„STAYING POWER"

Accounting for Ephemerality in the Georgian Party System Since 2012

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→ Georgia's post-Soviet experience of democracy continues to shape the dominant model of party formation to the present day, with most new entrants to the party system lacking deep roots in civil society and typically being led by individual 'entrepreneurs'.

→ Georgia's particular legacy of instability and insecurity incentivizes opportunistic, oligarchic behavior among leaders. This results in almost institutionalized cycles of conflict and cleavage, resulting in even more new parties whose fate is skewed towards ephemerality.

→ Although new parties continue to emerge and develop according to this established model, the example of Girchi – before its acrimonious split in December 2021 – shows that party-building within the system can be done differently. Programmatic distinctiveness, sustained legislative campaigning outside of electoral cycles, linkage to civil society movements, focus on a defined electorate and innovative party-building strategies can all help achieve sustainability.

FRIEDRICH EBERT STIFTUNG

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Contents

1

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

In one sense, the parliamentary elections held in Georgia in October 2020 were remarkable for the intensity of the subsequent political crisis and the novelty of the EU-mediated political settlement[1] that ended it. At the same time the 2020 elections have provided yet another opportunity to examine a perennially under-studied, but anecdotally well-established, feature of the Georgian party system: ephemerality.

Throughout the period of Georgia's post-Soviet independence, elections in Georgia have attracted significant numbers of new political contenders, each promising to deliver Georgia from its economic and geopolitical troubles and set the country on the road to development and success. There is nothing remarkable about this per se, especially in the context of a relatively new democracy and party system. But what is worth noting is the significant number of new entrants into the Georgian party system ahead of elections and the remarkable ability of promising new political movements, often with relatively well-known, well-educated and accomplished leaders, to fall far short of their own hype and, thereafter, to fizzle out into irrelevance and obscurity.

Of course, the last decade has been a boom period for political newcomers the world over, making the study of new political movements - and their capacity for long-term persistence - extremely relevant. Almost every established democracy in Europe has seen new entrants upset the political status quo over the last ten years, with many new political movements emerging from moments of crisis (the European financial crash,[2] the refugee crisis or Brexit[3]). On the other side of the Atlantic, the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States in November 2016 brought new dimensions to the increasing success of political newcomers. Some of these parties and movements - both on the left and the right - have managed to transcend the unique context in which they were born to become electorally persistent (if not always election-winning) political organizations. Others have all but disappeared within months of their formation.[4]

Being somewhat removed from this Euro-Atlantic context of 'old' democracies creaking under the pressure of 'new' crises, and existing within its own particular context of geo-political contention, economic vulnerability and the post-Soviet experience of democratization, Georgia presents an interesting case for the study of new political movements - one that can perhaps complement the increasing body of research and inquiry into new parties in Europe. As such, this paper sets out to answer the following questions: **Why are there so many new entrants on the Georgian political scene and why do so many of them subsequently recede into irrelevance and low-ratings after a few electoral cycles? What are the links between party origins, party adaptation to changing conditions and the party's (in)ability to survive as an influential political actor?**

This paper looks at new political parties in Georgia that have emerged since 2012. The period immediately before and after the parliamentary elections of October that year represent a 'liberalizing' moment in Georgian political history, with the transfer of power from the increasingly repressive government of the United National Movement to a political newcomer – the Georgian Dream coalition. The period after 2012 is also interesting because it has seen new entrants emerge from a variety of distinct origins, including party cleavage, protest movements[5] and political entrepreneurism, which, for the first time in Georgia's democratic history, provides a sufficient number of both 'new' and 'old' parties of different origin within one system to make the theoretical study of Georgian political parties worthwhile. Finally, an election of some kind has been held in Georgia almost every year since 2012, providing sustained impetus for the formation and participation of both new and old political parties. All of these conditions combine to make **the post-2012 period in Georgia a fascinating period of study**.

