Center for Social Studies
Georgia

Georgia

Country Report based on Research and Dialogue with Political Parties

About this report:

Political parties are indispensable for making democracy work and deliver. Finding the proper conditions for better internal functioning and effective legal regulation of political parties is of key importance anywhere.

This report is a result of world-wide research and dialogue with political parties. Together with national and regional research partners, International IDEA is improving insight and comparative knowledge. The purpose is to provide for constructive public debate and reform actions helping political parties to develop.

For more about the Political Parties' programme, please visit www.idea.int/parties

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Methodology

The most important political parties with the highest profile were selected for interviews: United National Movement; New Rights; Industry will Save Georgia (Industrialists); Conservative Party of Georgia; Leiborist (Labour) Party; Union of Georgian Traditionalists; and Republican Party of Georgia. The party Chairpersons and other leading figures were contacted to arrange meetings. Some interviewees were named by the party Chairs and others were approached personally by the researchers. The exception was the ruling party, the United National Movement, which was approached through its public relations officer who then contacted the leadership and arranged the interviews. All of those approached agreed to be interviewed with the exception of some representatives of the ruling party.

A number of documentary sources were also used, most of which are available through the Internet: for Georgian legislation, the website of the Georgian Parliament at www.parliament.ge; for electoral data, the Central Election Commission (CEC) at www.cec.gov.ge; for statistics, the site of the Department of Statistics at www.statistics.ge; and for information on international organizations, the site of the International Republican Institute's (IRI) Georgia office at www.iri.org.ge. Some information was obtained or verified through telephone calls and personal contacts.

Background

The recent history of political parties in Georgia begins with the first free elections, which were held under Soviet rule in 1990. In those elections the country's national independence movement won power under the leadership of former dissident Zviad Gamsakhurdia. Georgia has been independent since 1991. In 1992 Gamsakhurdia was forcibly expelled from the country and a military council took power. Its rule ended in 1992 when the new Parliament was elected.

The first main challenge for independent Georgia was to safeguard its territorial integrity. Following civil wars in two regions of the country, the Georgian government lost control over two territorial entities: from 1992, in the former Autonomous District of Ossetia; and in 1993 in the former Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia. Since then both regions have been ruled by separatist regimes and the question of Georgia's territorial integrity remains unresolved. The first post-Soviet democratic constitution was adopted in 1995. Nonetheless, although the central government regained full control over the Adjara Autonomous Republic in 2004, a constitutional arrangement providing for the territorial distribution of power has not yet been introduced and institutions for local government are underdeveloped.

Elections are held regularly but there has been no change in the ruling authorities through elections since independence. Persistent electoral fraud spurred the 'Rose Revolution' in 2003, when the results of the parliamentary elections were partly annulled and President Eduard Shevardnadze resigned his post. The leader of the Rose Revolution, Mikheil Saakashvili, was elected as President in 2004 and his party, the United National Movement, won an overwhelming majority after the elections to Parliament were repeated in 2004. Following the Rose Revolution the 1995 constitution was amended. Until 2004 Georgia was a presidential republic in which the head of state was also the executive and had no right to dissolve Parliament. The constitutional amendments of 2004 changed the system, creating a cabinet of ministers and the post of Prime Minister, and simultaneously giving the President the right to dissolve the legislature. The new constitutional arrangements led to a greater concentration of authority in the hands of the President at the expense of a balance of powers.

Georgia's President is elected for a five-year term by direct vote on the basis of universal suffrage in a two-round system. Members of Parliament (MPs) are elected for four-year terms. The Parliament has 235 members. Some 150 are elected on the basis of a proportional system (a single list for the whole country, considered as a single constituency) and the other 85 are elected in majority single-member constituencies in a two-round system. A 2005 constitutional amendment stipulates that the number of MPs shall be cut to 150: 100 elected by the proportional system, and 50 by the plurality-majority system. This amendment has not yet taken effect. One region, the Autonomous Republic of Adjara, elects its Supreme Council using a mixed system. Local representative bodies or *Sakrebulos* are elected every four years by a plurality-majority multi-member system, except for the capital, Tbilisi, where the *Sakrebulo* is elected by means of proportional lists. Mayors, when elected, are chosen using the first-past-the post system. Local self-government and its electoral

system are undergoing substantial change: new draft laws prepared by the government are under discussion. No quotas are applied in any elections.

