Great Power Competition and the Path to Democracy: The Case of Georgia 1991–2020. By Zarina Burkadze. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2022. x, 491 pp. Appendix. Bibliography. Index. $95.00, hard bound.

Georgia: From Autocracy to Democracy. Stephen F. Jones and Neil MacFarlane, eds. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020. xxxvi, 255 pp. Index. Figures. Tables. Maps. $71.00, hard bound.

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Georgia's Democratic Deficit

In the thirty years since its independence from the Soviet Union, Georgia astounds any observer with its dynamism and robust domestic political environment. As with most politics of eastern Europe and Eurasia, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has illustrated the importance of the region in international politics. Domestically, Georgia in the early 2020s has faced a crossroads, in no small part because of the renewed microscope on its domestic politics, its regime trajectory, and its place as a fulcrum between the Russian Federation and the west.

Superficially, Georgia's bonafides as a standout with regard to democratic accountability and responsive governance have been among the best in its neighborhood. The 2003 Rose Revolution gave way to electoral competition, anti-corruption campaigns, and state-building programs that helped strengthen Georgian infrastructure and development. After years of corrupt and capricious practices, state regulations eased the difficulties of starting businesses, earning accolades from the World Bank. In 2013, the country overhauled its public health care system, which effectively doubled the number of Georgians with insurance coverage. Yet Georgia's governance surge occurred amidst abuses of state power, the subversion of judicial independence and manipulation of the media landscape. Contemporaneously with this review, the Georgian government has announced a draconian foreign agent law designed to quell the power of opposition voices in civil society and journalism but revoked it (temporarily) given the strength of public outcry. There is a dynamism to the Georgian political landscape—a tug and pull by governments seeking to stay in power, by actors seeking to capitalize on growing wealth, and by opponents seeking either to hold incumbents accountable or to take the spoils for themselves. Yet, throughout the churn, the inadequacy of Georgian democratic outcomes has stayed stable. Freedom House, for example, has ranked Georgia "Partly Free" since 1992. While much has changed in the last three decades, evidently the overall level of freedom has not.

It is in this context, then, that we consider two books on Georgian political development: Zarina Burkadze's *Great Power Competition and the Path to Democracy: The Case of Georgia, 1991–2020* and *Georgia: From Autocracy to Democracy*, edited by Stephen J. Jones and Neil MacFarlane. While Burkadze's monograph has a clear message, that plural electoral outcomes in Georgia are due in no small part to the clashes of strategic behaviors of Russia and the west, Jones and MacFarlane have curated a collection of essays that crosscut several critical themes regarding the Georgian political, cultural, economic, and geopolitical environments. The timing of the publication means that the books were written prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the associated framing of that war in many circles as a democratic resistance to violent authoritarian imperialism. Yet it is hard to read the books without the lens of the war in Ukraine and the upending of the geopolitical conversations and regime narratives that accompany them in the east European/west Eurasian region. Collectively, the authors address the potentials for real democratic governance in Georgia, Georgia's ability (or inability) to chart its own path amidst geopolitical challenges and structural difficulties, and how to interpret Georgia's western orientation.

Democracy and Regime Outcomes

For two works with democracy in their titles, there is very little democracy in these books. This gap reflects Georgia's many democratic deficits but also the difficulties that scholars have in capturing the paradoxes of hybrid or so-called competitive authoritarian regimes. There is a thirst for democratic governance in those places, with a demand for it in the public and civil societies. There is also some supply of it in both ruling party governance and opposition party engagement and mobilization, albeit fragmented and inconsistent. It is also notable that these volumes are written largely by Georgian authors, intelligentsia based in urban centers, with a deep investment in their country's pluralist, if not democratic future.

Examining Georgian politics starting from its independence from the USSR, Burkadze contends that democracy needs friction to develop, a kernel of contention that disrupts an authoritarian default. In the case of the countries of the former Soviet Union, the rivalry between the Russian Federation and western powers created an arena for political dialogue and resourced competition such that both geopolitical poles fueled distinct sides of a growing partisan arena. According to Burkadze, this competition—and the absence of strong enough players on either side to veto the other—has contributed to the emergence of an often accountable and pluralistic political environment in Georgia. She traces the argument across two large moments in Georgian political history: the 2003 Rose Revolution and the 2012 Georgian Dream defeat of the United National Movement (UNM) ruling party, and six temporal eras linked to those moments.

