

Georgian parliamentary elections and geopolitical situation in Caucasus

Interview with Wakhtang Maisaia¹

Aleksandra Gryźlak: First of all I would like to ask for your commentary on the recent parliamentary elections in Georgia and the spectacular victory of the Georgian Dream coalition. Was their victory a surprise to you?

Wakhtang Maisaia: As a matter of fact, it was a surprise to me. In the Georgian political sphere there were very few coherent political parties or movements capable of dealing with various challenges facing the country. Georgian Dream (GD) is also not a real party, but part of a coalition composed of over 60 political movements. At the beginning of the election campaign, it was torn to pieces – several political parties decided to leave the coalition, for example the Republican Party, the Free Democrats, the National Forum and the Georgian Greens. On the other hand, the Georgian Conservative Party and Social Democrats remained key allies for Georgian Dream. But nevertheless, GD competed in the election alone.

Moreover, in this election, we had a strong opposition – the United National Movement (UNM). This is the party of former President Mikheil Saakashvili and his harsh authoritarian regime, which made the lives of Georgian citizens less stable and much more volatile. Thanks to President Saakashvili, Georgia lost 20% of its territory and was directly threatened by Russia. As a matter of fact, Georgia and Russia are still in a formal state of war – the Sarkozy-Putin-Saakashvili agreement was only a cease fire and not a real peace treaty. Russia is continuing its hybrid warfare, as it did before. Both Ukraine and Georgia were targeted by one-by-one scenarios. This was due to Saakashvili's totally non-strategic policy. This was one of the reasons why he lost the elections in 2012. The result for the UNM is an illustration of this trend.

This year, for the first time in Georgia since the 1995 elections, we have a three-party parliament. Apart from the above mentioned Georgian Dream (115 seats) and United National Movement (27 seats) a third party also won seats in the new parliament – the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG), a new party which obtained 5 seats. There is also 1 seat for a member elected in constituency – a former KGB general from the pro-Russian, Industry Will Save Georgia party. These elections were also interesting on a regional level, namely in Adjara Autonomous

¹ Interview was conducted on the 15th of November 2016. Dr Maisaia stayed in Warsaw as a visiting lecturer at the “Eastern Studies” program at the Centre for East European Studies University of Warsaw.

Republic, which held elections for regional parliament. Four parties won seats – GD, UNM, APG and the United Democrats, led by Nino Burjanadze.

Returning to the general elections – the result is that one party has an absolute, constitutional majority. APG will probably be supporting GD against UNM. It is worth noting that after the 2012 elections, the United National Movement was practically destroyed and was in huge crisis. Saakashvili was ousted from the party leadership position and one of the groupings inside the party, the so-called “Bokeria-Ugulava fraction”, gained the main leadership positions and are now trying to change the party and do away with Saakashvili’s heritage.

After the recent elections, we can also see parties in crisis. One example is the Free Democrats party, which, after leaving the GD coalition and running separately in the elections, didn’t get any seats. The party leader, Irakli Alasania, and other top members, like Alexandre Petriashvili, Giorgi Sagareishvili, Zurab Abashidze and Victor Dolidze, decided to resign from their positions. Alasania took full responsibility for the party’s defeat and the rest of the leaders could see no future for the Free Democrats. This caused a massive crisis inside the party.

When it comes to the Republican Party the situation is even worse. This formation began in the 1970s, as an underground, anti-communist dissident movement, with activists such as Levan and David Berdzenishvili, Vakhtang Dzabiradze or David Usupashvili. Many of its leaders were political prisoners during the Soviet period. It seems like it has always been on the modern Georgian political scene – always with an unchanging liberal and democratic programme, including its values. They have a very clear liberal-democratic line. This distinguishes the party from all others in Georgia. After running independently and losing the election, the Republicans are just on the verge of survival as a political party. David Usupashvili, the former chairman of parliament, Tina Kidasheli, and many of the party leaders, left the movement. Only the Berdzenishvili brothers have remained at the top of the Republican Party structure.

Therefore, the two parties considered to be the most democratic and modern, practically disappeared from Georgia’s political mainstream. The only balancing force which remained and survived this hard, tough campaign, and the subsequent elections, is Nino Burjanadze’s United Democrats.

I participated in the elections as an observer, registered in the Central Election Commission. The vote took place in a calm and stable environment. It was described by international observers as fair, despite a few exceptional incidents.

