

POLITICS

CLIENTELISM IN GEORGIA (REVIEW OF THE THREE PREVIOUS ELECTIONS)

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to examine clientelism in Georgian politics. It is one of the most severe cases of corruption since it substantially assists in establishing an anti-democratic regime in the state. Clientelism has been seen as a corollary of democracy, especially in the early phases of democratization. After 30 years of attempting to bring Georgia closer to European principles and complete integration with the West, Georgian politics has been dominated by informal ties that cause significant damage to state institutions. This study investigates politically motivated corruption-related activities using various sources and documentary materials. Additional factors that influence the creation of clientelism are also taken into account.

Keywords: politics, democracy, democratization, corruption, principles, aims, integration, regime, corollary

Introduction

Georgia's early years of independence at the end of the twentieth century have been harsh. The high level of corruption in these years echoes the systemic ties formed during the Soviet period. (Robinson, 2007) According to some scholars, the former Soviet nomenclature significantly contributed to the "Christmas coup" (1991), which caused great chaos and ended with the election of Eduard Shevardnadze as head of government. (Kikabize & Losaberidze) He implemented reforms and established a political regime allowing civil and political freedom. Despite this, the actual power was in the hands of a narrow elite, for whom "The Citizens' Union of Georgia" served as a formal umbrella. Shevardnadze's political regime was built on a network of clientelistic ties encompassing him. Coopting members from various interest groups into the power elite and preserving the balance between them was vital to the new political system. Therefore, this made Shevardnadze a feeble but indispensable leader. (Nodia & Scholtbach, 2006) Power was distributed according to clan principles, and the government during this period was characterized by a high degree of corruption and neo-patrimonial practices. One of the salient features of a civil servant was loyalty rather than professionalism or experience. (Gherasimov, 2019)

With the prevailing social, economic, and political crises, discontent in Georgian society was growing. The Rose Revolution of 2003 was a logical response to the ongoing crisis. With newly appointed elections, the "United National Movement" came to power under the leadership of Mikhail Saakashvili. Personal loyalty remained one of the priorities of the system created by Saakashvili, along with the Western education of employees. (Gherasimov, 2019) In the first years of Saakashvili's rule, he implemented essential reforms that strengthened state institutions and reduced the corruption rate. However, the issue of informal relations at the highest levels of government remained a severe challenge. (Kupatadze, 2018)

As a result of the 2012 elections, the Georgian Dream coalition, whose leader was Bidzina Ivanishvili, formed the new government. Nevertheless, he centralized power within his inner circle, and this group was called the "Old Guard" because of their style of governance. (Gherasimov, 2019) Personal allegiance was still a prerequisite for promotion. (Aprasidze & Siroky, 2020) Under the Georgian Dream regime, issues related to the shadow government, fragile state institutions, informal political ties, and elite corruption became urgent. Informal practices, such as political clientelism, still occur during elections, especially in majoritarian districts.

Using data from the country's most recent three elections, this paper looks for and analyzes patterns of political clientelism. The primary focus will be on the ruling party's election strategies due to the limited capabilities to monitor this phenomenon. Most of the data required for the research is from NGO reports that reflect information regarding the pre-election period and cover corruption and patrimonialism in the country. Attention was also devoted to indicators such as financial assets received or spent by political parties or further activities carried out during the previous elections. The first part of the paper lays out the theoretical and conceptual framework of the research subject. The following section contains information on the publications created around Georgian political clientelism. The third part presents the data required for the research and its analysis. The paper's conclusion highlights the key points and discusses the characteristics of modern Georgian clientelism as well as the causes of its existence.

What is clientelism?

Clientelism is an age-old phenomenon. Its establishment is based on an unequal trade with inequitable access to state resources as its foundation. (Sousa, 2008) Scholars describe clientelism as a trans-system phenomenon - instead of one particular social group, its emergence occurred in different periods of history, in entirely different states, regimes, or societies. While adapting to a democratic system, the main task of the clientele is to mobilize political support for benefits in return, and most citizens perceive its consequences as destructive to the basic principles underlying democracy. (Gherghina & Nemcok, 2021) Despite the various descriptions, three main features of this phenomenon are acknowledged:

The unequal connection between patron and client
The exchange on the principle of "quid pro quo."