Despite the fact that the current ruling party of Georgia is itself a 'successful' newcomer to the party system (being registered as a party only six months before the 2012 elections it subsequently won), the full story of the Georgian Dream's rise to power and its ability to weather a number of deep

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1   https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/05/10/defusing-georgia-s-political-crisis-eu-foreign-policy-success-pub-84494

2   For example, Podemos in Spain.

3   Perhaps most notably the Brexit Party in the UK.

4   Change UK, formed by centrist defectors from the Labour and Conservative parties in February 2019 was dissolved a mere 10 months after its launch date, having failed to win any seats in European and Parliamentary elections.

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5   The new political party 'Citizens' can trace its origins to the development of urban activism in Tbilisi from 2009.

crises in recent years involves wider questions about governance and the state that lie far beyond the remit of this study of Georgia's party system. **The focus, then, remains on new pretenders in the political sphere and their attempts - failed or otherwise - to consolidate their position outside of government but within the party system**.

In preparing this paper, **a mixed and flexible methodology** has been used. Close reading of the academic literature on political party formation and persistence has been combined with both desk research and formal interviews on party-building in Georgia in general, and on the three case studies given in particular. In a departure from the methodology of many studies of politics in the post-Soviet space, this paper also draws on **the personal reflections of the author** himself in order to give a 'fly-on-the-wall' view of life in a Georgian party-in-formation. The author has been involved in political campaigns both within and without the party system[6] over the period covered by this paper and it is hoped that his reflections will help to 'flesh out' the picture of Georgian political organizations that is presented here.

The **first chapter of this paper looks at how political parties have been theorized**, especially within new democracies, and how both party origins, elite choice and institutional settings determine persistence within the party systems of new democracies. The **second chapter** will then look at how these theoretical concepts and classifications might apply to the types of parties that have emerged in Georgia over the last 30 years. Finally, **Chapter 3 will look at three new political movements** that have formed in Georgia since 2012, looking at where these parties fit into both the theoretical model introduced in Chapter 1 and the party system described in Chapter 2. The process of party formation and development will be analyzed and, in the case of one party – Lelo - For Georgia – the author will attempt to illustrate the internal dynamics of a party in formation based on personal experience. Finally, the author offers a number of conclusions.

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[6] In chronological order, the author worked on an English-language newsletter for the Georgian Dream party ahead of Parliamentary Elections in 2016; he stood as an independent candidate for membership of the Tbilisi City Assembly for Saburtalo District in Municipal Elections in October 2017 in a campaign that was politically aligned with independent Mayoral Candidate Aleksandre Elisashvili (now Chair of the political party 'Mokalakeebi'/'Citizens') ; he worked with the campaign of independent center-left majoritarian candidate Grigol Gegelia in the parliamentary by-election in Mtatsminda district in 2019 and finally became involved in the political movement, later party, Lelo – For Georgia serving as a member of the party's internal audit body between December 2019 and June 2020.

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ORIGINS, CHOICES AND INSTITUTIONAL SETTINGS: STUDYING PARTY 'EPHEMERALITY' IN NEW DEMOCRACIES

Origins

In order to understand the process of party formation, development and decline, it's essential to understand party origins. In this regard, Nicole Bolleyer's work on new parties in old, established democracies (Bolleyer 2013) has contributed to an understanding of how party origins continue to shape the choices that party elites make during the processes of adaptation and transformation.

Bolleyer's model distinguishes principally between those parties that are 'rooted' in pre-existing social formations, and those which are founded by 'entrepreneurs' (often liberals, but not exclusively), who have perceived a gap in the electoral 'market'. A classic example of rooted parties might be the socialist and labor parties of classic Western democracies and their origin in (and persistent linkages to) trade unions, but other examples could be Green or environmental parties that developed out of organized protest movements, or religious parties, that grew out of Church-affiliated organizations. Theoretically, rooted parties can also develop from capitalist interest groups, where such groups are highly organized. Entrepreneurial parties, on the other hand, are formed by individuals or groups that aren't explicitly affiliated with existing societal formations. These political entrepreneurs might be charismatic politicians that have defected from an existing political organization, or individuals that enjoy public exposure thanks to their activities in business or other spheres of public life. This distinction, Bolleyer argues, captures "basic structural preconditions … which are expected to shape a party's evolution in the long run" (Biezen 2005).

