## GEORGIAN PARTIES ABROAD: NARRATIVE VERSUS REALITY

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In today's globalized world, party politics transcends national borders. The key debate concerns emigrants' political participation in their home country. An increasing number of states grant social and political rights to their citizens living abroad (Kernalegenn and Van Haute 2020). However, we should be cautious in assuming that states with a large diaspora will seek political engagement. In this context, Georgia—a small post-Soviet country in the South Caucasus—illustrates this point.

Despite introducing a number of structural reforms and pursuing political and economic transformation, Georgia has been unable to slow emigration. Due to mainly economic hardship or the pursuit of better opportunities, almost one third of the population has emigrated (i.e., more than one million people).[1] Whereas the diaspora's remittances represent a significant share in the country's economy (State Commission on Migration Issues 2019),[2] its participation in voting has been modest. From a broader perspective, this trend can be explained by Georgians' low level of trust toward political institutions as well as a lack of awareness of the rights and procedures when voting from abroad.

To cast a vote, every emigrant must register in the relevant consulate abroad. The registration procedures change from election to election. For example, before the 2016 election, registration required having a legal address abroad. In subsequent elections, this provision was no longer necessary; in addition, citizens could register online and without any fee. These changes practically allowed emigrants with illegal documents to cast a vote. According to Article 32 of the Electoral Code, all votes from abroad are counted in a special list, coordinated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia (Parliament of Georgia 2012).

Facilitation of voting procedures can be seen as part of the effort of the political parties, which—particularly in the past decade—have promoted a political narrative about the importance and necessity of the diaspora's participation in domestic political life. However, contrary to this narrative, it appears that, in reality, parties are hesitant to support the diaspora's political engagement other than casting a vote. For example, parties did not support a proposal by the president to include one representative among 15 candidates on the electoral list for the 2020 parliamentary elections. This dual approach of political parties vis-à-vis the diaspora can be explained by the deficiency in the party system itself, particularly by small membership and the lack of internal democracy.

Similar to other post-Soviet states, Georgia's modern party system emerged after the demise of the Soviet Union. Fascinated by an idea of political freedom, the number of registered parties exceeded 200 on paper; in reality, only a few could claim the party label. During the past two decades, the party system evolved, slightly improving the political culture. However, parties remain characterized by "a lack of clear ideology, values, or vision; excessive role of leaders' personalities; heightened degree of political opportunism and populism; lack of internal democracy" (Tarkhan-Mouravi 2006, 243). Instead of ideology-based, institutionalized organizations with serious political clout, parties in Georgia are more like political clubs, with loose organizational structures and small memberships (Dolidze 2005).

These structural deficiencies create major obstacles for parties in establishing party chapters or other forms of institutionalized linkages abroad. The lack of internal democracy and domination by the same political elites negatively influence the enthusiasm of emigrants to become engaged in domestic politics. In contrast, local elites might perceive a threat of external infiltration by an educated and younger generation from abroad that would be motivated to introduce new initiatives and changes at the party level. Because ideological consistency is not a strong feature of Georgian parties, supporters' affinity to values and norms would not motivate a party to institutionalize its support base abroad. It is true that the number of young politicians is relatively high in Georgia. However, the key factor of their success, in most cases, is their higher degree of loyalty toward the party leadership rather than their expertise or professional experience.

Nevertheless, emphasis on the diaspora remains a relevant and popular narrative in Georgian politics. It appears to be a good tool for appealing to emigrants' families, but it also serves as a source of external legitimacy. In searching for this external recognition, and from that perspective, parties are tempted to exploit the linkages with the diaspora. Symbolic manifestations abroad by a few migrants in support of or against the policies often can be effectively transformed as a good public relations tool by the political parties to gain extra credibility.

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It is unlikely that, in the short term, Georgian political parties will institutionalize their structures abroad. However, international party-assistance organizations may help Georgian parties carry out gradual steps to better engage with its diaspora. This could include transfer of knowledge and expertise on building the party abroad. Another idea could be exploring the possibilities in transnational party cooperation. Five parties have an affiliation with the major European Party Federations—the so-called Europarties—which could support their sister parties in mobilizing supporters abroad. For example, Europarties and their political foundations could include oversight of supporters of the sister parties in networks (e.g., participation in public events and inclusion in email databases). This would benefit not only national parties in mobilizing and profiling their supporters but also Europarties, which



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would strengthen the ideological and institutional standing at both the national and European Union levels. ■

## NOTES

1. This figure is widely shared among experts. However, due to illegal immigration, accurate data are missing.
2. In 2018, remittances were higher than Foreign Direct Investments.