The capacity and durability of the relationships

Another feature that merits attention is the broker, who mediates between the clients and the patron. They serve as information collectors about target groups; a significant portion of the resources intended to attract voters are distributed through them. Clientelistic connections may generate various systems. In one case, they could be formed around particular players who centralize power, so political decisions are made with minimal public engagement. In other instances, the focus is on the local authorities, which provides the efficacy of authoritarianism. (Gherghina

& Nemcok, 2021) Individual favor is of great importance to preserving power and thus providing the loyalty of adherents. Notably, the closer the ideological profiles of political parties are to each other, the higher the likelihood of forming clientelistic ties. (Stokes, 2011)

Empirical sources account for clientelism in several ways. In the first wave of research, scholars considered this phenomenon a feature of backward, agrarian societies bound to disappear with democratization and development. (Sousa, 2008) In the 1980s, an attempt was made to systematize the knowledge and explore historical materials related to clientelism. Because of this, the phenomenon transcended third-world countries – as a result, it was linked with modernism and even with antiquity. (Sousa, 2008) The publications created after the 1990s aimed to explore the adverse aspects of clientelism and the ramifications of informal institutions. (Stokes, 2011) It was deemed a threat to democratic values since it permits special interest groups to take a grip on power and weaken institutional performance, lowering the legitimacy and capacity of the government. This phenomenon is not intrinsic to democracies.

Despite various explanations of clientelism and its causes, empirical sources convey an overall stance. When institutions cannot provide citizens the service they are obliged to, society finds a way out by collecting these benefits through informal contacts. (Gherghina & Volintiru, 2020) Furthermore, the presence or absence of clientelistic practices also significantly impacts how political and administrative power are formed. This phenomenon is less common in relatively open, democratic, decentralized, and transparent systems than in closed, oligarchic, loyal, or inert to private interests and centralized ones. (Brinkerhoff & Goldsmith, 2002) Recent research has once again highlighted the complexity of this phenomenon, and two types—electoral and relational clientelistic practices—have been identified. The first focuses only on the elections and stipulates the mobilization of voters in exchange for one-off favors throughout this period. Relational clientelism encompasses a much more extended period and continues to offer benefits to clients as favors, even after the elections. (Nichter, 2011)

A literature review

The literature on Georgian political clientelism is meager. The cause of this lies, on the one hand, in the phenomenon's complexity and, on the other hand, in the absence of an effective tool to investigate high-level corruption. This phenomenon

was considered a concomitant process of forming Georgian state institutions and civil society in the sources created till 2000 and was examined alongside patrimonialism and corruption. Empirical sources emphasize the lack of diversity - the transfer of the parliamentary majority and executive authority in all municipalities into the hands of one party, which has become one feature of the Georgian political landscape. (Kikabize & Iosaberidze.) The existing conditions made the mechanism of “punishment” powerless (typical for clientelistic relations without counterweight support). They gave rise to a new trend - some Georgian political players are ready to alter their allegiance in favor of the ultimate winner. In some cases, this applies to a wide range of society, a vivid example of which is the results of the elections held in the Marneuli municipality. (2012, GD – 16%; 2017, GD – 69%). (Lomtadze, 2018)

The research, which studies the examples of three Eastern Partnership countries (Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova), provides valuable information and demonstrates Georgian political parties’ predilection for clientelism. (Gherghina & Volintiru, 2020) In the case of Georgia, one distinctive aspect stands out - compared with other cases, the component of personalization and the leader’s notoriety is substantial. The study’s findings indicate that the ruling party and the opposition frequently employ clientelist tactics.

As usual, political clientelism is discussed with other forms of corruption, and its analysis is conducted along with an overview of broader political processes. The literature on clientelism in the Georgian context permits us to perceive only a limited depiction. This article differentiates between two dimensions of clientelism, electoral and relational, which enables us to collect far more extensive data about the subject of the study. In addition, other factors linked to clientelism are considered, which play a significant role in Georgian society and may have a particular impact on determining the probable causes of this phenomenon.

Modern Georgian Political Clientelism

Electoral dimension

Electoral clientelism is a common practice across the Georgian political spectrum, with various manifestations during an election. According to the reports of Transparency International - Georgia and the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, large-scale social and infrastructure projects funded from the state budget were observed for three years before and throughout the election campaign.

