Georgia: More Crises to Come, More Democracy Needed

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Georgia has been in a continuous political crisis for the past two years. It is actually a chain of small crises, each of which burst from the embers of the previous one and each more serious than the last. The feeling in the country is that more crises are to be expected. Most of the 3.7 million Georgians deplore this situation, but at least the population can express their discontent and show the government and the political forces that they have to work for the Georgian people if they want to stay in or come to power. One can be less *democratic-optimistic* and think that the country is on the verge of forgetting its dreams of liberty, after having been the first one in the post-Soviet area to have had a political transition through election (Baltic States excepted), in 2012.

The direct roots of these crises lie in the governance that Bidzina Ivanishvili, an oligarch that became a billionaire five times over in Russia in the 1990s, has established since 2012. After the parliamentary election on the 1st of October of that year, his newly created party *Kartuli Otsneba* (*Georgian Dream*, or GD) won 83 of the 150 seats in the national assembly. But year after year, Georgians could see how Ivanishvili was taking a kind of personal control of the state and how ambiguous his relations with Russia were. But other roots of the crises must be sought in the mixed legacy of the former President Mikhail Saakashvili (2004 – 2013), which left a politically controlled judiciary system and an imperfect parliamentary system (that no one criticizes on its principles), but also a government back on its feet and the precedent of a ruling party leaving power just because it lost an election.

The beginning of the current chain of crises is easy to identify: on June 20th 2019, the Russian State Duma MP Sergey Gavrilov sat in the chair of the Chairman of the Georgian Parliament Irakli Kobakhidze. That triggered the anger of some opposition MPs[1], and then a months-long civic protest movement. Gavrilov, a member of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, was in Georgia to attend the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy. That day, he was asked to make an opening statement and didn't see a problem in sitting in the abovementioned chair, despite having himself voted in 2008 for the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Russia. The night before, he enjoyed the Georgian hospitality offered by Kobakhidze, Ivanishvili's trusted man in the Parliament, who didn't see it as problematic to have a drink with a politician from a country that "occupies"[2] 20% of Georgia's land.

"Gavrilov's Night [the name given to the protests – ed.] and the Russian side of what Georgia has been experiencing for the past two years was just the spark, and only a part of the global picture that led to this chain of crises," explains the opposition politician MP Elene Khoshtaria[3], who was the one who took the initiative to dislodge Gavrilov from the chairman's seat on June 20th, 2019. The way that the GD government handled the situation, by trying to not irritate Russia and using the opportunity to weaken the opposition and jail some of its leaders, but also by resorting to police brutality to disperse the protests that lasted for months, continued to nurture the nascent crisis and deepen it. "For me, the core reason that led to this kind of permanent crisis lies in the fact that Ivanishvili has captured almost all the state institutions since he came to power. There are no other ways now for Georgians to express their discontent other than going out into the street and shouting," says Khoshtaria.[4]

Indeed, GD and Ivanishvili's people have been appointed in

most of the key state institutions: the judiciary system ("the administration of the judiciary is entirely in the hands of a narrow group of influential judges, which is referred to as the so-called clan", reads a Transparency International recent report[5]), the prosecutor's office, the election administration, the media, the security services, etc. Since 2012, several ministers have been simply Ivanishvili's former employees, such as the current Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, the Minister of Internal Affairs Vakhtang Gomerauli, and the two last Ministers of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs Davit Sergeenko and Ekaterine Tikaradze.

Still, GD enjoys significant support from the population, despite a poor economic record. According to World Bank data, for example, the national GDP[6] and the GDP per capita[7] increased by only 6% between 2012 and 2019. "We observe no signs of GD's decline in our opinion surveys. GD remains far ahead of the main opposition parties, with 31% of the respondents saying that GD is the party closest to them according to our last polls. The image of Bidzina Ivanishvili remains stable as well, although not great. I think he manages to get the support of the people who support the pro-western course of the country but don't want to be in confrontation with Russia," says Koba Turmanidze[8], the president of the Caucasus Research and Resource Center (CRRC).

"The problem for GD and Ivanishvili, without whom the party is nothing, is that they have exhausted all their resources," thinks Nodar Kharshiladze[9] from the Georgian Strategic Analysis Center (GSAC). "GD gets around 40% of the votes during elections, but that is the case partly because there has been a strategy for 9 years now to increase the number of Georgians who receive their salary from the state or from new semi-governmental organizations and companies. So this exhaustion of GD's electoral resources makes its life more and

more difficult at every new election. And that's why we fear that more crises are to come." In this context, Gavrilov's Night would not have triggered such anger and the subsequent chain of crises if the government had been able to deal with the scarcity of jobs, poverty, and inflation – Georgians' three main problems.

