

Stephen F. Jones

2001-2002 IARO Grantee to Georgia

Research Report

My research expanded from an original focus on local government and public opinion in the Georgian provinces to broader questions of democracy building. In my discussion with Georgian scholars and policy makers, I was constantly urged to write a book-length analysis of the Georgian experience since 1991 of nation and state building. Thus along with continued research on local government issues and a number of trips to the provinces (Marneuli and Akhaltsikhe) to meet local government officials, my research broadened to an analysis of Georgia's multiple (but related) problems of national identity formation, inter-ethnic relations, corruption, civil society formation, and so on. The new title of my research topic is, provisionally, **Politics and Society in Georgia: 1991-2001**.

Relevance and Contribution to the Field.

Western scholarship on Georgian politics focuses almost exclusively on studies of ethnic identity, conflict management, energy issues and geopolitics. But almost all the surveys of Georgian public opinion suggest that it is not these issues that are of most concern, but rather the economy, health, salaries and pensions, education, crime, and political corruption. In a public opinion survey taken in September 1999 by SOCIOGEO, a Georgian survey organization, 66% declared economic and social problems to be the most serious facing Georgia today; only 17% mentioned ethnic and territorial issues. Extensive and methodologically rigorous public opinion surveys of the Gori and Akhaltsikhe districts conducted by the Horizonti Foundation in January 2001 came up with similar results: 51.4% of the respondents in Akhaltsikhe ranked unemployment as the primary issue, followed by economic difficulties (33%) and the energy crisis (6.6%). Despite this evidence of Georgians' own concerns and priorities, there is very little scholarly work on domestic politics, and in particular on political life in the provinces where almost three quarters of the Georgian population lives. The purpose of my research is the first systematic analysis of Georgian national politics over the last ten years – "national" meaning political life outside Tbilisi as well as in the capital. This includes two levels of analysis: an exploration of social structures, the changing nature of social and interest groups, of political culture and values and their impact on Georgian institutional structures, and the growth of civil society; second, an assessment of legislative, executive, economic and judicial reforms, the growth of lobbies, the impact of political parties and the role of the media.

Without an understanding of political culture in Georgia and the different value systems of the population, our analysis of democratic reform, its impact, and its likelihood of success, will remain inadequate. And without an understanding of how Georgian institutional structures work, the division of powers between them, and the impact of courts, economic lobbies, and parties on political decisions, policy making in Georgia will remain a confusing fog for concerned Western politicians and analysts.

While working in the parliamentary research department, I focused initially on institutional debates and the policy makers. I chose two pieces of legislation as case studies of the policy making process in Georgia. The first was the Organic Law of Local Self government and Government, (local government law) passed in July 2001; the second was the draft law on the Georgian State Language, still under discussion. Both pieces of legislation addressed regional issues (in the case of the Georgian state language, the rights of non-Georgian populations,) the impact of local powers and lobbies on legislation, and the impact of legislation on local politics. Work on the local government law began in January 2001 to replace a 1998 law that was generally recognized as inadequate, retaining too many powers of appointment for the center. The new legislation, the aim of which was to bring Georgian law into line with the principles of the European Charter on Local Self Government, only partially succeeded. The legislation, passed in August 2001, was formulated by the State Chancellory (in particular by Badri Khatidze, head of the Chancellory's Regional policy and Management Service,) the parliamentary Committee on Self Government and Regional Policy, along with international NGOs like the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the Urban Institute. The latter played a particularly important role in drawing up advisory and technical groups to conduct meetings in the provinces and write the draft legislation. My research involved interviews with the main participants in the legislative process - Badri Khatidze (State Chancellory,) Temuri Jashua of the Parliamentary Research Department, Alexandre Kukhianidze, Deputy Chief of Party at the Urban Institute and the organizer of the technical group, Mark Mullen of NDI, Vakhtang Khmaladze, an MP and expert on local government reform, officials in the regions such as Grigol Baramidze (Presidential plenipotentiary in Samtskhe-Javakheti) and Levan Mamaladze (Presidential Plenipotentiary in Kvemo Kartli) and experts on the situation in the regions such as Nino Saakashvili, the Director of Horizonti who had conducted detailed opinion surveys and needs assessments in the provinces. The Ministry of Finance and Ministry of State Property Management were also influential participants in the draft law.

In addition to interviews, I worked in the parliamentary archives to compare previous laws on local government with the new draft. I collected policy briefs, statistical materials and official handbooks describing the new local government functions under the new law. The new draft was the result of significant conflict between the State Chancellory, which wished to retain central powers of appointment and budgetary control, and NGOs (with allies among opposition MPs,) which attempted to decentralize powers to the municipal level. It showed a vital battle over democratic reform and issues of decentralization, tax collection and control, the division of power between executive and legislative organs, and the degree of popular supervision over centrally appointed executives. There was genuine pluralism in the process, but government policy and amendments revealed the weakness of reformers and the continuing absence of genuine decentralization of powers to the regions. Opinion surveys that focused on the regions of Akhaltsikhe and Gori suggest the local population, though supportive of more democratic control, is split on the efficacy of its participation. In Gori, for example, 41.8% believed the population could play a "big part" in the solution of local problems, whereas 47.5% thought the opposite. The links between local opinion, institutional reform and implementation will be a major focus of my work on state-building and civil society formation.