The first era, under Zviad Gamsakhurdia, lasted from 1991–1993 and saw very little geopolitical competition, resulting in a largely authoritarian environment. The Shevardnadze period (1993–2003) contained two eras, the first dominated by Russian autocratic expansion in the form of influencing personnel, and the second wherein US and European actors took greater interest, providing developmental aid as well as engaging in democratization programs. The resulting political struggle led, Burkadze notes, to the emergence of an empowered media environment that challenged the old Russian-backed *nomenklatura* network, whose coercive efforts undermined rather than entrenched their authority. The outcome was the Rose Revolution and the emergence of real electoral politics in Georgia (and the Georgians' growing expectation of such).

The years under Mikheil Saakashvili and the United National Movement Party (UNM) likewise had two parts. The first, in which there was little Russian intervention, brought about power centralization and autocratic tendencies, despite the professed liberalism of the political leadership. Political opposition efforts in 2007 and Saakashvili's subsequent resignation and reelection, however, worked alongside western support to stimulate, rather than quell, greater democratic expectations within the population. As the Saakashvili regime became abusive, Burkadze asserts, the availability of free media and opposition mobilization (with some help of anti-Saakashvili Russian intelligence) catalyzed an electoral loss of UNM to the emergent Georgian Dream party in 2012. The final era in the book charts the political divisions between the now ruling Georgian Dream and the UNM in opposition, a tumult that some characterize as polarized politics, but Burkadze argues produced Georgia's first democratically elected woman president (Salome Zourabichvili) and the emergence of a new array of opposition political parties. This broad competition, she contends, diffused political power rather than concentrated it, permitting the emergence of electoral democracy.

The argument is compelling and has an intuitive logic. It is also, of all the messages in these books, the most positive in predicting a free political outcome in Georgia. That said, I wondered at the broadness of the claim and its underlying methodology. Burkadze states at the outset that the outcome she is explaining is *electoral democracy*, which is a term of art more than science, meant to connote when states have elections that are sufficiently free and fair to generate an outcome that comports with voter preferences, but falls short otherwise. Electoral democracies are notable for their gaps in provision of such things as a free media landscape or broad inclusion of minorities, as well the likely absence of rule of law protections. The choice of electoral democracy showcases a weakness in Georgian politics, which has not been able to move beyond the partly free designation, no matter the geopolitical competition. But it does beg the question—if geopolitical competition does indeed bring about democracy, is there a reason that democratic outcomes in Georgia are not better? Or does geopolitical competition provide a beginning, but not much more, in spurring deeper commitments to democratic governance?

Georgia's democratic gaps are picked up by several of the authors in the Jones and MacFarlane edited volume. In a fascinating assessment of the Georgia's judicial system from independence to 2018, Vakhtang Menabde finds that, while outsiders tend to see a sharp distinction between the Shevardnadze, Saakashvili, and Ivanishvili/Georgian Dream political eras, all governments have undermined rather than strengthened judicial independence. The judicial system, established in the 1995 Georgian Constitution, was partly a body borne of the democratic inclinations of a new polity, written with a clear eye toward the need for accountability, independence, and incentives to keep judges law-bound and not pocket-bound or partisan in their orientation. But its implementation was weighed down by burdens and practices associated with the Soviet system, a legacy that included informal customs of bribery and corruption, a top-down bureaucratic expectation that worked against the logic of judicial independence, and an accusatory system, which tended to discount the rights of the accused in favor of empowering prosecution and enforcement.

Menabde reports that Chapter V of the Georgian constitution—the one that lays out the power and make-up of the courts—is one section that has experienced the most amending over the years. Those reforms have typically bound the judiciary closer to the executive. This tendency started under Eduard Shevardnadze but continued during the Saakashvili/UNM and the Georgian Dream eras. The goal, he notes, has been to rid the new regime from the empowerment of elites from the previous system. Judicial purges have corresponded to the breaks in governance authority, an empowered effort to undermine opposition through constitutional change. Menabde's observations thus provide a counterpoint to Burkadze's framing of the two shifts in Georgian governance. Burkadze emphasizes the pluralism and electoral meaning in the Rose Revolution and the electoral success of the Georgian Dream. In Menabde's telling, though, these moments of openness should be interpreted alongside an awareness of their consequences in terms of judicial independence. In both cases, the courts were undermined, rather than empowered, and used as a tool against the opposition by victors of the political moment.