Choices

The trajectory of this party evolution is contingent upon the choices that parties go on to make, and here Bolleyer introduces another fundamental distinction. Parties may choose to 'institutionalize', and focus resources on creating a party structure that can survive a change in leadership, or they may decide to focus on consolidating the power of the party's leadership over that of the organization. Whether a party choses to 'institutionalize' is, Bolleyer argues, in part shaped by the structural conditions in which it is formed (i.e.,

its origins) and "the capacity of its elites to overcome a core tension inherent in the institutionalization process, namely the tension between the self-interest of party founders to protect their own position of influence in the party and the need to invest in a viable party infrastructure autonomous of its current leadership" (Bolleyer 2013).

As for achieving electoral persistence, being able to survive internal crises and the conflicting demands of being in public office, Bolleyer argues that there is a link between party origins, party choices and other variables (such as the distinctiveness of the party's policy program) which can provide a template of sorts for party success or failure. Rooted parties tend to enjoy the advantage of an incipient extra-parliamentary structure which helps to balance the distribution of power between members, the executive and the parliamentary party, as well as facilitating "value-infusion" – the process of uniting the party's members around a common set of moral and political values – before, during and after a party's spell in public office. For these rooted parties, a winning strategy is to focus on the "routinization of recruitment strategies and conflict resolutions". Entrepreneurial parties, on the other hand, should focus their attention on building an extra-parliamentary structure capable of withstanding "changes of leadership and electoral decline" (Casal Bertoa 2016). So important is the need to institutionalize that even rooted parties, when their leaders exhibit entrepreneurial tendencies, are likely over time to decline and perish.

Institutional Settings – New Democracies

Whilst party origins and party choices may give us clues as to a party's prospects for long-term success or failure, a fuller picture is only achieved by considering the institutional setting into which parties emerge and in which they continue to operate. First of all, it's clear that the historical period in which a party is born determines, to a large extent, its origins and therefore also its future trajectory. In Western democracies, there are governing parties that can trace their origins back more than a century, to processes of class formation and struggle and the extension of suffrage beyond a small, land-owning elite. These parties were born out of existing social cleavages – such as that between class

groups – and were formed in order to further the interests of specific groups in society. From the very beginning these parties enjoyed linkages with civil society and capitalist interest groups and while these linkages have changed over time – sometimes radically – they still influence the choices made by parties as they continue to evolve.

We can contrast this scenario with the radically different context into which parties emerged in the post-communist polities of Eastern and Central Europe, as well as the countries of the former Soviet Union. Here parties emerge into a society in which capitalist interest groups are under-formed and oligarchical, civil society is small and slow to develop and free, independent trade unions are rarely encountered. Party affiliation also carries negative social connotations in many post-Communist societies and all of this means that parties emerge into the post-communist world without any existing representation "on the ground". As a result, in most cases, the first parties to be launched were both rootless (or at least "unrooted") and entrepreneurial, with their leaders often being reformed figures from the old regime. As the theorist Ingrid van Biezen notes, even where democratization is brought about through a wave of mass mobilization, national movements are neither coherent enough, nor do they represent a sufficiently enduring social cleavage, to form the basis of new, rooted organizations (Biezen 2003).

It is also the case that the peculiarities of the post-communist environment influence party development and condition elite choices. Firstly, it is important to remember that post-communist politics was, from the outset, "not so much about policies as about polities" (Biezen 2005). In other words, the principle issues at stake were not so much the distribution of resources and political representation – the standard fare of established democracies – but rather the nature and direction of regime change, the 'rules of the game' and the character of the new constitutional order. As such, political parties in new democracies have always been less interested in ideology than their counterparts in older democracies.

Secondly, the absence of pre-existing social linkages has helped forge parties which are indifferent to the development of large and active memberships. Party offices tend to be made up of paid professionals and active volunteer members are given few responsibilities. Another symptom of this indifference to membership and affiliation is the phenomenon of unaffiliated, 'independent' candidates running for office under party banners, something which is common across the post-Soviet space[7] and rarely, if ever, encountered in more established democracies.[8] Other symptoms of this indifference to active membership include minimal party presence outside of cities, and, obviously, a lack of formal linkages between parties and organized interest groups, such as trade unions, business associations, civil society and protest movements (Biezen 2003).

