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Ó Beacháin Stefańczak, Karolina

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Georgian Politics: Gender Imbalance and Women's (Under)Representation¹

Karolina Ó Beacháin Stefańczak, Dublin

Abstract

The imbalance of representation of men and women in Georgian politics diminishes the problems affecting women in society, making them less prominent and more difficult for the authorities to address. This article examines the political representation of women in independent Georgia in the context of political and electoral systems and the broader socio-economic environment of the state. It outlines the roles and positions women hold in political parties and provides a synopsis of the gender outcomes of parliamentary elections since 1991. The political participation of women in Georgia is analysed in conjunction with 'traditional values', the social perception of gender roles, and the influence of the Orthodox Church and its opposition to the ideas of gender equality.

Introduction—Political Representation of Women in Post-Soviet Georgia

Women in Georgia comprise 59% of voters, but their political representation oscillates at just 10%. Presidential elections in Georgia were contested exclusively by male candidates until 2004. There was one female candidate in the 2008 and three in the 2013 contests. With one exception, the candidates achieved less than 0.2% of the votes. The only female contestant who attracted a significant share of the electorate was Nino Burjanadze, whose support exceeded 10% in 2013. Burjanadze is the only woman who has held the two highest positions in Georgia. She was the Speaker of Parliament for over 6 years (2001–2008) and twice, for periods of two months, the acting President of the state (2003/2004 and 2007/2008).

Georgian parliaments since independence have had small proportions of women MPs, varying across the 22 years between 5.6% and 12%. With the 2008 elections, the share of female MPs elected to parliament was reduced to 6% and Georgia became the lowest ranking country among OSCE member states for the proportion of women in parliament. Following this election, the party of government, the United National Movement, had eight women MPs while one other female MP was elected from the list of the Christian Democratic Movement. The number of female legislators doubled from 6% to 12% (from 9 to 18 MPs) as a result of the October 2012 elections, and, for the first time in independent Georgia, the proportion rose above 10%.

The low representation of women can be explained, to some extent, by the negative legacy of Soviet rule on contemporary gender relations, on-going political instability and the complex relationship between the electoral and party systems. The electoral systems and the lack

of gender quotas have had an impact on the legislative recruitment of women internationally. In post-communist countries, however, there is relatively little difference between the share of seats held by women under the 'closed list' proportional (PR) and single mandate majoritarian systems. Unlike the experience in established democracies, where women tend to do better in PR systems, in the former Soviet states PR systems do not lead to significant increases in the number of women in parliament and, in some cases, women do better in majoritarian contests than they do on the party lists. In spite of Georgia's use of a single constituency list for at least half of its parliamentary seats since 1995, the percentage of women deputies has been very low (see Table 1).

Table 1: Women in Georgian Parliamentary Elections—an Overview

Year	Total number of seats	Women MPs	% of women MPs
1990	250	18	7.2
1992	222	14	6.3
1995	250	16	6.4
1999	235	17	7.2
2004	235	22	9.4
2008	150	9	6
2012	150	18	12

These figures could be interpreted as a slow incremental improvement for women until the 2008 election. The 2008 election is an anomaly as just prior to this contest the size of the parliament was cut by just over a third, resulting in a more competitive election than its predecessor, perhaps with the effect of squeezing women out. Looking in detail at the results of the 2012 parliamentary elections, women in the winning coalition performed marginally better in the majoritarian contests

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than they did on the list system. These results have to be contextualised by the volatility of political and party systems, armed conflicts, non-democratic elections and civil uprisings. Nonetheless the percentage of women elected to the Georgian parliament since 1990 seems to reaffirm that, in the post-Soviet sphere, there is no clear relationship between the level of democracy, the electoral system and the level of women's political representation.

Political and Electoral System

Georgia had a strong presidential system in place for all the post-1992 elections, until the transitional 2012 legislative elections and 2013 presidential contest moved it to a parliamentary system. The same voting system, with some variations, has been used for all parliamentary elections since the 1990s. Since 2012 the parliament is elected through a mixed system, with 73 MPs representing single-mandate constituencies and 77 MPs selected by party list ballot.

In the Georgian system, political parties are required to receive at least 5% of the valid votes to be included in the allocation of PR seats. This threshold had the effect of encouraging the development of 'blocs' of parties with combined lists. This may have had an adverse impact on the placement of women in prominent positions on the party lists, as it adds an additional element of negotiation between a number of male-dominated party leaderships. The majoritarian contests employ a two round system—to win in the first round a candidate must receive at least 30%, failing this a second ballot is held between the two candidates who received the highest support in the first round. The voting system after the 'Rose Revolution' has not encouraged independents and it was only in 2012 that they have been allowed to stand. Independent candidates are excluded from contesting the proportional part of elections and are confined to standing in single mandate districts only. They must demonstrate the support of at least 1% of voters registered in the district in which they intend to stand (this requirement does not apply to incumbent MPs) and pay a deposit of 5,000 GEL, the equivalent of seven months average salary in Georgia, which is reimbursed only to those candidates who receive at least 10% of the vote. While this provision sets a high barrier for independent candidates, this amendment potentially opened the electoral competition to women who were active in local communities but were outside political parties. Nonetheless, in 2012, due to the highly competitive and combative campaign environment, civil society female independent candidates were not encouraged to run.