It is challenging to justify the necessity of implementing some of these projects at the pre-election stage, referring to a pandemic or difficult social conditions.

Several precedents for such expenses are provided below:

- The legalization of apartments in 2018 for 900 families
- the increase in pensions and salaries for different social groups
- the issuing of one-time social allowances before the elections

In 2020, the debt of the Gori Military Hospital was canceled for about 1,000 people. (International Transparency, 2020) The expenditures mentioned above include the abolition of fines of up to 76 million lari for persons and organizations who violate specific coronavirus-prevention laws enacted in 2021. (International Transparency, 2021; Fair Elections, 2021) The program initiated by the ruling party jointly with the Kartu group during the 2018 presidential elections, which covered the debts of 600,000 citizens, also falls within the framework of the study of electoral clientelism (Fair Elections, 2018).

The suspected bribing of voters, most related to the ruling party, is also highlighted in the NGO reports assessing all three elections. Providing the population with various goods, as reported in NGO reports and by the media in the three pre-election periods, manifests electoral clientelism. For parties applying such strategies, it is crucial to verify/ensure the fulfillment of the obligations undertaken by clients, which is quite difficult due to secret ballot. To surmount this obstacle, it is common practice to shoot the ballot in the voting booth and/or publicly display the recorded option. It should be noted that on each of the three voting days, there was a large-scale mobilization/transportation of citizens and the process of their identification, which is considered an essential feature of electoral clientelism (International Transparency, 2018; International Transparency, 2020; International Transparency, 2021; International Transparency, 2020).

Relational dimension

Based on the available data, we can conclude that the target audience for relational clientelism in Georgia is mainly the high social class. This form of clientelism continues to benefit the clients after the elections. Politicians use this strategy to reward faithful supporters with different privileges, including state contracts. The return service from the “awarded” accompanied this type of relationship as donations for the election campaign. (Grzymala-Buse, 2008) The link between large

donations received by the party over the elections and the donors' access to state funds will be used for surveillance.

The reports of the NGO Transparency International-Georgia provide tangible information. According to data for 2020, organizations and individuals who won state tenders for 68 million GEL funded the ruling party's election campaign for 1.6 million GEL. (International Transparency, 2020) Simplified procurement contractors or related persons who received a profit of 4.2 million GEL donated 2.2 million GEL in favor of the "Georgian Dream." (International Transparency, 2020) A similar trend continued in 2021 - organizations and individuals who, from January to August 2021, won state tenders of GEL 122 million also invested 2 million to finance the pre-election campaign.

NGO reports also mention several business groups affiliated with people or organizations that received contracts for different tenders or gained simplified procurement from the state while simultaneously being one of the major supporters of the ruling party. (International Transparency, 2018; International Transparency, 2021) We also should pay attention to the fact that citizens employed in state-funded organizations intensively attended pre-election rallies organized by the ruling party. (International Transparency, 2021) The case is notable due to the elements specific to relational clientelism that may be used in dealing with employees from these organizations, such as the threat of job loss as a "punishment" for failure to provide support.

Ideology

In modern democratic states, political parties seek to mobilize the electorate primarily for ideological considerations. Though less opportunistic, there are other methods of electorate mobilization than an ideologically focused program approach. (Barkaia & Kvashilava, 2020) While researching clientelism, Stokes (Susan Stokes) proposed that the closer ideologically political parties are to each other, the higher the likelihood of vote-buying. (Stokes, 2011) The parties will target people who remain indifferent or slightly opposed to them on ideological grounds. Regarding this segment, they employ additional incentives to obtain votes, which may comprise access to public services and particular material benefits. In Stokes' opinion, the risk that arises during the formation of such connections is the critical factor for both parties. They do not wish to waste resources on die-hard opposition voters since the chances of getting reciprocal support are relatively slim, even if

they provide extra benefits. On the other hand, the most vulnerable citizens, who have to choose between today's "gift" and a future social package, prefer the first. (Stokes, 2011)

In general, political parties in Georgia do not declare distinct ideological viewpoints. Their promises are broad and mainly populist. They employ fewer programmatic strategies, while leadership charisma, rather than ideological preferences, plays a crucial role in success. (Lebanidze, & Kakachia, 2016) The main factor determining the activity of Georgian political parties is not ideology, which could be related to the fact that they do not represent large segments of society. (Barkaia & Kvashilava, 2020; Lebanidze, & Kakachia, 2016) Nevertheless, their ideological stances seem interesting to evaluate, and experts occasionally highlight some standard features.

