with the public is considered to be an expert.

It is not surprising that the public at large has learned to treat political scientists and experts with a great deal of irony: this brings to mind TV pictures of experts interviewed against the background of bookcases or sitting at a computer monitor and lecturing to respectful audiences. The audiences, however, wonder how many experts per capita there are in Georgia? Aware of the turn of the public mood experts hasten to blame the journalists (who made them popular in the first place) of pinning a wrong tag on them.

In Soviet times, this niche was filled by political observers who told the country about what was going on in the world. Today, such people call themselves experts.

Those who belong to a narrow circle of "popular" or "recognizable" (according to the Georgian electronic media) can communicate with a TV audience from the screen or with readers from the pages of newspapers and journals. This drives society and the media apart: the latter has knocked together a "micro" intellectual community and stopped looking for fresh faces and fresh opinions.

It should be said in all justice that in recent times the Georgian media have stepped up their search for a new batch of intellectuals, probably because they finally became aware of the boring and repetitive nature of expert thought. Recently, the level of political thinking, information, and general knowledge of the ordinary people became much higher, which made the old experts inadequate. Today, a large part of Georgian society knows much more about politics than these "traditional" political commentators.

In recent years, new scientific schools have appeared in Georgia (including a legal school) and professional associations; the huge number of experts in political science (diplomaed and those who came from other professions) has done nothing to raise the level of the social and political sciences.

Experts, members of society, and intellectuals have to perform the same functions; this obliterates the dividing lines between these very different groups. Experts act as enlighteners, while intellectuals function as moral mentors.

American philosopher Robert Nozick described intellectuals as those whose professions were associated with thinking and whose job was to transform thoughts into words; he meant poets, writers, critics, journalists, and university professors.

In post-Rose Revolution Georgia, the people in power looked down on the intelligentsia with a great deal of suspicion, partly because it was inherited from the Soviet Union.

In the 1970s and 1980s, when Eduard Shevardnadze as First Secretary of the C.C. Communist Party of Georgia was the de facto ruler of Georgia, the so-called creative intelligentsia was a moral teacher of Georgian society; together with the Communist Party nomenklatura, its members enjoyed unrivaled privileges.

The people brought to power by the Rose Revolution created their own circle of so-called intellectuals (pop singers were among them) who had nothing in common with the classical spheres of intellectual activity. "True" intellectuals were gradually pushed away from the public sphere.

The new public elite acquired similar functions and similar privileges as the Soviet intelligentsia before it (in the Soviet Union and under Shevardnadze). It consists of young authors, publicist writers, and members of other creative professions who can hardly be called intelligentsia, let alone intellectuals.

What is expected of the intelligentsia? First and foremost, it should rally the public around the political elite by using the public sphere. It is common knowledge that when political passions fly high in Georgia, politicians and intellectuals come to the fore on both sides of the barricades. Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci said at one time that all social groups had an intelligentsia of their own. In Georgia, all political groups have their own intelligentsia.

Since Soviet times, the Georgian intelligentsia has learned to think highly of itself as the "conscience of the nation," which means that people are guided by its opinions. It was believed that democracy was not the will of all the people, but of a narrow circle of educated and well-read intellectuals.

Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the first president of Georgia, tried to deprive the intelligentsia of its privileges; its members were called "red intellectuals" to associate them with the communist regime the first president had been fighting against. He was deposed, and not without the active involvement of the intelligentsia. Some of the members of this social group, however, sided with President Gamsakhurdia and were never branded as "red."

As distinct from so-called experts, society, the older generation in particular, respects the intelligentsia. According to the public opinion poll organized by the *Kviris palitra* weekly, the results of which were published in November 2011, the majority of the sample of 488 agreed with the statement that "today, the intelligentsia is the most worthy representative of Georgia," the media came second, and the ombudsman, third. Fourth and fifth places were filled by the non-parliamentary opposition and members of show business, respectively.

Strange as it may seem, no one bothered to size up the level of people's confidence in the expert community.

One thing is absolutely clear: experts, political scientists, and intellectuals shape public opinion, they dominate the public sphere of Georgia, its media in particular.

Conclusion

To sum up: after the Soviet Union's demise, Georgia concentrated on building up its statehood, political system, and institutions. It turned out, however, that after 22 years of independence, the aims could change: better state administration needed civil society, which should grow from below rather than be planted from above.

The government and society have never been pleased with each other. During the years of independence, civil society gradually degenerated into an elite privatized by a narrow circle. This means that today the state should start the process from scrap, even if there is the danger of the new civil society likewise being guided by political considerations rather than the interests of the people.

In its broad meaning, civil society in Georgia has outstripped the political elite in a certain sense. Today, the country is displeased with the political and NGO elites, because their interests have nothing in common with what the people want.

Information technology, social networking in particular, has proven to be the most convincing sign that there is a real civil society in Georgia. The people can freely express their opinions, which has pushed the elite into the background.

An analysis of information retrieved from the social networks shows that the agendas of "real society" and the elites of civil society are frequently worlds apart.

The country has social capital with which politicians have nothing in common. If it manages to organize itself, it could become the driving force behind the country's progress toward democracy.