Internationally, the significant increase in women's parliamentary representation from a global average of 12% in 1996 to 22% in 2014 has been attributed pri-

marily to two factors—the spread of democracy and the adoption of 'gender quotas'. Georgia does not have legal mandatory measures to secure more balanced gender representation. A 'soft' gender quota was introduced for the 2012 parliamentary elections in the form of financial incentives (a 10% increase in state funding) for political parties that fulfil the criteria: 20% gender quota evenly distributed throughout the party list.

The 2016 parliamentary election will be held under the amended Law on Political Unions of Citizens that includes a provision of increased supplementary public funding of 30% to parties that include three women for every 10 candidates on the lists.

Political Parties

The voting system in Georgia makes political parties and electoral coalitions the real gatekeepers to parliaments and therefore to real power. Their leaderships are almost exclusively male. Georgian parties are characterised by low levels of internal democracy and an absence of institutionalised mechanisms, which means that decisions are taken informally, through processes that are shaped by a male focused party culture.

The party system is volatile and instable. At the time of the 2012 election, the average age of the significant political parties contesting the election was 8.6 years; the party of government had existed for 11 years and the main challenger had been formed only the previous year. The post-Soviet Georgian state had existed for 22 years and no significant party dated from the beginning of independence, the oldest being the very small Republican and Labour Parties.

Georgian Dream, the coalition that won the 2012 elections, is a young formation, led by a party established in April 2012, emerging from a movement of the same name that had been launched in December 2011 by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili. Its interim leader was a woman, Manana Kobakhidze. The party identifies itself as social democratic. It is led by a political council, which in May 2013 consisted of 21 members, five of whom were women. That was a much higher share than their parliamentary representation. The proportion of women was impressive but has been reduced since from 24% to 16.6%. In February 2015 the 12-member political council includes two female members: Manana Kobakhidze and Eka Beselia. Georgian Dream is the main party within the five-party coalition. The oldest of the coalition parties is the small, but influential Republican Party of Georgia. Founded in 1978 as a dissident movement, its current leader, elected in November 2013, is a woman, Khatuna Samnidze. The other three coalition members are the National Forum, established in December 2006, the Conservative Party of Geor-

gia, founded in 2001 and Industry Will Save Georgia, founded in April 1999.

The main opposition party, United National Movement (UNM), was founded in 2001 by Mikheil Saakashvili and enjoyed a parliamentary majority between 2004 and 2012. The UNM is a centre-right formation affiliated to the European People's Party (EPP). The formal and broader informal leadership of the party is all-male.

The main political parties in Georgia do not have official and transparent candidate recruitment procedures; the processes of selecting prospective majoritarian MPs and composing the lists is both resource driven and informal, and hence is disadvantageous for women. Parties do not have internal gender quotas and lack other voluntary measures to secure more balanced candidate representation. In preparation for the 2016 parliamentary elections, some of the main Georgian parties are currently working with international organizations and NGOs to introduce new mechanisms to help them achieve the 30% women's representation on their lists.

Latest Elections

The Georgian parliamentary elections of 2012 were contested by fourteen political parties, two election blocs (comprising a further eight parties: six making up the Georgian Dream coalition and two being part of a Christian Democratic Union) and two independent candidates.

In the months prior to the 2012 elections, Georgian public opinion was extremely polarised between two key contestants, Bidzina Ivanishvili and the Georgian Dream coalition opposing President Mikheil Saakashvili and the then ruling party (UNM). It is important to note that as these were parliamentary elections, neither Ivanishvili or Saakashvili ran for office. The manifestoes and programmes of the parties were eclipsed by the public curiosity aroused by the prospect of a showdown between the two dominant male leaders. Issues of gender equality did not feature in the campaign.

In this election, a significantly larger proportion of women candidates contested when compared to the 12% of women deputies elected to the parliament—of the 2,757 candidates, 28.4 % (783) were women. This is atypical internationally, as usually the percentage of women elected approximates the proportion of women candidates. This discrepancy can be explained by the large number of candidates on the party lists, including the insignificant parties that did not put forward majoritarian candidates. A total of 444 candidates contested the 73 majoritarian seats compared to the 2,313 that contested the 77 proportional seats—on average 6 candidates contested each majoritarian constituency

compared to the average of 30 candidates for every proportional seat. Table 2 shows the proportion of women candidates on the party lists for the four significant parties/party blocs. These four electoral subjects made up only 30% (685) of all candidates on party lists, an indication of the large number of minor parties that contested this election. Women made up nearly 20% of the candidates for these four parties and coalitions, but only 13.5% for the two election subjects that divided the election between them, compared to 25% for the unsuccessful parties that did not pass the 5% threshold and therefore were not allocated seats. Of the candidates for the majoritarian seats, 13.30% (59) were women, of whom seven were elected, that is 9.5% of majoritarian MPs compared to the 14.3% of women in the proportional seats.

