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PROBLEMS OF THE FORMATION OF THE POLITICAL ELITE OF POST-SOVIET GEORGIA

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Abstract

This article comprehensively analyzes the structural problems of the transformation and formation of the political elite in post-Soviet Georgia, as well as their direct, destructive impact on the country's national security and foreign-policy orientation. Based on the theory of rational choice and the theory of neoclassical realism, the paper identifies the main domestic-political and foreign-political challenges which, for more than three decades, have hindered the consolidation of a rational, institutionalized, and meritocratic ruling class. The author argues that, against the background of the collapse of the modern global security architecture, the survival and stability of Georgia, as a typical "small state," critically depend on the rationality of the decisions of its elite; however, in reality, there is an acute deficit of strategic vision and growing populism. Within the research, three fundamental findings are outlined: First, a deficit of rationality and populist tendencies dominate the decision-making process. Based on Gustav Le Bon's "concept of the psychology of crowds," it is shown how cold, pragmatic planning is replaced by manipulation of the irrational attitudes of the masses and an emotional agenda. Second, using Max Weber's theoretical framework, the clientelist and neopatrimonial nature of Georgian party architecture is analyzed. It is substantiated that, instead of ideological platforms, parties represent personalized clans mobilized around charismatic leaders or financial oligarchy for mercantile purposes, which blocks the formation of an elite oriented toward national consensus. Third, by projecting Alexander Rondeli's model of "small state behavior," the article reveals a deficit of political culture, which is expressed in a reactive, superficial analysis of geopolitical reality and in turning the foreign course into an instrument of domestic-political confrontation.

Ultimately, the paper reaches the critical conclusion that ignoring the dynamics of the international anarchic system and domestic-political fluctuations cause the maximum decline of the geopolitical function of a small state, marginalization, and increase existential security risks in a turbulent regional environment.

Keywords: political elite, foreign policy, small country, rational choice, populism, geopolitics.

Introduction

When assessing the process of state transformation and democratic consolidation in the post-Soviet space, the qualitative characteristics of the political elite play a decisive role. The example of Georgia, as a typical "small state" located in a highly complex geopolitical area, deserves special attention. More than three decades after the restoration of independence, the problem of forming an institutionalized elite oriented toward long-term state interests still remains acute in the country. The relevance of the research issue is determined by the circumstance that, against the background of the collapse of the modern global and regional security architecture, the survival and stability of a small country

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directly depend on the rationalism, competence, and ability of its ruling class to adequately analyze external threats; political polarization and populism, however, weaken the elite's ability to conduct effective diplomatic and strategic activities.

Research Objectives and Tasks. The aim of the research is to identify the structural and behavioral factors hindering the formation of the political elite in post-Soviet Georgia and to assess their influence on the country's foreign-policy effectiveness.

To achieve this aim, the following research objectives are set:

- Study the stages of the evolution of the Georgian political class through the lens of elite theory and rational choice;
- Analyze those domestic socio-political factors that contribute to the dominance of populism in the elite;

Scientific novelty. The scientific novelty of the article lies in the fact that the problems of the Georgian political elite are studied through the synthesis of international theories, instead of narrow internal competition. The paper critically assesses how domestic-political populism lowers the quality of foreign-policy analysis.

Research questions:

1. What main structural factors determine the delay in the formation of a meritocratic political elite in post-Soviet Georgia?
2. How do populism and the deficit of strategic vision existing in the political class affect the realization of Georgia's foreign-policy tasks as a small country?

Research hypothesis. The development of the political elite in post-Soviet Georgia is hindered by the fact that meritocracy is replaced by populist and kinship-clan models. This causes a superficial assessment of security risks and limits the foreign-policy capability of the small state.

Theoretical Classification of Political Elites and Social Stratification

In modern political discourse, it is notable and noteworthy that, when assessing the political transformation of the so-called new independent states, the Baltic countries have long no longer been referred to with the transitional term "post-Soviet." With regard to other former republics, however, this definition still retains its descriptive function, which, unfortunately, also reflects the reality of Georgia. Unlike the Baltic states, where the consolidation of elites occurred around national consensus and Western integration, in Georgia the transitional period acquired a chronic character. The main structural reason for this is the deficit of a politically state-minded elite – a class that would have a clearly defined, coherently formed domestic and foreign political strategy and priorities.