The country inherited from the Soviet period a strong trend towards a centralized system of government and one-party rule. Political parties can be freely established and operate almost without interference, but the ruling party has significant advantages over those in opposition because of its access to state administrative resources and the media. The ruling party tends to dominate the political landscape, but after losing power such parties dissolve. Although opposition parties have limited influence they are more stable and are better able to survive political change.

Table 1. Parliamentary situation as of August 2005*

	No. of seats	% of total seats	No. of seats for women	% of total seats for women
Ruling party				
United National Movement	61	44%	17 for whole ruling party	81%
Unified Democrats	34			
National Movement-Democrats	1			
Opposition party				
New Rights	10	4.5%	3	14%
Republican party	5	2%		
Industry Will Save Georgia	9	4%		
Conservatives	4	1.8%		
Leiborist (Labour) Party	3	1.4%		
Others, independents	93	42%	1	5%
Total	220	100	21	100

Source: www.parliament.ge

*Please note that the table reflects the political party affiliations of members of parliament immediately after the 2004 elections. The subsequent political party developments that have taken place, especially among the ruling parties, are not reflected.

External regulation and environment

Legislation governing political parties and internal party functioning

Political parties are governed by the constitution of 1995 and the Law on Political Associations of Citizens (1997). Both provide a high level of negative freedoms and impose only limited restrictions on the functioning and formation of political parties. The law prohibits the creation of regionally-based parties, since the country's territorial integrity is one of the most pressing issues to have emerged following independence. Public funding for political parties is included in the Law on Political Associations of Citizens but this provision has not yet been enforced. All parties are required to have statutes that regulate their internal functioning. According to the law, the party leadership is elected by the party Congress, which is a party's highest governing body.

Registration of parties and candidates

Political parties represented in Parliament, as well as those that are not represented but can submit 50,000 signatures, can register for elections. In parliamentary elections the parties register lists for proportional elections and can nominate candidates for single-mandate districts. Both party candidates and independents can contest majority elections on every level. Candidates in such elections have to submit 1000 signatures in order to register. Candidates for these seats in Parliament must also be included in the party proportional list.

Only those parties that participate in elections (and not even all of them) are really active. The number of parties officially registered with the Ministry of Justice (182) significantly exceeds the number that participate in elections, and that number has been declining from one election to the next in recent years.[1]

Election campaigns and observation

Until recently, parties appointed the members of Central Election Commission (CEC). The CEC is now a 'professional' body and each of the three most successful political parties of the last election can appoint only two members of the lowest level of the electoral administration—the Precinct Election Commissions (PECs). The new arrangement has been seen as dominated by one party (members of the CEC are appointed by the ruling party) and a danger to fair competition, but it is too early to make a judgement on the matter. The parties have observers who can express their views in at CEC meetings, and who enjoy all the rights of official observers on polling day and during the counting of the votes. The quality of elections, however, which have been marred by irregularities, remains open to question. Further observation of the process will help determine whether the quality is improving.

Elections campaigns are regulated by the Law on Broadcasting (2004) and the Unified Elections Code (enacted in 2001 and substantially amended on several occasions since then). Formally, all electoral subjects[1] have equal rights to campaign and equal access to the media. They are also equally entitled to observe the voting and counting. In practice, however, elections in Georgia are characterized by fraud, and those parties that have greater access to the state's administrative and communications resources have significant advantages. Not all legal provisions are equally enforced, and thus equal competition remains a challenge. This is often mentioned by opposition parties as one of most critical obstacles to development. Although legal provisions require that the media work on the basis of parity among electoral subjects in practice this has not been the case.

Political parties spend significant amounts on television advertising. A new broadcasting law requires that public and private broadcasters with general licences should broadcast pre-election debates and provide a specific amount of free advertising time on a non-discriminatory basis.