Table 2: Percentage of Women Candidates on Party Lists

Name of Party (Bloc)	Candidates Total	Number of Women	% Women	Met gender quota?	% National Poll
Georgian Dream	200	33	16.5%	N	54.97%
United National Movement	155	17	11.0%	N	40.34%
Christian Democratic Union	163	47	28.8%	Y	2.04%
Labour Party of Georgia	167	36	21.5%	N	1.24%

New regulations introduced by the Georgian Parliament in 2012 to promote more balanced gender representation were motivated by the very low proportion of women elected in 2008, which damaged Georgia's credibility internationally. They were generally ineffective; of the four significant electoral blocs three did not fulfil the criteria. Both UNM and Georgian Dream had substantial resources at their disposal and did not respond to the financial incentives to increase the parliamentary representation of women. Only the Christian Democratic Union Bloc, a coalition of CDM, a party with very conservative views on women's roles in society and a minor party with virtually no public support, met the gender criteria and qualified for additional subsidies. It seems likely they fulfilled these conditions primarily for the financial benefits, not due to the commitments to women's political advancement. The Labour Party's list included over 20% of women, but it did not meet the ranking conditions.

In spite of the failure of the financial incentive, the 2012 election significantly increased the number of women in parliament: from eight in 2008 (10.6%) to 11 (14.3%) in 2012 elected through the proportional

system and from one (1.3%) to seven (9.5%) elected through the majoritarian system.

In the previous term of Parliament dominated by UNM there was only one female majoritarian MP (1.33% of total) and in the 2012 election UNM continued the pattern they had adopted in the previous election by running only three female candidates for majoritarian seats. However three UNM women incumbents, who had entered parliament in 2008 through the party list, retained their seats, with one, Marika Verulashvili, re-elected as majoritarian MP for the Kvareli district (Khatuna Gogorishvili and Chiora Taktakishvili were re-elected as party list MPs) indicating that she had the support of the party and also that the electorate are willing to vote for women. In contrast Georgian Dream fielded female candidates in winnable majoritarian seats, such as Tbilisi, where UNM support was lower and also in Ivanishvili's home district of Sachkhere. They also chose female candidates who were well-established politicians and activists with good name recognition and reputations, including Tea Tsulukiani, Tinatin Khidasheli and Eka Beselia, who were well prepared and resourced to contest the elections. As a result Georgian Dream had the same number of women in majoritarian and proportional seats. For UNM the percentage of women on the proportional ballot was, at 15.1%, much higher than the proportion of women occupying UNM majoritarian seats.

Conclusions

Though communist ideology promoted the principle of gender equality, Soviet women were considerably under-represented in the influential circles of political power.

About the Author

Karolina Ó Beacháin Stefańczak is a PhD candidate at Dublin City University, Institute for International Conflict Resolution and Reconstruction, researching 'Gender, political parties and parliaments in the post-Soviet states: A case study of Georgia and Moldova.' Karolina is also an international consultant in the field of democratic governance with a strong focus on women's political participation and gender equality within political and electoral processes. She has worked in the Caucasus as a Parliamentary Advisor for the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) in Georgia; an OSCE/ODIHR expert in an on-going 'Women in Political Parties' program in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Moldova, and a Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD) consultant.

Further Readings

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- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2013, 'Gender and Elections in Georgia' <<http://aceproject.org/ero-en/regions/africa/DZ/undp-gender-and-elections-in-georgia-2013/view>>
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While official quotas secured the high levels of female representation in Soviet political institutions, women were kept out of the top positions within the Communist party and thus denied real political influence. Women comprised approximately one-third of the deputies in the Supreme Soviet, but the maximum female representation in the Central Committee of the Communist Party was never beyond 5%.

Democratic transformations in the region brought hope of a positive change for women. However, the transition from the Soviet republic to independent states had a negative impact on women's public involvement and influence. It brought an end to the formal structures that had supported women's political engagement while at the same time the reassertion of 'traditional values' with the social perception of gender roles and the growing influence of the Orthodox Church mitigated ideas of gender equality that would have supported calls for women's political participation. Female representation in new legislatures dropped to less than 10% across the former USSR and, although the record has improved over the last two decades, the average percentage of female MPs remains low in comparison to the EU average.

The underlying trend of improvement in the number of women engaged in politics, which amongst other things could be linked to Georgia's higher level of international engagement, its links to the EU, and its perception of itself as a European state should result in better representation of issues affecting Georgian women. The case of Georgia shows, that it is not just institutions that are important. Party and electoral politics also matters, in pushing gender issues to the forefront of wider political debates.