I followed similar research procedures for the case study on the draft law on the Georgian State Language. I interviewed the primary shapers of the law: Levan Rhinjilia, Chairman of the Georgian Language Chamber and primary drafter of the law, staff members of the parliamentary committee on Civil Integration, representatives of non-Georgian associations such as “Public Movement, Multinational Georgia” as well as non-Georgian MPs (Givi Shughurov and Izumrud Kurbanov,) and members of the OSCE who convened a conference in Tbilisi at the beginning of December to discuss the proposed language law. I attended the OSCE conference as well as an open parliamentary committee hearing on the issue. I interviewed the Georgian Minister of Education (Alexander Kartoza) on the potential impact of this law on schooling in Georgia. As with the local government law, the legislative process revealed continuing deep conflicts on state versus civil rights, over concepts of citizenship and minority rights, and public/private spheres. At the same time, it showed growing pluralism with the role of interest groups and ethnic associations in the policy making process.

In addition to interviews that focused on these two legislative projects, I interviewed the leaders of most parliamentary political parties, parliamentary leaders such as the Chairman of the parliament, Zurab Zhvania, Ministers and officials from the State Chancellory (Petre Mamradze, Head of the State Chancellory,) members of the Tbilisi city council, parliamentary staff (Roman Gotsiridze, head of the parliamentary budget office,) leaders of the trade unions and NGOs. I also interviewed President Eduard Shevardnadze. In all, I gathered over 30 interviews. I collected extensive statistical data from the Georgian State Statistical Department, the parliamentary Research department and from numerous parliamentary committees including a great deal of legislation from the parliamentary committee on legal issues, legitimacy and administrative Reforms (judicial committee.)

Preliminary Conclusions

My preliminary conclusions, which have to be substantiated by further survey research in the provinces suggests a highly polarized society along a number of axes – urban-rural, elite-mass, rich-poor, ethnic and ideological. The democratic culture in Georgia despite a veneer of urban sophistication and pro-Westernism, is extremely weak. Democracy is poorly understood and deeply rooted clientalism and cynicism is undermining its progress. Most ordinary citizens have little desire to participate in policy making in Georgia or believe they can have an impact. New value orientations that might support an active civil society, such as support of greater participation, openness, protection of minority rights and the need for community organization, are undermined by inadequate democratic legislation, weak institutions, and corruption. In democracy building there is an important relationship between effective reform legislation and value change among the population. Political activity, grassroots organization and electoral participation and choice are all affected by changes in value orientations. In Georgia, the slow process of “de-traditionalism” of popular values, the preservations of old social arrangements and the absence of citizen trust for the state make the prospects for democratic reform weak.

Future Research

There is considerable work to be done on a whole range of domestic issues in Georgia. Western financial and democracy-building policies have largely failed in Georgia. There needs to be research on alternative strategies that will reduce corruption, activate popular participation, stimulate the economy and foreign investment and ensure electoral reform. More work on regional issues, education and social reform and analysis of policies that can help reorient Georgian value orientations toward aspirations for self-realization, pluralism, civic competence and efficacy is necessary. The evidence is that until more basic values of economic and personal security, material well-being and political stability are satisfied, the generation of democratic values will be limited. It is time to focus more on the population's own concerns rather than on geo-politics and ethnic conflict, which though important to stable statehood have overshadowed other more fundamental domestic needs for sustainable democratic statehood.

Policy Recommendations

- A thorough reappraisal of US aid policies, programs and strategies. There needs to be analysis and explanation for the failure of millions of dollars of financial aid to achieve its goals in Georgia.
- More emphasis should be put on training, retaining and putting to work of Georgian human capital. The exodus of Georgian expertise is undermining the potential growth of a new middle class in Georgia.
- There should be more consideration of infrastructural repair programs and projects to stimulate domestic employment.
- There should be more focus on stimulating Georgia's regional economies and economic integration of non-Georgian groups. Economic integration of Georgia's regions based on a modern economy is key to political success in Georgia.
- There has to be closer coordination with the IMF on its restructuring and tax policies in Georgia. The programs have had extremely limited success and in many cases are counter-productive.
- More effective pressure has to be put on the Georgian leadership to implement reform. The current leadership of Shevardnadze lacks political will and popular support. Continuation of Shevardnadze policies will undermine democratic development and US strategic aims in the region.
- The US should continue its policy of regional coordination between the three Caucasian republics. Economic stagnation in all three will lead to threats to US security in the regions such as the expansion of drug routes across the Caucasus, a rise in internal ethnic and social conflict, intervention by foreign powers and reduced security guarantees of energy transport through the Transcaucasian corridor.