Finally, it is worth bearing in mind that many parties emerged into an electoral environment in which financial subventions from the state were enshrined in law either immediately after democratization or from a relatively early stage. For many parties, state subsidies represent a significant part of declared income, especially outside of election periods, and membership fees, if they are paid at all, are an almost insignificant source of funding. This can be contrasted with the conditions in which parties developed in more established democracies, which were incentivized early on to develop linkages with organized groups that could provide financial and other support, and where state subsidies were introduced at a later stage of party development. This environment is linked to two key processes in the development of parties in new democracies. Firstly, state subsidies incentivize the étatisation of political parties at an early stage, pushing them closer into reliance on the state and further away from reliance on the electorate. Secondly, it supports the internal oligarchization of parties, with party elites unaccountable before a largely disempowered membership. One natural consequence of party oligarchization is the entrenchment of key figures as party leaders, with peaceful leadership contests far less frequent than in established democracies.[9]

Ephemerality

Before looking at how these theoretical observations might help us make predictions about the prospects for success for new parties in new democracies like Georgia, we must first define what we mean by 'success' and 'failure'. Bolleyer's model includes definitions of short-term 'survival', which she terms 'sustainability' and which refers to the party's ability to institutionalize (i.e., develop a robust extra-parliamentary structure) that can help sustain it through electoral decline after an initial breakthrough. A party that still forms part of a party system decades later; still fielding candidates and continuing to play a role in political debate, is deemed to have achieved 'persistence'.

The opposite of persistence is also difficult to measure. State funding allows small parties to persist, even to field candidates, long after any significant electoral support has evaporated. Some such parties manage to survive as parasites of larger, better-resourced parties by joining electoral blocs. As such, 'party death', in the sense of deregistration and dis-

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7   Georgia's current president, Salome Zurabishvili, stood as an independent backed by the ruling party. She was elected in the same way to parliament in 2016, standing as an independent majoritarian for Mtatsminda constituency in Tbilisi.

8   One similar phenomenon which might invite comparison is the existence of 'independent unionists' from Northern Ireland that have often been elected to Parliament in Westminster. However, it must be noted that these independents are usually selected by committees made up of members of local protestant organizations in a very similar way to standard selection procedures in mainstream parties.

9   These observations are not to be taken as an argument against state funding for political parties, and the subject of state subventions is only mentioned here in order to illustrate how a lack of accountability before a fee-paying membership can result in oligarchical modes of leadership from the earliest stage of development, which in turn influences the party's prospects for long-term persistence.

appearance, is a rare phenomenon and we could say that most parties in Georgia persist on 'life support' with minimal electoral success.

Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, 'ephemerality' will be defined simply as the **failure of a party to increase its vote share above 5% of the proportional vote within three subsequent elections without running in an electoral bloc.** Although there is arguably a degree of arbitrariness in the adoption of these three criteria, they have been selected in order to give at least some empirical grounding to distinctions that are often complex and subjective. The aim here is simply to identify those parties which can – by whatever means – attract sufficient resources and translate those resources into a significant increase in electoral support, and those which can't. Similarly, while "ephemeral" might not be the most precise description of parties that persist with extremely modest vote shares for many years at a stretch, the term is perhaps one way of capturing the gap between the "hype" and expectations around a new party during its period of initial formation and its actual electoral performance.

In conclusion, we can learn a lot from existing theorizations of party development in established democracies, but ultimately, party building in post-Soviet polities must be viewed as a process sui generis. As Bolleyer argues, origins matter, and parties in new democracies invariably carry a different kind of "baggage" – in terms of constraints, impulses and incentives – than their counterparts in old democracies.

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PARTY ORGANIZATION *À LA GÉORGIENNE* – THE POST-2012 PICTURE

Fundamentally, party persistence – and electoral success – in both systems depends on the ability of party leaders to prioritize party building over their own narrow personal interests, but as we have argued above, the particular conditions of post-Soviet democratic transition in countries like Georgia weigh heavily on new parties, tipping the scales in favor of ephemerality.