For any new political system, the first-priority task is the meritocratic formation of the national political class, which must ensure institutional stability at the most critical, transitional stage. The idea of elite governance was already visible in medieval philosophical-theological thought. In particular, Thomas Aquinas noted that ensuring public good and order is only the prerogative of a selected minority equipped with intellectual and moral qualities, which bears the highest social and political responsibility for governing the state (Rondeli, 2003).

Etymologically, the term "elite" (of French origin *Élite* – distinguished, best) implies the leading social group of society, which possesses legitimate influence, authority, and leadership resources. According to classical theories, the elite must be characterized not only by high intellectual, cultural, and moral capital, but also by material-structural capabilities. In political science, this phenomenon is differentiated into several autonomous, though interdependent, sub-elites: intellectual, financial-economic, military, and political. From the restoration of independence until today, Georgia has experienced precisely a qualitative deficit of a consolidated political elite, which is the main source of systemic political crises, polarization, and institutional instability.

In political science, three main theoretical approaches are used for analyzing the structuring and functioning of elites: axiological, functional, and institutional.

Axiological theory defines the elite by its meritocratic and value-based parameters. Within this approach, the political class is distinguished from society by its highest moral, spiritual, and intellectual potential. José Ortega y Gasset and others substantiate that elitism does not contradict democratic principles, since legal equality does not mean biological or intellectual identity. Democracy ensures equal starting conditions of opportunity, although individuals use these chances proportionally to their own talent, cognitive abilities, and energy. Accordingly, in every social system, stratification emerges between groups with high

productivity – leaders – and the rest of society. According to the axiological approach, the direct obligation of the leading social stratum is to assume social responsibility and create mechanisms for the protection and employment of less competitive groups.

Functional theory places emphasis not on the personal-moral qualities of individuals, but on their functional role in a politically organized system. In this paradigm, the elite is considered as the totality of governing organizations, institutions, and ideological bureaucracy, which carries out the optimization of decision-making and social governance.

Institutional theory is fundamentally formulated in Charles Wright Mills's classical work "The Power Elite" (Mills, 2000). The advantage of the institutional approach lies in the fact that it makes the empirical identification of the elite possible. Here, elite status is determined not by personal charisma or morality, but by a strategic position (post) in the main political, legal, economic, and military institutions. It is precisely institutional structures that grant an individual power resources and form the so-called "ruling class," which governs the state.

The Evolution of the Georgian Political Elite and the Clientelist Architecture of the Party System

The analysis of the acquisition of sovereignty by small states and the building of the national security architecture shows that, for successful political transformation, the correct identification of the window of foreign-policy opportunities is decisive. Without a correct assessment of the dynamics of the international system, open and radical political actions are followed by systemic catastrophe and defeat.

A classical example of the mentioned strategic narrative in the history of Georgia is represented by the modernization reforms of the beginning of the twelfth century. The state activity of King David IV (the Builder) is interesting not only from a military point of view, but also because of the qualitative mental and institutional transformation which laid the foundation for the military-political elite of that time. At the strategic level, David IV first prepared the internal socio-political and institutional ground (the Ruisi-Urbnisi Church Council, as a mechanism of ideological-administrative cleansing), and only after that carried out open geopolitical manifestation, once a favorable factor emerged in the international arena – the European Crusades and the fragmentation of the Seljuk Empire. This political agenda ensured public consolidation, discipline, and institutional stability, which, from the point of view of political legacy, maintained functional effectiveness for almost one century (Gvinjilia, 1989).

Although in the modern Georgian political space there are frequent attempts by leaders to identify themselves with the mentioned historical experience, the real behavioral model of the political class of post-Soviet Georgia reveals a radically different dynamic. The analysis of the period after the restoration of independence through the lens of classical theories of elites shows structural asymmetry among domestic-political subjects.