The former parliamentary term, in the years 2012-2016, was dominated by a fierce clash between the GD and the UNM. This caused most political and administrative potential, as well as energy, to be spent in this never-ending battle. The reform process was stunted, and parliament did not act as it is intended to; to face many internal and external problems. Now the situation is different, the ruling party has all the political leverage and UNM can no longer be blamed for

disturbances. It means that after these elections, Georgian Dream takes full responsibility for the country's development. If it should fail, in four years Georgian society will respond at the polls and GD will most likely lose the 2020 election.

A.G.: Constitutional majority in the hands of Georgian Dream and strong popular legitimization – might this be a danger for democracy in Georgia, like in 2008?

W.M.: Now, they have strong legitimization from the nation. Interesting thing is – despite the fact that some parties and movements left the ruling coalition – Georgian Dream is still not a classical political party, more like a broad movement. It is not homogenous, but an umbrella conglomerate of fractions and groupings. The constitutional majority in the hands of such a “colourful” and internally divided movement is not the same as it was back in 2008, when the majority was in the hands of a very homogeneous party with a strong single-person leadership. When United National Movement had constitutional majority, it was like a Soviet-type parliament. Now we have two opposition parties – they are a real opposition and GD is not like the UNM.

A.G.: Bidzina Ivanishvili, the main face of the election in 2012, the founder and sponsor of Georgian Dream, after one year as Georgia's prime minister, decided to abandon his post and retreat into the shadows. The main political seats in the country are occupied by people without their own political backing and real influence in the GD. Ivanishvili seems to be pulling the strings from backstage, without taking political responsibility. Could this cause problems for Georgia's democracy?

W.M.: Bidzina Ivanishvili, as far as I know, wished to play according to democratic rules. Unfortunately he decided to leave official politics. The problem in Georgia is that our society is still strongly influenced by the Soviet legacy. When Ivanishvili left office, people in the GM, but also voters, were absolutely paralyzed and scared. The Soviet legacy means that people were waiting for the next Tsar or first secretary – one important person that tells them exactly what to do. It is like the Soviet patronage system. Unfortunately, it is true that Ivanishvili was making some decisions from behind the political scene, but I believe that this was not done willingly and he was forced to do so, because no one else wanted to. I could compare this to the situation of the former prime minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, who after leaving his post in 1990, was the unofficial “senior minister” or “minister mentor”. Maybe also the case of Deng Xiaoping in China. We can see that this could be applicable to Bidzina Ivanishvili's case. He is someone who – to

some part of society and the political elite – is looking at problems from a different, more social position. However, it is not the will of Ivanishvili, but a political necessity, resulting from the prejudice of Georgian society, diseased with Soviet thinking. It has a huge influence on political culture in Georgia. Maybe the next generation will be absolutely free of these prejudices and mentality. What we have now is very difficult to change.

A.G.: What about the alleged pro-Russian and anti-Western attitude of Ivanishvili himself and the Georgian Dream elite? We have seen many steps taken by the ruling party towards normalizing relations with Russia, some of which were considered to be too far going. On the other hand, the pro-Western line has been maintained. Is it simply geopolitical pragmatism, or a real pro-Russian course that could endanger the country's independence?

W.M.: I can assure you that, in contrast to what we might observe in Moldova and partially in Ukraine, Georgia has a totally different attitude. Georgian society is not anti-Russian, but definitely anti-Kremlin. Sentiments against Vladimir Putin and his policies are very strong in Georgia. This was expressed in the recent elections – parties which expressed pro-Russian views and arguments lost, and gained very small numbers of votes. Examples of this trend are parties like, Industry Will Save Georgia or United Democrats. All parties in the new parliament reflect a very pro-Western vision of the future of Georgia, including the Alliance of Georgian Patriots. The only exception is the one future member elected in constituency representing the Industry Will Save Georgia party. Despite some irritation with the slow process of NATO and EU integration, in all polls, Georgian society continues to express its willingness to join both organizations.