As noted above, there is plenty to be learned from studying the shared heritage of post-Soviet democracies, but that should in no way lead to a perception of the post-Soviet space as monolithic or homogeneous. Firstly, the successor states to the Soviet Union display a huge variety of regime types – from the successful EU-member democracies of the Baltic Region to the "hermit kingdom" of Turkmenistan. At the same time, each new polity has experienced its own particular set of political challenges, including separatist conflicts and civil wars, "color revolutions" and varying degrees of interference by – and involvement with – the old center of power, now invested in the Russian Federation. Additional variables include the ethnic composition of the population, local dynamics of conflict and violence, natural resource rents and opportunities for economic development. Finally, and of particular relevance to Georgia, Western institutional presence and/or pressure represents yet another thread in the diverse tapestry of post-Soviet politics – all of which is bound to shape party systems as much as anything else.

Georgia's immediate post-Soviet breakdown into territorial conflict has been well-documented elsewhere, and the story of Georgia's 'Rose Revolution' and subsequent global promotion as the poster-child of pro-Western reform is well known. Given that our remit is Georgia from 2012, this brief section on the Georgian party system picks up the narrative on the eve of the parliamentary elections of October 2012, which resulted in the country's first peaceful transfer of power.

By 2011, it had become clear that Saakashvili's party had lost legitimacy both nationally and abroad. Against a backdrop of increasing tensions with Russia and the breakaway republics, Saakashvili's government sought to quash opposition through control of the country's media outlets, with the storming of Imedi TV by police forces being a watershed moment. Although the country's devastating war with the

Russian Federation in August 2008 galvanized the nation against Russian aggression, it also resulted in a fresh wave of refugees from Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and many were left feeling that the war could have been avoided altogether. Surveillance of civilians and police crackdowns further heightened tensions within the country.

It was into this febrile atmosphere that a new pretender appeared in the form of billionaire businessman Bidzina Ivanishvili. Ivanishvili's personal fortune[10] was largely derived from business activities in Russia and in 2012 was roughly equivalent to 46% of Georgia's GDP (Lebanidze and Kakachia 2017). He had also been associated with a number of charitable causes through this Cartu Foundation. This large personal fortune and reputation for generosity endowed Ivanishvili with significant national legitimacy, and he embarked on the formation of a broad-based, catch-all electoral bloc led by his new party, Georgia Dream-Democratic Georgia, co-opting a number of opposition leaders and movements from across the political spectrum. After a prison torture scandal erupted in 2012, the bloc swept to power in parliamentary elections the same year.

Saakashvili's UNM was thrown into crisis by this electoral defeat. With Saakashvili facing various criminal charges at home and no longer enjoying the immunity of office, he was forced to emigrate first to the US and then to Ukraine. Tensions emerged over Saakashvili's attempts to lead the party remotely through video conference calls, and his position was further threatened by his loss of Georgian citizenship in 2015. Two new movements emerged from this crisis ahead of parliamentary elections in 2016, the first of which was the libertarian New Political Center – Girchi, founded by Zurab Japaridze, which is discussed in detail below, while the second was (For a) New Georgia led by UNM defector and former Deputy Justice Minister Giorgi Vashadze.

The period after Georgia's Parliamentary elections in October 2016 saw the crisis in opposition deepen even further. The ruling GD party had by this time shed some of its former coalition partners and adopted a governing style that

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could be characterized as *cooptive or oligarchic informal governance* (Lebanidze and Kakachia 2017) and managed to achieve a supermajority in parliament, pushing the UNM's vote share down to 27.11%[11]. In January 2017, 21 of the party's 27 MPs left the UNM and formed a center-right party called European Georgia, which has had mixed fortunes in subsequent elections.