The elements of the axiological dimension are preserved to a certain extent only in the narrow academic and scientific-creative intelligentsia. This stratum indeed possesses certain cultural capital and value orientations; however, its share and real decision-making influence on modern Georgian political processes are minimal. In parallel, the functional dimension, which applies to politically organized and party systems, experiences a deep systemic anomaly in Georgian reality. In the classical understanding, political parties should represent strong ideological platforms which fight for power on the basis of organizational discipline and programmatic priorities.

However, in post-Soviet Georgia, the architecture of the party system is formed not on the basis of ideological or value-based consolidation, but on the basis of clientelist and neopatrimonial interests. Political parties represent clan-corporate structures united around a specific charismatic leader or financial group for mercantile and careerist purposes. As Georgian researcher Lasha Kalandadze notes in his monograph published in 2025 "Transformation of Elites and Clientelism in Post-Soviet Georgia" the degradation of party institutionalization in the post-Soviet space is directly proportional to the index of "clientelist mobilization" of elites, which shifts the political field from competition of ideas into a regime of narrow group survival (Kalandadze, 2025).

A clear illustration of this type of clan politics is unstable political alliances and coalitions, which are created and dissolved before every electoral cycle. This phenomenon was described by Max Weber a century ago, who indicated that in traditional and transitional societies parties often represent only the "retinue" of aristocratic (or oligarchic) clans, where the leader's change of camp is automatically followed by the migration of all his resource and human capital into another political space (Weber, 1996).

Foreign-Policy Dilemmas of the Small State and Post-Soviet Institutional Infantilism

In the theory of international relations, particularly in the paradigm of political realism, the foreign-policy behavior of small states is largely determined by the asymmetry of threats existing in the anarchic system. Small countries, when making strategic choices, are often guided not by the principle of absolute, but relative security. According to the theory of the founders of political realism – Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz – altruism and moral categories are ignored in the international arena, while the behavior of states is determined only by national interests and the balance of power.

Systemic analysis shows that no great power guarantees the security of a weak partner without bilateral strategic benefit. In international politics, obtaining security patronage is always connected with certain asymmetric concessions, which often implies partial delegation or restriction of sovereignty. In such patron-client relations, the dominant actor demands from the client the validation of the rules of the game and institutional values. The most negative scenario is the case when an external power aims at the complete annexation and absorption of the sovereignty of a small state, which occurred twice on the part of Russia in 1801 and 1921. Therefore, the correct choice of foreign-policy orientation for a small state represents not subjective will, but the imperative of its physical and political survival (Durmishidze, 2013).

For the successful implementation of domestic and foreign policy, it is necessary that the political class of the country first achieve fundamental consensus at the domestic-national level around strategic interests. In a democratic system, pluralism and alternative views are a natural reality; however, leading political actors are obliged to protect the red lines of national security. The dichotomy established in the modern Georgian political space between “pro-Western” and “pro-Russian” camps often has a superficial character and reveals a deficit of national strategic culture. Rational foreign policy should be based only on pragmatic national interests and not on the uncritical copying of the political identity of any external actor, which ultimately causes the marginalization of the interests of one’s own state. The development of a fundamental foreign-policy strategy requires from the elite continuous and professional analysis of the global and regional balance of power, as well as the geopolitical conjuncture of the neighborhood.

The ideological and structural basis of the future ruling elite is formed even before gaining independence. In the Baltic republics, this process developed with high professional and intellectual consolidation, which gave them the possibility of rapid and effective Western integration. In the case of Georgia, the dynamics of the national-liberation movement had different specificity. After the occupation of 1921, the resistance movement continuously continued in various forms – beginning with armed uprisings and ending with manifestations of cultural nationalism. The cultural and intellectual sub-elite (writers, scientists), even under conditions of strict ideological censorship, managed to preserve national identity, language, and cultural memory.

The mass public protests of 1956 and 1978 showed that anti-Soviet potential was high in Georgian society. However, these actions were mostly reactive and identity-protective in character and were less oriented toward long-term, pragmatic planning of state-building after independence. The development of a systemic vision and a state project took place at the level of narrow dissident groups, which managed to achieve unprecedented mobilization of the people on a moral platform; however, at the moment of declaring independence, the country faced a deficit of a ready institutional and rationally prepared political class.