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## US PARTIES ABROAD: REPRESENTING VERSUS MOBILIZING EXPATRIATES

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On March 23, 2020, news arrived that Bernie Sanders had scored his biggest percentage-term victory so far in the US Democrats' presidential primary season, winning almost 58% of the vote (and nine of 13 delegates) in the Democrats Abroad (DA) Global Presidential Primary. By the time this news was released, 13 days after the contest concluded, public and private life in the United States was fully focused on Covid-19; therefore, the results garnered little attention. Yet, whatever its impact on the presidential race, for the Democrats, the far-flung contest marked a success in terms of voter mobilization. The 40,000 votes cast represented a 15% increase compared to 2016. This was a major organizational accomplishment, even if these voters were only a fraction of the more than 3 million voting-eligible US nonresidents.[1]

*With electoral turnout of Americans residing abroad remaining under 10% (Federal Voting Assistance Program 2018), and with more than 3 million US expatriates who are eligible to vote, there seems to be scope for increased overseas organizational efforts from both parties.*

The DA is one of two major partisan organizations dedicated to reaching out to this global electorate. In an era of many differences between the main US parties, perhaps it is no surprise that these organizations differ profoundly in both their legal status and relations with their parent parties. The DA is a suborganization of the Democratic Party, with seats on the Democratic National Committee and a status similar to that of a state party. In 2020, the DA used a Global Presidential Primary for the fourth time to allocate its pledged delegates to the Democrats' presidential nominating convention. The primary was open to all adult US citizens living abroad who support the Democratic Party.[2]

The DA's Republican counterpart is the Republicans Overseas (RO). Unlike the DA, the RO is not a party subunit. Instead, it is a registered 501(c)4 organization, making it an interest-advocacy group. In keeping with this advocacy status, its main political activities have revolved around lobbying to change or repeal the Foreign Account Tax Compliance Act and the Foreign Bank Account Report, policies that the organization considers unfair to expatriates. (For more details on both organizations, see Klekowski von Koppenfels 2020.) The RO—like its predecessor organization, Republicans Abroad—has never held seats in the Republican presidential nominating convention. As a result, it does not organize a primary or another process to allocate convention delegates (although in some presidential years, it has conducted a candidate straw poll). Lacking such an event to spur mobilization, the RO has less need to coordinate the work of its country affiliates, and it conducts less outreach to enlist supporters. Both the DA and the RO are similar in their low funding and almost exclusive reliance on volunteers. Neither organization releases membership figures; however, given that the largest RO chapters (in the United Kingdom and Germany) claim at most 1,000 members, its reach seems well below the participation levels recorded by the DA in its recent Global Presidential Primaries.

One reason that these differences in organizational capacity are notable is because two decades ago, the Republican expatriate operations were better funded and seemingly more effective, and the Party seemed to have good reasons to continue investing in them. Indeed, in 2003, Dark III (2003, 242) predicted that both US parties, given their large and growing numbers abroad, would increase their activities to mobilize overseas voters. However, this has turned out to be only (modestly) true for the Democrats, whereas the Republicans' overseas organizing has gone in another direction.

What explains these differences in US parties' approaches to the challenges and opportunities of representing and mobilizing expatriate partisans? Klekowski von Koppenfels (2020, 49) rightly notes that in the US system, federalized vote counting and the lack of congressional seats reserved for expatriates minimize incentives for parties or candidates to attempt to mobilize expatriate voters. However, she attributes the parties' organizational differences to their differing political philosophies: the Democrats see politics as more group-based and Republicans take a more individualistic approach. Nevertheless, it might be argued that it is Republicans, not Democrats, who mostly treat expatriates as a distinct group and who seek to represent them accordingly. Thus, the RO prioritizes advocating for co-partisans on an issue that uniquely affects expatriate citizens. In contrast, by constituting the DA as similar to a state-party organization, the Democrats are treating their expatriate supporters like all other supporters. That is, rather than being defined as having a shared interest, they are encouraged to make their voices heard by participating in the


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