Elections have been observed by various local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international institutions. Exit polls are normally conducted and parallel counting takes place. A problem with the electoral roll is usually identified as one of the most pressing matters, since there is no reliable source of information to produce accurate lists before polling day.

Internal functioning and structure

The political parties in this study all have at least several representatives in Parliament and play a significant role in public debates and the media. None of them has roots in the former Communist Party. All the parties that emerged from the Communist Party are marginalized in Georgia's current political landscape. The oldest party covered by this study, the Republican Party, originated among dissidents. Most of the parties were created recently, and their stability and durability will become clearer over the long term.

Table 2. Parties in Georgia: ideologies, social groups represented, why and when established

Leiborist (Labour) Party	Left-wing, centrist; middle class; established to represent broad strata of population in 1995.
United National Movement	No specific ideology; claims to represent the whole population; says it was created because the country was developing in the wrong way; 2002.
Republican Party of Georgia	Right-wing, centrist; neo-conservative; represents all social strata; established to struggle for independence in 1978.
Union of Georgian Traditionalists	Right-wing, centrist, conservative; middle class; created as a part of the national independence movement to participate in elections and build independent Georgia; 1990.
New Rights	Right-wing, conservative, middle class; business groups, intelligentsia, entrepreneurs; created to fill a gap in the political spectrum in 2001.
Industry will Save Georgia	Right-wing, middle class; established to support local industries by means of reducing tax burden, improving investment climate, representing business interests; 1999.
Conservative Party of Georgia	Conservative, right-wing; various social strata who should be supported by the state; says it was established because the country should be arranged differently; 2005

[1] The Georgian term "electoral subjects" refers to candidates, political parties and blocs of parties.

All the parties have a party Congress, which is the highest governing body, and a governing Council that is not active on a daily basis but has political functions. Day-to-day activities are directed by executive structures with fewer members, normally headed by the party leader. In the case of the ruling party this is the Secretary General, since the party leader is also the President.

Each party has a party leader, the chairperson. Leaders and governing bodies are elected by party Congresses. In one case, the Republican Party, the leader is elected indirectly by the National Committee from among its members. The Committee, in turn, is elected by the Congress. In most cases the process of nominating leaders is unclear, as is the composition of the party Congress. There are no provisions restricting a party's senior management, which can manipulate the composition of the Congress for its own purposes. In many cases, leadership elections are somewhat formalist. In most of the parties covered in this study, the Chairperson has not changed. In some of them the leader is a formative element of the party (the founder, who is out of contention). Some new parties are trying to introduce real alternation in and/or competition for the party leader position, including the use of intra-party primaries. In the Conservative Party, candidates can be nominated by at least five district leaders; elections are competitive and by secret ballot. The ruling party is organized around its leader, and thus questions about his or her election are not considered important by the members.

In all but two parties, regional and local organizations are established on the basis of broad territorial entities. In some cases their leaders are directly appointed by the central governing bodies, and in others there are mechanisms to subordinate the local leadership to the central office (an Executive Secretary is appointed, or the central office has the right to remove the Chairperson). The Conservative Party differs in this regard, since it takes a bottom-up approach. In no party are there formal provisions to make the leadership follow ethical principles.

Policy development

A party's main political values and goals are normally stated briefly in its statutes or another document ('Basic Values' in the case of the Conservative Party). Some parties have more extensive policy documents that are approved by the party Congress; this is the case for the Labour Party. Others have only election manifestos, which are approved by the party's governing bodies.

How do the parties decide on their policy programme documents? In the Leiborist (Labour) Party, information from party departments and services (such as the service for research and analysis, the public relations service and committees working on particular issues) is collected and analyzed by the Political Committee, and a draft programme document is then produced. This document should be approved by the party conference or Congress. The United National Movement has no programme document, though it is preparing policy documents for forthcoming parliamentary by-elections and local elections. The Republican Party sets up issue-specific teams; party members, depending on their interests, choose which one to join. Drafts are presented for discussion and are sent to other members and regional organizations. Following widespread discussion they are approved at the party Congress. The latter, however, is necessary only for the statutes; for election manifestos the National Committee or Political Council suffices.