Structure, Agency, and Identity

Given the three decades of tumultuous politics amidst ambivalent outcomes, a cogent analyst may wonder how much they should assess Georgian politics with regard to structures that predetermine results or individual agency of the political leadership. To what extent are Georgians the masters of their own fortune and to what extent are they victims of their geopolitical location or pawns in the imperial games of others? To what degree are their current political quandaries linked to outside forces or historical legacies, despite Georgians' best desires and best interests now? Is there a path for Georgians to choose their own political and economic futures? These questions, more than democratic outcomes, preoccupy the contributors to the Jones and MacFarlane volume. The authors draw no clear conclusions as to Georgia's ability to chart its own course in what all agree are circumstances that both hamper its sovereignty but also provide mechanisms for embarking on an independent and democratic trajectory. But achieving that path is not inevitable.

Georgia is, like many borderlands that demarcate the boundaries of (former) empires, both blessed and cursed by its geographic location. It must contend with the unsettled foreign policy of the Russian Federation. Even under Boris El′tsin, Russia had never reconciled the loss of its superpower status and hold over its so-called Near Abroad. Russia's aspirations for influence over, if not outright annexation of, the countries to its south and west are a constant consideration for regional decision makers. Thus, as Stephen Jones and Neil MacFarlane observe in their respective book chapters, the first order of business for the leaders of independent Georgia in the early 1990s was to establish and maintain state sovereignty. Self-governance and domestic control over the state are central components of the Weberian understanding of the state but are in fact dynamic conditions that challenge small states especially. In his chapter on Russian foreign policy toward Georgia, MacFarlane concludes that Russia's goal has been to assert as much control over Georgia (and other post-Soviet states) as possible, with the influence and engagement growing alongside Russian power. The mechanism of control, he warns, is more stick than carrot. The 2008 War, therefore, was Russia's punitive response to Saakashvili's unwillingness "to accept subordination in the hierarchical relationship" with Russia" (Jones and MacFarlane, 197). It was a sharp rebuke. In his contribution, which focuses on the outsized structural conditions that bedevil Georgia's democratic development, Jones remarks that "Georgia remains a small country dependent on clever maneuvers to retain its political sovereignty" (Jones and MacFarlane, 34).

Even without a rowdy northern neighbor bent on the undermining its sovereignty, Georgia's geographical position brings economic, political, and cultural challenges, advantages, and quandaries. Many authors, and most of the works considered here, emphasize Georgia's role as a transit country, a zone for transmitting goods, ideas, and values from east to west, north to south, and vice versa. Economically, according to Joseph Salukvadze and Zurab Davitashvili, Georgia's position as an energy transit route for Caspian oil to western markets creates problems, since that access threatens Russian regional dominance and its policy of creating zones of resource dependence. For Mamuka Tsereteli, Georgia's role as a conduit between east and west is its primary leverage for maintaining sovereignty; in consolidating this role, he argues, Georgia is westernizing itself rather than looking east. Mikheil Tokmazishvili takes his readers on an absorbing tour of the economic costs and benefits of Georgia's role as a transit country, not just bridging Europe and Asia, but also navigating the political and economic superstructures that define the contours of trade in the area. Georgia supplies the main trade route between Iran, Russia, and Armenia, as well as connecting to the Eurasian Economic Union. Georgia enjoys a strong trading partner in Turkey, not only as a conduit for Azerbaijani oil and gas. Georgia also maintains a vibrant trade with the EU, with the latter accounting for a quarter of Georgia's imports and exports by 2017.

One problem Georgia faces is the financial cost of straddling the various regulatory markets. It is less expensive to trade with the non-EU markets, given their fewer regulatory particularities. Indeed, few producers can afford the technical burdens of producing goods for both the EU and the Eurasian marketplaces. According to Tokmazishvili, the Eurasian Union [EAEU] is more problematic, both practically and ideologically, for Georgian producers to manage. The Union has "an incoherent structure" that assigns tariff and non-tariff conditions capriciously, often to serve a foreign policy political agenda. Furthermore, the Union's chief goal is to compete with the EU and set parameters for closed, rather than open, markets. This rigidity means that Georgia increasingly will be forced to choose *between* the entities rather than *bridging* them. Despite the lower costs of engaging in the less regulatory Eurasian Union, Tokmazishvili determines that its unpredictability and use of political leverage means that "the EAEU is not a good strategic option for Georgia." He concludes that the EU, even without Georgian membership, is a better partner.