The United National Movement adheres to a centrist ideological line. Nevertheless, the party's pre-election agenda contains some leftist policies. (Lavrelashvili, 2020) Its election program is committed to liberal values. It supports an open market, low taxes, and incentives for the private sector while at the very same time offering pricey social packages to the people. Instead of mechanisms for solving particular problems, general slogans are used. (Barkaia & Kvashilava, 2020)

Georgian Dream was founded in 2012, and its rhetoric was mainly antagonistic then. Its program was populist, which was especially noticeable in several unrealistic promises of solving particular problems. Over the next four years, the program was significantly changed, and specific stances on the institutional allocation of authority were examined more systematically. (Barkaia & Kvashilava, 2020) The government is essential to the economic dimension, but GD still mainly follows centrist views with leftist components. (Kakhishvili, 2018)

The two political parties, one of which is now referred to as the significant oppositional power and the other of which has been in power for the tenth year, offer voters ideological content that is roughly comparable. In the context of similar programmatic profiles and a policy of fragile adherence to any of the ideologies, the Stokes theory comprehensively answers what additional mechanisms will be used to mobilize votes efficiently. In Georgia, a sizable portion of society belongs to the lower social strata, which she believes is most vulnerable to clientelism. According to 2020 data, over 20% of the population is below the edge of absolute poverty. (GEOSTAT, 2020.) People who live in such conditions, in the case of similar programs by political forces, are ready to vote for a candidate who will immediately provide at least a small amount of economic support.

Leaders and populism

Clientelistic chain growth is significantly influenced by populism as well. Once in power, populists also exploit clientelism in addition to plebiscitarian connections. (Gidron and Bonikowski, “Varieties of Populism,” 13.) Over the past three decades, populism has been critical in Georgian politics. (Abramishvili, “Populist politics”) Political parties’ unification around a single person rather than an ideology contributes to this.

Mobilization of the public around the leader resulted in developing a messianic attitude towards them. The current situation resembles Latin American movements that have led populist politicians to counter the existing system. Citizens perceived them as heroes who could overcome the “evil” government. (Ostigguy, „Populism,” 115.) Similarly, Saakashvili was regarded as a “God-sent Savior” who was supposed to liberate the country from corruption and restore its economy. He was anticipated to raise citizen living standards and hasten infrastructure development considerably, but the egregious human rights violations undermined the effort’s success. Ivanishvili, whose antagonistic pre-election campaign promised society large-scale economic and social benefits, was perceived similarly. Despite this, neither GD could fulfill a part of the promises. (Abramishvili, “Populist politics.”) Assessing the actions of the GD, Aprasidze, and Siroky (David et al.) focus on the distribution of key posts in the government based on clientelism. They distinguish between the “inner” and “outer” circles formed around Ivanishvili. High-ranking incumbent officeholders are appointed from the “inner circle,” which is incredibly loyal. (Aprasidze and Siroky, „Technocratic Populism,” p. 583.)

We also encounter clientelism in relatively lower layers. The elections held in 2003 - 2012 demonstrated that local political actors tend to declare loyalty to the ultimate winner. This course of action is motivated by the desire to blend in with the majority, which, on the one hand, will enable one to avoid a contest with a powerful opponent and, on the other hand, promises to gain further rewards. (Lomtadze, “Evidence of political clientelism,” 27.) A similar trend persisted in further elections, especially in majoritarian districts. Local majoritarian candidates attempted to win the hearts of voters by offering personal benefits (Barkaia & Kvashilava, Political Parties, p. 16.) that weakened the programmatic part of the campaign. The research conducted by Gherghina and Volintiru (Sergiu et al.) examined the cases of three Eastern Partnership countries (Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine). It provided valuable information regarding the features of Georgian political clientelism. The study revealed a correlation between the territorial coverage of the

parties' activities and their use of clientelistic practices. Parties with local branches throughout the country were more likely to resort to informal practices. (Gherghina and Volintiru, „Political Parties and Clientelism,” p. 13.) Parties with high civic support and clientelistic linkages deliver messages to citizens through local leaders who seek to mobilize the electorate by offering a range of private services. The leader's notoriety has a significant impact on this strategy.