In the Union of Georgian Traditionalists, the Political Council creates a programme group and approves a draft document. New Rights institutes special groups to work on specific issues, and the Political Council then approves a draft. The Party leadership of the Industrialists works out main principles and directions of the programme document, which is then developed by groups of specialists and approved by the party Council. Finally, in the Conservative Party the programme is developed by a special commission that is approved by the National Committee or Congress.

Party manifestos and programme documents are barely known outside the party, are never discussed and do not play a significant role in election campaigns, apart from brief slogans used for billboards and television advertising.

Membership

Although the parties would like increase their membership, it is not easy to join most of them. Joining a party often requires first becoming a candidate for membership, securing recommendations from other party members, and finally being accepted by the party's governing body. One of them, the Conservative Party, has completely free membership rules. The ruling party is the most unclear about its membership.

All parties have membership registers but in many cases the number of party members is not disclosed. Membership of an average party is normally given as several thousand, and the ruling party probably has many more. Parties that have open membership policies, or that at least allow local organizations to accept new members, have a larger membership. Others seem to prefer retaining greater control over the party at the expense of increasing the number of members.

No party has figures for the number of women members. Some estimate that 50 per cent of the membership is female, others 30 per cent, and yet others 25 per cent. Although these figures indicate that there are fewer women than men in the parties, there are no quotas or other measures to encourage women to undertake political activity or to promote their presence within the parties.

Party members usually have no formal guarantees that they will be able to influence party policies. Normally they can voice their opinions, receive information on party activities, meet the leadership and stand for election, but there is an absence of procedures to ensure they have decision-making capacity within the party.

Electoral activity: candidates

There are different methods for choosing candidates for presidential and parliamentary elections, as well as for those to self-governing entities. The candidate in presidential elections (when a party decides to nominate its own candidate) is normally the party leader, and thus there is no internal election. Two different approaches are taken in parliamentary elections, for party lists and for majority elections. Majority candidates are normally chosen on the basis of information provided by local organizations. Both party lists and majoritarian candidates are finally decided by the party leadership. The newly established Conservative Party has adopted more comprehensive rules in this regard but has not yet had an opportunity to apply them in practice.

No party applies a quota for women or ethnic minorities. Greater efforts are made to promote youths, and parties usually seek to include representatives of youth branches on their lists. Members of the ruling party are young on average, and the party makes extra effort to attract young members.

Electoral activity: campaigns

All parties plan their electoral campaigns and some create special headquarters for that purpose. They normally provide their candidates with printed material, produce television advertising and so on. Parties use research data, and they train their members and activists in election processes, either independently or with the support of local and international NGOs.

The parties' external relations

The parties international contacts seem to be weak. Most have some links with the Republican and Democratic parties in the United States, but there are few working contacts with European parties or with those in neighbouring countries. Some of them are affiliated to party internationals. No party has well-developed contacts with party foundations. The IRI is reported to be the main international contributor to political party development; it imparts training, provides some international contacts and consults parties on their internal development. Opposition parties have begun to cooperate with each other on specific political issues. The parties expressed an interest in improving their international contacts and receiving more support for their development, International contacts with other parties (especially European parties) are underdeveloped, a circumstance that prompts concern among the parties.

Funding

Parties are mainly financed by individual donations. They also receive some (mostly symbolic) income from membership fees. Election years impose much greater demands for financing than non-election years. Majoritarian candidates in parliamentary elections have to cover a large share of their expenses independently of the party. Those who are included on party lists often provide resources for the party campaign, although for the most part the amount is not specified.

The law requires that political parties disclose their finances and report their campaign spending to the CEC. According to the Law on Political Associations of Citizens, parties should receive direct public funding, but this provision has not been enforced. Parliamentary parties receive GEL 200 per MP, which they use for party financing, although this support is minor.

There are plans to amend the law so as to increase funding for the leading parties as of next year, but the problem of party financing remains acute. There is an urgent need for greater transparency in this respect, especially as regards the ruling party, which often misuses public resources for its own ends.