The first democratic and multi-party elections in Georgia in 1990 became the logical culmination of the national-liberation movement, preceded by a mass protest wave and the tragic events of April 9, 1989. The newly elected Supreme Council, under the leadership of the first President, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, created a firm international-legal precedent for the restoration of independence. In particular, the nationwide referendum of March 31, 1991 and the “Act of the Restoration of the State Independence of Georgia” of April 9, 1991 ensured the legitimacy of sovereignty with full observance of the norms of international law, which was based on the legal legacy of the 1918 Declaration of Independence.

Despite the high quality of de jure legitimacy, the transitional government created in 1991 and the opposition spectrum were unprepared for the de facto tasks of state-building. The disregard of political theory and practice caused the design of modern political, economic, and legal institutions to remain outside attention. Idealistic views regarding the economic self-sufficiency and security guarantees of a small state dominated the political elite. In such a strategically vulnerable geopolitical area as the South Caucasus, the country’s leadership did not create a unified concept of national security, which is considered in international relations theory as a prerequisite for the formation of an “incapable state.”

Gaining sovereignty does not automatically mean the viability of the state; it requires a long-term, rational strategy, where idealism is replaced by strict geopolitical realism (Brzezinski, 2014).

Georgian political culture, where the interaction of elites and masses is often irrational, is characterized by two extremes of “political infantilism”: radical national nihilism and pessimism, which is manifested in mass disappointment and institutional paralysis after political or military defeat; hypertrophied, ethnocentric nationalism, which causes barriers to adequate communication with the outside world and threatens domestic-national stability in a multiethnic society.

The disintegration of the Soviet Empire gave Georgia a unique chance of geopolitical opportunities; however, the international conjuncture of the 1990s was not used to its advantage by the country’s internal political class. The strategic collapse of the ruling elite caused civil war, institutional destruction, and the loss of territorial integrity in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region, followed by a deep socio-economic crisis. Subsequent stages, including the Russia-Georgia war of 2008, once again confirmed that the inadequate analysis of international security risks by the elite and the ignoring of the regional balance of power cause the decline of the role of the state not only in the global, but also in the regional geopolitical architecture.

Conclusion

Based on the theoretical and empirical analysis carried out in the present research, the following fundamental findings can be formulated regarding the specificity of the transformation and formation of the political elite in post-Soviet Georgia:

1. Ochlocratic tendencies in the decision-making process. The main systemic challenge of the Georgian political elite is the irrational management of strategic questions – “What is the long-term state goal?” and “By what rational mechanisms should it be achieved?” The absence of meritocratic selection and institutional instability caused the dominance of populism in the political field. Instead of making decisions oriented toward state expediency, domestic-political actors often resort to manipulating the irrational attitudes of the masses.

2. Clientelist and neopatrimonial party architecture. The paper substantiates that the party system in post-Soviet Georgia could not be formed on a stable ideological and value-based platform. The structural anomaly causes chronic instability of the electoral cycle, the immediate collapse of pre-election tactical coalitions, and the complete ignoring of ideological identity. The dominance of narrow group interests and mechanisms of political revenge blocks the consolidation of a responsible, institutionalized elite oriented toward national consensus.

3. Deficit of foreign-policy strategic culture in the context of the small state. The article shows that the political class of Georgia, from the restoration of independence until today, is characterized by a shallow, reactive analysis of the international conjuncture and geopolitical balance of power. Instead of state-oriented, pragmatic, and flexible policy, there is excessive ideologization of foreign-policy orientation and its transformation into an instrument of domestic-political confrontation. The imperative of the survival of a small state in an anarchic international system requires continuous, professional filtering of foreign threats and the building of rational patron-client relations with partners. The institutional collapse of the 1990s, the loss of territories, and the consequences of the Russia-Georgia war of 2008 clearly showed that ignoring the dynamics of the international system by the elite causes the maximum decline and marginalization of the geopolitical function of the state both at the global and regional levels.

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