Russia failed with its so-called “soft power” in Georgia. The Russia-sponsored think-tanks and media propaganda all failed. Now the Kremlin is conducting more “hard power” projects. President Putin signed a very interesting agreement which was ratified by the State Duma. The agreement was officially signed between Russia and the so-called “government of Abkhazia” concerning the merger of their military armed forces. Based on this document, Russia has already started to create a special Abkhazian-Russian military formation inside Abkhazia under Russian command. It is approximately 20,000 servicemen strong. A similar thing happened in South Ossetia, where all de facto military forces were subordinated to Russian command. They simply merged with the Russian Federation’s army. This means that Russia started the annexation of Georgia. It clearly implicates how Moscow started to implement instruments of “hard power” on Tbilisi to force society to change their minds. Economic sanctions are yet another instrument of this new strategy. Some Russian ministries and agencies have limited exports of Georgian

products to the Russian Federation. We can observe how the Kremlin is using cyber warfare to achieve its geopolitical goals. NATO includes cyber terrorism as a means of “hard power” and as an element of hybrid warfare.

A.G.: In connection to Russia’s policy towards the South Caucasus, a very important event took place this year, namely the so-called “Four-Day War” between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the mountainous Karabakh region and the territories separating it from Azerbaijan. We observed an interesting shift in the current alliances in the region – Russia did not support Armenia. Yerevan lost, which caused mass protests and chaos in the country. Russia didn’t even criticize Baku. For the last 2-3 years, we can see that Ilham Aliyev is moving closer and closer to Moscow – perceiving it as the only stabilizing force in an unstable environment. Winning this petty war gave a strong boost to Aliyev’s regime. What is your opinion on what we can observe right now and what implications it will have on the South Caucasus?

W.M.: This situation of course could lead to more anti-Russian sentiment in Armenia. Unfortunately, this country, despite the war, is becoming more Russia-oriented. Its political elites, including the opposition forces, supported this line. The opposition was sometimes even more pro-Moscow than the ruling elite, the so-called “Karabakh Clan”. The truth is that they simply have no other choice. Geopolitically they are bound to Russia. When it comes to Azerbaijan, their problems concern Turkey and its internal shift towards an autocracy – very religious, very unpredictable and despite what some might imagine, in close cooperation with the Kremlin. Baku, like Armenia, is becoming a state in a geopolitical deadlock and has no other option than to orient itself towards Moscow. The drastic change in Aliyev’s policy was exceptionally visible this year in August, during the summit held in Baku. The leaders of Russia, Iran and Azerbaijan created a new regional energy and security forum, which is to be prolonged at the beginning of 2017, during a summit in Teheran. The leaders of these countries decided that such a partnership would allow them to fulfil and realize their geopolitical, security and geostrategic interests. Moreover, this cooperation is oriented towards the war in Syria, where Russia and Iran set up a coalition. A similar coalition – a short term agreement concerning very specific interests in the Caucasus region – was also created during the summit in Baku.

The detente in Russian-Turkish relations and similarities between both regimes also creates a very difficult situation for Georgia. It is becoming a state in a landlocked area, surrounded by hostile alliances. The situation resembles Georgia’s geostrategic position in January 1921, when the Bolsheviks had already invaded

the North Caucasus, Azerbaijan and Armenia. Georgia, at that time, was the only independent “island”. Bolshevik Russia wanted to seize Georgia – and it finally did. The southern border was no better. Turkey was also hostile and the Anatolian government also invaded Georgia and took control of 30% of its territory. After the double invasion, Ankara and Moscow made a deal, and Georgia became part of the Soviet state. Unfortunately for Georgia, the present situation is very much similar – the North Caucasus is under strict Russian control, to a much larger extent than it was in the 1990s. Armenia and Azerbaijan perceive Moscow as their best geopolitical ally. Georgia is encircled. Now we have only one hope – the creation of the so-called “NATO Black Sea Naval Task Force”, which was a Romanian proposal to NATO Headquarters. Perhaps it could help Georgia to somehow counterbalance Russia’s large engagement in the region. We also lay our hopes in strategic cooperation with the United States, with whom we have a strategic agreement. Georgia is defined by US foreign policy as one of the so-called “pivotal states”. In 2009, we signed the Strategic Partnership Charter with the US. These are the ways in which we can ensure some sense of balance. Russia is trying to expand its influence and only the West can provide protection. That also includes Poland, for which we are very grateful.

A.G.: You have mentioned the strategic cooperation with the United States. Are you afraid that this could change after the recent elections in America? What will President Trump mean for Georgia?