Authors similarly consider the broad historical legacies that bind current Georgian leaders and constrain options for transformation. Jones, rather pessimistically, laments the tendency of Georgian politics to revert to an authoritarian mean, noting similarities shared across the short-lived Georgian Democratic Republic (1918–21) and Georgia today. One sobering insight offered by both the Menabde chapter on judicial structures and Marine Chitashvili's engaging discussion of higher education reform is the burden of the Soviet legacy on the design of political institutions. While much ink has been spilled in other venues about the power of the Soviet legacy on its successor states, these articles offer a captivating reminder that the structures of command economies, especially their institutional centralization, assert a distinctive pull on their non-command successors. The authors of the chapters appear divided on the role of structural factors in binding the Georgian polity to non-democratic governance or to the availability of alternatives, namely democratic incentives, to Georgian state builders and policy makers. While Jones shows ambivalence, both Chitashvili and Menabde emphasize the agency of policy makers to build systems outside the Soviet historical trajectory, although admittedly Menabde's example of Georgian elite agency showcases examples of *decreasing* institutional pluralism. But, if Georgian leaders do have the agency (and, perhaps, the interest) in building pluralist and accountable governance in their harried condition, from which direction might it emerge?

It is useful to situate Burkadze's monograph in this conversation about structure versus agency. While her argument contends that geopolitical factors contribute to the emergence of pluralist politics in Georgia, the empirical focus of the book is not on US/western or Russian action so much as it is the role of Georgian media, the actions taken by Georgian opposition actors, and how Georgian political leaders respond to that pressure. Burkadze does not take up the issue of structure versus agency directly, a gap that ill serves the causal pathways crucial to her argumentation. At some points, the geopolitical competition is about *pressure* and *coercion*–as evidenced by Russian-selected members of the Georgian Council of Ministers' security departments (74–75) or US-required schemes for power-sharing arrangements (39). At other times, it is about the use of (generally western) development schemes to apply *leverage* for policy development, for example a 2000 initiative that would offer economic development support if matched with Georgia undertaking policy initiatives to better integrate ethnic minorities (38). At yet other times, the causal mechanism is about *resources* rather than substantive changes: the funding of opposition parties, for example, or the funding of media outlets. The book is also strikingly opaque about the 2008 War, which was a strong policy rebuke taken by Russia toward the UNM government. How did that robust act of intervention affect domestic governance strategies? Do different sorts of pressures yield different outcomes regarding the production of democratic governance, accountability, and inclusion? Burkadze's conclusion—that in order for democracy to bloom in Georgia, western democracy promotion requires an autocratic counter—is unsettling.

There is space, according to some authors, for Georgia to chart its own path. Governance is about choices, after all. David Sichinava, drawing from years of longitudinal survey data, finds reasons to discount a common argument that Georgian political parties tend to follow individuals rather than ideologies. He argues that increasingly Georgian voters link their own preferences for a western orientation (generally observed through evaluation attitudes toward EU membership). This preference correlates typically with support for opposition political parties. As the Georgian Dream government has recently embarked on a more critical and overt stance against western influence in Georgia, this cleavage may yet render important political outcomes. While thus far, we have seen expressions of this pro-western stance in public mobilization and outcry supporting Ukraine and rejecting laws targeting foreign "agents," it may be that this political moment is affecting popular expectations and mass demands for political accountability. Sichinava's insights thus echo Burkadze's but turn the focus inward—it could be the case that Georgians increasingly prefer their leaders to adopt specific ideologies and policies in their governance and tie those expectations to ballot box decision-making. They are responding, perhaps, to a preference for the western *example* rather than to western *pressure*.