GD has lost a lot of credibility in the past two years. In 2012, Ivanishvili's party arrived on the Georgian political arena as a brand new political force, portraying itself as an anti-Saakashvili model: non-brutal (one should remember the scandal of the videos on prison abuse that were leaked two weeks before the 2012 election) and more committed to democracy (in the media sphere, election integrity, etc.). After Gavrilov's Night, and several other incidents, GD appears to have repeated most of the mistakes of the Saakashvili era, and others as well: the use of brutality (during the repression of the June 19th and then November 2019 rallies), total control over the judiciary system, the imprisonment of a handful of political opponents on dubious charges and through equally dubious legal procedures, pressure on the media,[10] resorting to non-democratic methods to avoid losing an election (as was the case between the two rounds of the 2018 Presidential election),[11] etc.

In this context, on the 31st of October, the last parliamentary election became another link in the chain of crises that Georgia has been experiencing for two years. None of the elected MPs from the opposition, no matter which party they belong to, agreed to sit in the new assembly, saying that the vote was rigged by the use of administrative resources, pressure on some segments of society, etc. It was a new crisis in the series of crises. It became so embarrassing that the government finally accepted EU mediation by the European Council President Charles Michel himself after his special appointee Christian Danielsson failed to reach an agreement.

On April 18th, a deal was concluded between the ruling party and the opposition. Among other things, the elected opposition MPs agreed to sit in the Parliament on the conditions that political prisoners would be released and also that if GD received less than 43% of the votes during the local election next October, then snap parliamentary elections would have to be organized in 2022. Elene Khoshtaria, for example, refused the deal, telling us that "the EU and Michel wanted to end the crisis first of all, but without addressing its real roots, starting with a deep reform of the electoral code."[12] This last question is indeed a key issue in the chain of crises, being already a core demand of the protestors after Gavrilov's Night. To end that *first crisis*, Ivanishvili promised to adopt a fully proportional system. But he took his words back five months later, and thus triggered new heated protests in front of the Parliament building in Tbilisi.

The "43% rule" could become a headache for GD and trigger a new crisis next fall. Indeed, the former Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia decided to quit GD last February, after the ruling party launched a large-scale special police operation to arrest Nika Melia (leader of the main opposition party, Saakashvili's UNM), and then to create his own political movement. The very first day after his sensational announcement, the Georgian population seemed eager to follow him. It seems unlikely to us that Gakharia's party will actually become strong, but even if it receives 3 or 5% of the votes in these upcoming local elections, it could be enough to put GD below the 43% threshold decided with Michel. "That could trigger a new crisis, because GD and Ivanishvili don't seem willing to accept defeat and, as I said, they have exhausted their resources and can't expect much more than 35-40% of the votes. In the meantime, the opposition hasn't managed to fill the vacuum left by GD. People don't trust the opposition either," explains with pessimism Nodar Kharshiladze.[13]

This vacuum has led to a crisis that is not only developing among political actors, but that has been shifting down to the citizens, many of whom don't see themselves represented by any political forces. In a survey last December, 54% of the respondents declared that they support "no party," "refused to answer," or "don't know"[14]. This crisis, the government's incapacity to solve people's issues and the dead end in which the whole political system is locked, are probably the main reasons for this series of demonstrations of people's anger, whether against the Namakhvani HPP project, the strikes in many companies (often for better salaries), the recent violence in Dmanisi, etc.

[1] From the *European Georgia* party and the *United National Movement* (of the former President Mikhail Saakashvili).

[2] I refer here to law n°431 *on occupied territories*, adopted by the Georgian Parliament in October 2008.

[3] Interview, April 23rd 2021, Tbilisi.

[4] Interview, April 23rd 2021, Tbilisi.

[5] "The State of the Judicial System 2016-2020", October 2020.

[6] https://data.worldbank.org/country/georgia

[7] https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=GE

[8] Interview, April 27th 2021, Tbilisi.

[9] Interview, May 14th 2021, Tbilisi.

[10] "The government is actively using its influence on the judicial and law enforcement systems against critical media,

including with the aim of putting pressure on the owners and management of TV companies, or their family members," reads another recent Transparency International report.

[11] As Salome Zourabichvili, an independent candidate endorsed by GD, was in a very unfavorable situation after the first round, because the Saakashvili party's candidate Grigol Vashadze was supported by the other main opposition parties, Ivanishvili promised to personally pay off 600,000 loans that the Georgian population was struggling to repay. The promise was due to take effect after the second round. It was enough to get Zourabichvili elected President, and the loans were indeed repaid by the end of 2018. In the second round, Vashadze received more or less the number of votes that he had in the first round plus the ones of the allied party that called to vote for him, while Zourabichvili saw the number of ballots cast for her doubled.

[12] Interview, April 23rd 2021, Tbilisi.

[13] Interview, May 14th 2021, Tbilisi.

[14] "Public Attitudes in Georgia Results of December 2020 telephone survey", NDI, CRRC, British embassy, UK-Aid, p.64.