W.M.: Despite the fact that during his campaign Donald Trump was more on board with the so-called “neo-isolationist” foreign policy course, I guess we should not expect any drastic change in US-Georgia relations, at least not in the first part of his term. I believe that Trump’s administration will follow its predecessor’s policy towards pivotal states and strategic partners. I guess Trump will utilize the selective engagement strategy as a part of a global mission, just like Barack Obama and George W. Bush, before him. Selective engagement with Trump’s administration may of course mean that US domination may be slightly diminished. I am also worried that it could lead to the acceptance of multilateralism and a return to so-called “spheres of interests” in the world order, which absolutely coincides with the Kremlin’s vision of foreign policy. Trump’s first telephone conversation with Vladimir Putin may imply this. Nevertheless, I think that the US will remain a power leverage in the South Caucasus region, at least in connection with the Black Sea security dimension. I believe that combating international terrorism and international organized crime will remain at the heart of American policy makers’ interests. My Georgian colleagues and I hope that Trump will not lose interest in the Caucasus region. Barack Obama described this region as one of the strategic

regions vital for US security, included in the National Security Concept Strategy in 2015. Georgian soldiers serve in Afghanistan as part of our contribution to collective security strategy.

A.G.: Putin might test the new American president, check his engagement. Let's hope it will not happen in Georgia.

W.M.: That is true. Every time Putin probes and tests, he is always pushing forward and checking how far he can go. Unfortunately, despite our hopes, some serious changes must also be taken into account. Trump's administration may focus on the internal situation and forget about global hegemony and uni-polarity – something that was a key provision for Obama and Bush. We'll have to wait and see.

A.G.: You mentioned Russia's control over the North Caucasus. It is a very diverse and complicated region, unfortunately, known mostly for its terrorist activity. What is the actual terrorist threat in the region at the moment? Is there any possibility of the revival of the Caucasian Emirate terrorist organization? Do local groupings have any connections with ISIL and are they strong enough to perform any large-scale terrorist attacks?

W.M.: There is no possibility of such a strong organization as the Caucasian Emirate coming back to life. We may say that it was relegated to the dustbin of history. When it comes to local groupings, there are some insurgent groups affiliated with the ISIL leadership, and some of them are even part of ISIL formations. Examples are Vilayet Gurjistan or Vilayet Caucasus, which not only operated in the North Caucasus, but also in the South Caucasus. We have a large number of Salafi supporters in Azerbaijan, and ISIL affiliated groups are present in what is de facto Abkhazia. Recently, one of them committed a terrorist act – one of its members blew himself up in front of the building of a local TV station. Much will depend on the ongoing military operations in Mosul, Aleppo and Rakka. But everything indicates that ISIL's presence in the region will increase.

Apart from the so-called "Islamic State", we can also observe the presence of the Taliban in the Caucasus. It is using our region for drug transit, mostly heroin. In 2014, the Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs seized a transport of 3 tonnes of liquid heroin belonging to the Taliban. Drugs are a huge source of income for them. The above-mentioned groups, so far, may seem dormant, but their presence in the Caucasus is evident and strong.

A.G.: In the 1990s, terrorism in the North Caucasus began as an evolution of the Chechen War – terrorism was local and oriented against the Russian

state. It might have seemed attractive because of the very difficult economic and social situation in the region, because of the oppressive policy of the local Russian power structures. The Russian state had nothing to offer young Caucasians. The revival of radical Islam was not the source of terrorist activity. Now, the situation has dramatically changed.

W.M.: That is absolutely true. Russia dramatically changed its strategy in the North Caucasus. First of all, it has pacified Chechnya with Kadyrov's puppet regime. Russian military presence in the region has vastly increased. Moscow's rhetoric and tactics have changed. Before, the menace was political Islam, nowadays it is NATO proximity. They have to respond to their fears of NATO taking control in the region. Put simply – the enemy has changed.

By the way, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed strong concerns about joint NATO-Georgian military exercise held at the Krsanisi National Training Centre, near Tbilisi. In their statement, we can read that the exercise poses a serious threat to regional stability and peace. It is hard to imagine. Due to such events, Russia is increasing its military involvement in the North Caucasus. It is also due to the hybrid warfare still going on in Donbas. The benchmark of this operation is Operational Central Command of the South and, of course, one of the main directions is to increase military pressure on Georgia. By doing so, Russia is also increasing its presence in the Black Sea region, which is the southern flank of NATO. This is part of a new game against NATO. Right now they use slogans of an anti-terrorist operation in Syria, while back home the real enemy is NATO.

A.G.: What about the terrorist threat in Georgia and Azerbaijan? Citizens of both countries have joined ISIL. You have mentioned the increasing presence of radical groups also in the South Caucasus. Do they pose a serious threat?