Challenges and opportunities

Following the Rose Revolution, political parties in Georgia are often perceived as an obstacle to further progress on democracy. There has been little substantive public discussion over the last decade to promote party development. Such development has been left mainly to the 'political market' and the public at large has made few attempts to influence the process.

Political parties would like to have more members than they have now, but usually they have restrictive membership rules. In many parties, aspirants need not only recommendations but also the approval of the party's highest (or second highest) governing body. It seems that the parties prefer to remain restricted organizations rather than open themselves to a new members who might have different views, and who might challenge the ideologies, policies and hierarchy that have developed under the current leadership.

The parties proclaim ideologies, with the exception of the ruling party, which presents itself as a popular movement that represents the whole of society. Most parties describe themselves as right-wing or conservative, and only one as left-wing or centrist. Aside from the extent to which the official ideology is consistent with a party's actual policies, it is clear that there is no left-wing party representing the upper social strata. The ruling party, moreover, which claims to be ideologically impartial, persists with the inherited Soviet means of legitimizing its authority.

Most parties were established to transform the system (to restore independence or change the existing political structure). Three of them (the Labour Party, Industrialists and New Rights) were founded to represent specific economic and social strata (respectively, the lower, middle and upper sectors). The question that arises is what the future holds for political parties in Georgia: should they represent particular social groups or lead structural social change? This question is related to the problems attendant on establishing a stable political system, as well as to the plurality of representation. Should parties have to bargain for specific policies and social interests, or seek power only to bring about changes to the system?

Some of the legal regulations on the parties' internal functioning impose unnecessary constraints on their internal structure, especially as regards the distribution of power in the executive and governing bodies. As a result, parties have broad and representative governing bodies that have almost no real functions or power, and all party activities are managed by the party leader through the party's appointed apparatus. Some parties are markedly dominated by their leaders, while others have endeavoured to be more democratic and innovative in giving greater influence to their members.

Georgia's electoral code is often amended, mostly in the approach to elections and usually in favour of the strongest electoral subjects. Many commentators see the 7 per cent threshold for proportional lists in parliamentary elections as too high and unwarranted by the country's current situation. New parties, which could foster broader public participation and representation, have limited prospects for success.

As regards the influence of the electoral system, the proportional lists used in Georgian parliamentary elections (contrary to expectations) do not provide a basis for greater social representation. The need to register party lists induces politicians to create parties to contest elections, but it does not encourage them to represent social groups or devise specific policies. On the contrary, the parties have to distance themselves from specific groups in order to secure a broader electoral base. Since the proportional system is based on a single constituency, and since there is only one proportional list for the whole country, the links between parties and society are further weakened. Given that post-Soviet societies are quite egalitarian and homogenous, territorial representation is one option that could be pursued in the interests of diversity and pluralism. The system, however, does not provide a basis for developments along those lines. In such an underdeveloped system of representation, it is not surprising that the problem of the political representation of minority groups and certain social sectors remains unresolved.

Internal party democracy may be enhanced if it is linked to an external re-orientation of the parties towards greater representative capacity. There are some positive trends in this regard, and most parties seem open to further discussion and innovation, but such a development requires a favourable external climate for the parties.

Some legislative measures could be taken to put the ruling party on the same footing as the opposition parties. Ethical standards should be promoted, so that society not only reacts to politicians' obvious misdeeds but also that formal regulations deter them from undermining the equality of political rights.

The parties are seeking broader international contacts and would benefit greatly if they were involved in the European political agenda. Such a development would open them to new perspectives for their development, and help make their policies more structured and diversified.

Notes

[1] In the 1999 parliamentary elections, 50 political parties; in the 2002 local elections, 41 parties; in the 2003 parliamentary elections, 22 parties; and in the 2004 parliamentary elections, 20 parties. Source: www.cec.gov.ge.

About International IDEA

Founded in 1995, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization that seeks to promote and develop sustainable democracy world-wide.

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About CSS

The Center for Social Studies (CSS) is an independent research organization, established in 1994. CSS studies processes of post-soviet transformation in Georgia, and is devoted to supporting democratization and civil society development. The Center's activities in the past year focused on the promotion of political parties' development in Georgia.

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