Additional factors

Clientelism is the most well-known example of incumbents extracting private gains from the state. (Grzymala-Buse, 2008) This strategy provides a significant advantage in political competition, which can play a decisive role in victory. In order to enhance the efficiency of clientelistic practices, officials seek to weaken the regulations and create a system where authority will be redistributed according to their discretion. One way to form this new system could be the fusion of state institutions and a political party. (Grzymala-Buse, 2008) In this regard, the NGO ISFED's report on the 2020 and 2021 elections should be taken into account, according to which the involvement of majoritarian candidates from GD in various events organized by administrative resources narrowed the line between the state and the ruling party. (Fair Elections, 2020; Fair Elections, 2021)

It also should be noted that clientelism perfectly aligns with systems where informal power redistribution occurs. Georgia has substantial experience in this direction. Over the past two decades, two informal systems have been employed for state administration. Unlike Saakashvili's "coercive," Ivanishvili's "cooperative informal governance" was relatively reasonable, mainly due to lower oppression. Hence, the new system implicated a weaker government, which could quickly come under the influence of a particular group of interests. However, compared with the authoritarian one, its advantage was a higher degree of pluralism (Lebanidze, & Kakachia, 2017).

Ivanishvili retained a substantial part of his influence after leaving the PM post. (Lebanidze, & Kakachia, 2017) Subsequently, a new component in the vertical chain of power has been formed (Kupatadze. 2018), which can carry out the functions of clientelistic brokers. According to numerous journalistic investigations, the new group was involved in various corruption dealings and had substantial authority. (Kupatadze. 2018) Those informal "power brokers," as usual, are part of Ivanishvili's inner circle and ensure that senior decision-makers in government remain loyal to private interests.

Conclusion

The paper indicates that clientelism has become rooted in Georgia's political environment. It emerged as a replacement for the Soviet era's informal contacts and, in parallel with the liberalization and building of the Georgian state, became an effective tool for seizing power. A lack of civic consciousness and a growing gap between the upper and lower classes fostered its appeal.

The current environment resulted from the chaos during the first years of sovereignty and the poor attempts to reform the state. Under weak democratic institutions, the most effective strategy for elites to seize power was to mobilize substantial political support in exchange for small favors. Desires to gain power, rather than reflecting the broad interests of residents, were the main drivers for the founding of political parties. The weak internal democracy in political parties supports this argument. Clientelism, as well as other informal practices, flourish in such an environment.

Over the last three decades, society has periodically unified around a single leader, giving rise to a Messiah complex. Such unprecedented support resulted in the development of autocratic power. At this point, a well-known phrase tells a lot about Georgian politics: "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." The need for informal practices and the desire to preserve authority promoted the development of a vertical chain of power rather than a horizontal one. Weak state institutions also contributed to the growth of demand for informal practices by failing to meet residents' needs adequately. Clientelism had been inherited with the change of governments, and it had become one of the cornerstones of power maintenance. When analyzing the last three elections, it became clear that electoral and relational clientelism had been required for resource redistribution to maintain power. Because of such ties, a vicious cycle has been created in which elections are treated as a formality. Citizens continue to back the elit, which offers them various informal services. Clientelism distorts the political rules by establishing an unequally competitive environment that favors clientelistic players. It seems almost impossible to transfer power to another political body based on democratic principles in such conditions.

Clientelism is considered a corollary of democratization, and the subject of its total abolition is debatable due to the phenomenon's adaptability. As a result, ongoing research is required to improve countermeasure effectiveness. The article analyzes this phenomenon as a vertically organized system of relations and, perhaps, needs

to reflect the Georgian reality fully. Due to the limited opportunities to study this phenomenon, I mainly focused on the ruling party's policies. However, recent studies suggest that clientelism is just as attractive among the opposition. At the same time, the benefits-seeking theory as an event that causes clientelistic relationships was not considered.

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