It's worth pointing out here that the UNM has a claim to being the first former ruling party in post-Soviet Georgia to persist beyond losing power. The Communist Party all but disappeared under Shevardnadze, which wasn't the case in all post-Soviet countries. Similarly, Shevardnadze's Union of Citizens of Georgia (UCG) failed to re-assert itself in any meaningful form after the Rose Revolution. Perhaps the secret to the UNM's persistence within the ruling party system, despite the many defections it has suffered, lies in Georgia's polarized information environment. The TV channel Rustavi 2 was instrumental in carrying pro-opposition messages before and during the Rose Revolution in 2003 and remained loyal to Saakashvili's government thereafter. In the wake of the 2012 transfer of power, it found a new direction under Saakashvili loyalist Nika Gvaramia, who had held ministerial positions in the former government. In the post 2012 era, Rustavi 2 combined innovative entertainment programming with fierce criticism of the Georgian Dream government un-

til 2019, when a court-ordered change of ownership led to a new editorial slant. Since then, Nika Gvaramia's brand of sensationalist anti-government reporting has found a new home in the newly-established Mtavari Arkhi ('Main Channel'), setting out a view of contemporary Georgia – accepted by many – in which GD is nothing more than a corrupt stooge of the Kremlin.

This paper is not about ruling party typology in Georgia, but the observations made above are important for this study, since ruling parties have traditionally been a key source of new political entrants in the Georgian party system. Of the eight opposition parties that won seats in the October 2020 parliamentary elections, three came into existence as a result of a schism in a former ruling party[12]. The UNM is both a former ruling party and one that itself resulted from a party cleavage. The remaining four consist of two recent, liberal newcomers (Lelo – For Georgia and Citizens), one conservative newcomer dating back to 2012 and the Georgian Labour party, which has been in opposition since it was founded in 1995.

How can we account for this high number of cleavages? Well, it's worth bearing in mind that Georgia since independence has been both economically and institutionally unstable. This instability de-incentivizes long-term planning and incentivizes opportunistic, short-term political calculation. In order to

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Figure 1
Parties elected to the Parliament in October/November 2020 and their origins

Party	% won*	Seats	Date Founded	Origin
Georgian Dream	48.22	90	2012	New Entrant – Coalition
UNM – Strength in Unity	27.18	36	2001	Cleavage – UCG
European Georgia (w/Free Democrats)	3.79	5	2017	Cleavage – UNM
(For a) New Georgia – Strategy Aghmash.	3.15	4	2016	Cleavage – UNM
Lelo – For Georgia	3.15	4	2019	New Entrant – Entrepreneur
Alliance of Patriots	3.14	4	2012	New Entrant – Entrepreneur
Girchi	2.89	4	2015	Cleavage – UNM
Citizens**	1.33	2	2020	New Entrant – Rooted/Entrepreneur
Labour Party	1.00	1	1995	Veteran Entrant (1995)

*   This represents the party's share of the proportional vote. Under the system used to elect this parliament, 120 of the seats were allocated according to results of the 'party list' ballot, where voters select the party of their choice, while the remaining 30 were filled by candidates winning the 'majoritarian' ballot, where named candidates were elected after gaining 50% of the vote. In the event that the leading candidate failed to win 50% of the vote in their district, a run-off election was held between the two leading candidates.

**   Aleko Elisashvili's candidacy for the 2014 local elections grew out of a growing urban protest movement in which he had been a prominent figure. He enjoyed the support of this movement during his campaign for Mayor of Tbilisi in 2017. According to the typology presented by Bolloyer, the author would classify Elisashvili as an entrepreneurial leader of a semi-rooted movement with limited national reach.

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11 See Lebanidze and Kakachia, 2017 for an analysis of how Saakashvili's remote interference negatively affected his party's campaigning in Georgia.

12 European Georgia, Strategy Aghmashenebeli, Girchi.

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maximize chances of success, pretenders seek to co-opt as much of the political spectrum as they can, creating fractious coalitions and blocs of non-affiliated political leaders. Both the UNM and GD came to power with the support of other parties, and both experienced the defection of coalition partners within a few years of gaining power. Once they're rid of coalition partners, party leaders have no incentive to balance power within their own parties. Tensions between an oligarchic executive and the party's parliamentary wing eventually triggers another round of defections.

After nearly 9 years in power, the Georgian Dream party is facing its own cleavages. The decision to allow a visiting Russian MP to chair an inter-parliamentary meeting in June 2019 sparked large-scale anti-government demonstrations. The GD party responded by offering to pass legislation to bring in an entirely proportional system for parliamentary elections and to lower the barrier for entry. When the reform bill failed to pass after a rebellion by majoritarian MPs, protests resumed and a number of prominent Georgian Dream members left the party in protest. Some of these MPs went on to form a new party – Our Georgia - Solidarity Alliance, which took only 0.43% of the vote[13] in October 2020,[14] thus failing to win a seat in parliament.

