

## **The Democratic Landscape in Georgia after September 11**

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Six months after the terrible attack on the World Trade Center, and as the international community discusses the question of whether Osama bin Laden may have found a refuge in Georgia, I remember a popular phrase among Georgian democrats: "Georgia will be a democratic state or it will not be a state at all." The news, which comes from Russian sources, is viewed with skepticism and suspicion by Georgians and the world community. But, at the same time, no one can ignore the possibility of its validity. After ten years of independence, the Georgian government is very weak at controlling its borders and the different regions within them.

Before September 11, a situation prevailed in countries like Georgia that concerned the West, but this was a different kind of concern than we see today. Prior to the attack, the West viewed Georgia in terms of geopolitical competition with Russia. All of our shortcomings were seen as faults which would eventually be cured by a reduction in Russian influence. Pipelines, corridors, and other big economic projects were considered the main tools to strengthen the statehood of Georgia and other similar countries.

The West preferred to pursue geopolitics rather than democracy, explaining that democracy needs stability in order to grow. That is why the West has supported President Eduard Shevardnadze despite numerous violations of civil and political rights during the presidential elections in April 2000. That is also why the West has considered the government of Georgia legitimate despite the entire state apparatus's refusal to serve the people of Georgia. This raises the question of whether or not democracy is in conflict with geopolitics. But a new set of questions - questions of stability - has also been raised since September 11. Is it worth supporting non democratic leaders simply because they support the fight against terrorism? Is stability a reality if a country's political institutions fail to provide equal opportunity for citizens to participate in the decision-making process?

The reactions of Georgians watching the Twin Towers collapse were far different from the reactions in Palestine, but I did observe a certain cynicism in many people in Georgia - a very poor country - towards the tragedy in America - the richest country in the world. Many in Georgia saw the tragedy not in terms of values but in terms of 'world influence', 'economic interests', and 'imperialism', words more comprehensible to Georgians than 'democracy', 'human rights', and 'social contract'.

Georgians and people in the West can blame our Soviet heritage as the main source of our political apathy, nihilism, and cynicism, but we also need to ask ourselves what we expect from people who were never asked about their desires and wishes. We were pleased when President Shevardnadze declared his very suspicious "Pro-western Policy", but no one, whether in the West or in democratic circles in Georgia, truly cared about the feelings and thoughts of ordinary Georgians. Did we do enough to clarify to ordinary people that they needed to change not only their economic system but also their style of political (and not necessarily socio-cultural) life?

We have been forgetting that the path from a totalitarian past to a democratic future lies in the involvement of people in the political process and we have been trusting political leaders more than people themselves. As a result, the unresponsive attitude in Georgia towards September 11 can be explained in the following way: there is a gap not only between the Georgian people and a corrupted government, but also between the Georgian people and the West that supports that government.

The sort of aid that the West has offered Georgia also calls for its own justification, and seeing time and stability as the only remedies for our disease has but resulted in an erroneous belief in economic aid. Offering vast amounts of money to the corrupted government of Georgia has made ordinary people no less confused, and this problem is only made worse by the fact that, because of the weakness of democratic political institutions, this money is funneled into the private pockets of government officials. Comparing the amount of resources provided for government-led programs (even under the control of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank) to funds that went directly into fragile democratic institutions, like NGOs and the media, could serve as an important way of analyzing this problem.

As I conclude this essay, having mostly blamed the West and having said only a little about our own defects, I realize the obligation that Western democracies have: to be responsible for both the shortcomings of their own policies and the failures of countries like Georgia. q

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