In one of the Jones and MacFarlane volume's most compelling contributions, Natalie Sabanadze inverts the common dialogue that pits Georgian decision-making as a *result* of the geopolitical environment, instead focusing on Georgian foreign policy choices. But for a country like Georgia, those choices come with unfair and disproportionate costs. Like MacFarlane, she portrays Russian expansionist foreign policy as a problem (rather than a source of political discourse, as Burkadze contends). In Sabanadze's telling, the Georgian leadership since independence has largely chosen to follow a western path. This choice, she observes, has been costly, with some detriment to the security and sovereignty of Georgia (exemplified by the 2008 war). Moreover, the west's support for this decision has been more ambivalent than it has been decisive. Georgia thus sits on a knife's edge in its costly decision to resist Russian expansionist foreign policy, particularly if its only tool to achieve that goal is an alliance with western powers. Sabanadze agrees with her co-authors that an alliance with the Russian Federation is an unwise long-term strategy for Georgia. It is unclear how many concessions the Russians would accept in terms of compromised sovereignty and guaranteed influence. Nonetheless, the path against Russia, particularly without western support, is a dangerous one.

Sabanadze also argues that, domestically, western influence brings better governance in its setting a high bar for Georgia to join the EU and NATO. (Sabanadze, writing prior to the 2022 Ukraine War, doubts any real willingness of those entities to entertain Georgia joining). Her chapter's approach contrasts Burkadze's position: where Burkadze observes western leverage and pressure, Sabanadze perceives indifference and likely abandonment.

Georgia's Western Credentials and Trajectory

Georgia's westward orientation and its pathway to western norms are important considerations. For those addressing economic factors (Tsereteli, Salukvadze and Davitashvili, and Tokmazishvili), the choice is obvious and the western advantages are stark amidst Russian-oriented problematic alternatives. MacFarlane and Sabanadze probe the dangers of these choices—the punishment of Georgia by Russia (MacFarlane) and a likely betrayal by the west in the end in a likely rejection of an EU or NATO bid (Sabanadze). Sabanadze muses that many in the west look at Georgia's geography to determine its Europeanness, while Georgians, on the very edge of that geography and thus ambiguous, represent their Europeanness as an identity, and thus primordial.

Others, like Jones, frame Georgia's western trajectory almost as a promise, an imploration to those reading to conceptualize Georgia as western, with a plea to overlook historical flaws in Georgia's legacies of governance: problems integrating minorities, politics of corruption and patronage, among others. Yet it is striking that Jones is enumerating flaws that any western country has either had in its very recent history or continues to face now. The distance between a non-western country and a flawed western country is unclear. It is a distance that many in these volumes are trying to track, although the dimensions are not concrete and, as they say in American football parlance, the goal posts will change according to the decisions of western political leaders, as much as by the Georgians themselves. The units of measurement are encumbered not just by geography, uncertain democratic performance, and diverging identities, but also in the immensity of the risk, both in economic and security costs, of a western alliance with a country so proximate to an imperialist Russia.

In the Shadow of Russia's Imperial War in Ukraine

Written prior to the 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, these books remind us that even when the world shifts in astounding ways, there can be remarkable stasis in the governance conditions, even in a country so close to the conflict. Western powers had largely stayed distant during the 2008 invasion of Georgia, the 2014 seizure of Crimea, and the War in Donbas. Yet, the current war in Ukraine has brought shifts in western policy, both with regard to military support for the Ukrainians, but also diplomatically and politically. The European Union reenergized its attentions to expansion, which had faded after the 2008 financial crisis and then Brexit, extending candidate status to both Ukraine and Moldova. It rebuffed Georgia's application, offering a list of conditions that needed meeting to join as a candidate. These requirements included undergoing a process of de-oligarchization (aimed at Bidzina Ivanishvili, who leads the Georgian Dream Party), as well as creating an independent judiciary and establishing a pathway to truly competitive elections. The Georgian Dream government has instead begun a campaign of hostility toward western influence in the country, decrying the pathways of "liberal fascism" that western organizations have engendered in Georgia, and initiating "foreign agent" legislation. The latter efforts faltered amidst massive public outcry, as peaceful protesters withstood rubber bullets, tear gas, and water cannons.

In her chapter in the Jones and MacFarlane volume, Natalie Sabanadze largely laments the abandonment of Georgia by Europe, noting the disparities between Georgia's western identity, governance patterns, and the standards for admission to the European club. The likely scenario for Georgia, she predicts, was to stay outside of the EU and institutional western protections, even as it attempted a non-Russian geopolitical path. But she does leave space for a slight opening, presciently musing that it could be that, under some unlikely conditions in the EU, "an opening just might appear for Georgia." "Georgia," she admonishes, "must be ready." The people appear to be. The leadership, alas, does not.

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