Apart from these post-cleavage formations, new parties have also formed around figures from the worlds of philanthropy and business. Georgian opera singer, Paata Burchuladze, entered political life first by creating a social movement in November 2015, and then in May 2016, founding the political party 'State for the People'. This party established a new pattern of entry which has been followed by other newcomers in the post-2012 period: the foundation of a social movement, followed by co-optive recruitment and ultimately, formal party status. Aleko Elisashvili, who had been elected as an independent member of Tbilisi City Assembly in 2014 and stood for mayor in 2017, founded a 'civic movement' shortly after his election bid, which has now transformed into the political party 'Citizens'. Likewise, Mamuka Khazaradze founded Lelo in the summer of 2019 as a social movement, before transforming it into a political party in December that year. Reporting requirements for social movements – often registered as NGOs – are less stringent than they are for political parties, allowing new entrants to develop regional networks, hire staff and receive funding before formally registering as a party. The existence of a putative future political party also places the new movements on the radar of pollsters, allowing new entrants to track and analyze their own popularity without having to fork out for expensive research. As we will see below, however, new parties have hardly been rewarded electorally for delaying their own formal entry into politics in the post-2012 period.

To conclude, in the Georgian context, new entrants have typically been rootless entrepreneurs, as we would expect in a new democracy. Georgia's legacy of instability and insecurity incentivizes opportunistic, oligarchic behaviors among leaders and effectively institutionalizes party cleavages, resulting in a particularly high number of new entrants whose fate is – by virtue of their origins – skewed towards ephemerality.

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13 https://results.cec.gov.ge/#/ka-ge/election_43/dashboard

14 In fact, the results of the 2020 poll present a stark lesson for any wannabe defectors hoping to replace their former party. Ex-MP Davit Chichinadze's "conservative left-wing" party Tribuna, formed in 2019, garnered only 0.51% of the vote. Eka Beselia, former Chair of the Parliament's Legal Affairs Committee who at one stage appeared almost nightly on political talk shows, founded a party called For Justice after resigning from Georgian Dream, taking 0.1% in the 2020 election.

4

CASE STUDIES

The next section of this paper will look in more detail at the stories of three political movements from the post-2012 period. Their origins will be examined, as well as their particular approaches to party building and adaptation. In the case of Lelo, the author offers his own personal reflections on that party's experience of party-building.

NEW POLITICAL CENTER – GIRCHI

Girchi's beginnings can be traced back to a group of defectors from the UNM after their electoral defeat in 2012. Zurab Japaridze, who had entered parliament through the UNM's party list in 2012, quit the party in May 2015 together with three other MPs, citing the party's failure to 'renew' itself after defeat. The group talked of a need to 're-shape' the country's political spectrum ahead of the 2016 election by forming a 'new political center' with bold and ambitious plans for the country's development.[15] The party was officially founded at a congress held on 16 April 2016, with Zurab Japaridze elected Chairman. The new party's ideological positioning[16] was explicitly liberal-libertarian and pro-Western from the outset.

Throughout the spring and summer of 2016, Girchi embarked on a process of fundraising and opening regional offices with a view to participating in upcoming parliamentary elections. Party membership was introduced. According to one key member interviewed,[17] the failure of these activities to improve the party's ratings – less than 3% in June 2016 – was one factor behind the new party's decision to seek the support of an electoral bloc. On 5 August 2016 Girchi joined another newcomer – ex-UNM MP Giorgi Vashadze's 'New Georgia' – and the 'New Rights' party in an electoral bloc. Two weeks later, the bloc was joined by another newcomer, opera singer Paata Burchuladze's State for the People,[18] which enjoyed a slightly higher political rating of around 5%.[19] However, Girchi promptly left the new block less than

two weeks before polling day, citing bad management and financial problems within the Burchuladze-led bloc.[20] The split was acrimonious and public, and meant Girchi could no longer participate in the elections.