W.M.: In recent days, we received the news that already the twenty-fifth Georgian has been killed in Mosul. According to data from the Georgian State Security Service, fifty Georgian citizens fled to Syria. But according to my sources, that number definitively exceeds fifty and is closer to around four hundred people, who went to Syria and are involved not only with ISIL, but also other organizations such as Jabhat al-Nusra and Junud al-Sham. Even the expeditionary corps of the Caucasus Islamic Emirate fought in this war. Islamic radicals from Georgia play an important role in the Syrian war. I can provide a good example – a citizen of Georgia, from Pankisi Gorge region – Abu Omar al-Shishiani, also known as Tarkhan Batirashvili – was a very influential military commander of the Islamic State in Syria and its defence minister. Presently, his brother, Tamaz Batirashvili, has become his successor. Another influential warlord from Georgia, who plays a

very important role in the Junud al-Sham formations in Syria, is Murad Margoshvili, known as Muslim Abu Walid al-Shishiani. There are many such influential and active Georgians there.

A.G.: Do they get radicalized in Georgia?

W.M.: Yes, they presumably become radicals in Georgia. They get recruited via Turkey, and there they get all the necessary information and transit routes to get to Syria. They usually leave with their families. The regions of Georgia where they originate from are mostly Pankisi Gorge, Adjara and Kvemo Kartli. Kvemo Kartli is interesting, as it is a region with a large Azeri Shia population and at the moment it is the most radicalized place in Georgia. Pankisi Gorge, on the border with Chechnya, was influenced by two counter-terrorist operations, during which Georgian forces managed to arrest many jihadist and Salafi radicals – several thousand of them. Kvemo Kartli is much more vulnerable to Salafi indoctrination. It is a poor, socially backwards region, where religious affiliation was previously very low. That makes it perfect ground for radicals to act and recruit new followers.

A.G.: This year you wrote an article for the Polish journal “Ante Portas – Studia nad Bezpieczeństwem”, concerning revision of Russian military strategy. There was interesting information concerning the new model of using private military companies for outside military operations planned by the Russian Army. What does this mean for world security?

W.M.: The law concerning this matter has already been adopted in Russia. Many Syrians are paid through these companies. This started with another Russian law, adopted in 2006, allowing key corporations, such as for example Rosneft or Gazprom, to have private armies for protecting their infrastructure and strategic assets abroad. Yet another legal document concerning this matter has been amended, and according to this amendment, Russian contract serviceman can be temporarily suspended from active duty to be hired for foreign missions.

A.G.: Does it mean “green men”?

W.M.: Yes, that means “green men” and no responsibility of the Russian military or political leadership. Unofficially they will be acting according to orders and plans issued by Russian army commanders. They will keep their Russian Army ranks, salaries and so on. Officially they are mercenaries having nothing to do with the Russian state. By the way, there is also one interesting element in the new Russian Military Doctrine, signed by President Putin in 2015. Paragraph 32 of this document talks about what Russian military forces should be engaging in during

peacetime. According to this paragraph, their mission should be the protection of Russian economic interests all around the world. That is remarkable and unseen.

A.G.: I can't help but ask you about your opinion concerning the latest decision of Mikheil Saakashvili to abandon his post as governor of Odessa Oblast, and his plans to build a new political party, calling for early elections in Ukraine. In Ukraine, he is associated mostly with victory in an anti-corruption war in Georgia. Do you think he can be successful in Ukrainian politics?

W.M.: Saakashvili got rid of corruption in Georgia, but only at a low level. Corruption within the ruling elite increased. I will give you just one example. David Kezerashvili, Georgian politician, former defence minister and Saakashvili's close ally, when he came into power, was only a young university graduate and he literally had just a single penny to his name. After leaving his ministerial post, he opened an account in one of the free trade zones worth two billion dollars in bonds. Where and how did he make this money? But to answer your question, I don't believe in Saakashvili's success in Ukraine.

A.G.: Do you think that if the United National Movement were to win an election there would be any chance of Saakashvili's return to the Georgian political scene?

W.M.: In my opinion, the chance for his return are close to zero. First of all, the UNM elites reject Saakashvili. He has been absolutely removed from the party. To the UNM, the image of Mikheil Saakashvili is very dangerous and all this time, since 2012, they have been working very hard to distance themselves from his legacy. To Georgia and Georgians, Saakashvili is ancient history.

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