As a result of these events, Girchi entered a period of crisis and reflection, as private sector donors abandoned the party. The crisis resulted in an experimental move away from resource-intensive traditional party building practices.[21] Costs were cut, regional offices closed, volunteers and interns replaced paid staff and donations were sought from among the membership, rather than private companies. The party developed new online platforms for communication with its members and was especially active on Facebook. The liberalization of drug policy in Georgia – especially regarding the recreational use of cannabis – had been a leading policy direction for Girchi from the start, but the party now started to actively lobby for more liberal laws. It carried out a well-publicized act of mass civil disobedience at the end of 2016 in which members planted cannabis seeds in the party's Tbilisi office, which, at the time, was punishable by up to 12 years' imprisonment. The incident was investigated but the party escaped with nothing more than an administrative fine. Throughout 2017, Girchi combined more explicitly liberal and libertarian rhetoric with headline-grabbing stunts designed to appeal to frustrated younger voters. In March 2017, the party registered its own religious organization and started consecrating its members as clergy in order to offer a legal way out of compulsory military conscription. The party suffered a minor setback in 2017, when it failed to gather enough signatures to compete in local elections held in October, but Zurab Japaridze stood in presidential elections in June 2018, gaining 2.26% of the vote. The party also fielded a candidate in the 2019 parliamentary by-election in Mtatsminda, with Hermann Szabó finishing fourth with 4.76% of the vote.[22] They again grabbed news headlines when it launched its 'Shmaxi' service, providing a legal way for taxi drivers to avoid new regulations in Tbilisi by registering them as educators, with passengers paying them for the 'lecture' they receive, rather than the distance travelled.

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15 https://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=28300

16 https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1172152932836164

17 Interview with Toresa Mossy, 11/10/2020

18 https://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=29382

19 http://www.civil.ge/files/files/2016/NDI-Poll-PoliticalRatings-June2016.pdf

20 https://civil.ge/archives/125782

21 Interview with Toresa Mossy, 11/10/2020

22 https://civil.ge/archives/306867

Figure 2
Girchi's Electoral Results Since Formation

Year	Type	Vote Share (Number of Votes)
2016	Parliamentary	N/A
2017	Local	N/A
2018	Presidential	2.26% (36 034)
2019	Parliamentary By-Election	4.76% (701)
2020	Parliamentary	2.89%

In recent years, the party has also changed the way in which it interacts with members and makes collective decisions. In 2019, the party launched both an online portal and a digital currency – the Georgian Dollar or 'GeD' for use among their members. GeDs can be bought by making a financial donation to the party, but they can also be earned by party volunteers. GeDs can be distributed between political leaders and the more GeDs a leader is given, the higher their position on the party's list of candidates for proportional elections. The party also launched an online TV channel in 2019, which featured both re-broadcasts and its own live, political talk shows.

Despite demonstrating an ability to innovate on party organization and decision-making, and despite developing a knack for headline-grabbing political stunts, Girchi's results in the October 2020 parliamentary elections were a mixed bag. The party garnered 2.89% of the proportional vote nationally, gaining them 4 seats in parliament for the first time since the party's founding members had resigned from the UNM five years earlier. The party also increased its vote share in the capital Tbilisi, coming third in the proportional vote. However, Girchi joined other opposition parties in refusing to take up their seats in parliament. In December 2020, tensions in the party came to a head after Iago Khvichia, one of the party's more flamboyantly doctrinaire libertarian faces, publicly expressed support for a suspect in a child pornography case. Zurab Japaridze subsequently left the party in early December, and by the end of the month had launched an "alternative" Girchi together with supporters, called Girchi - More Freedom. The "new" Girchi uses the same logo as the original party, ostensibly because the party's libertarian ideology rejects the concept of intellectual property rights.[23] Both Girchis participated in local elections in October 2021. Girchi – More Freedom received 1,44% of the nationwide proportional vote, while the rump Girchi party headed by Khvichia et al. garnered less than 1%.[24]

Girchi's party-building trajectory is quite distinct from that of other parties in the Georgian system, even among post-2012

newcomers. The crisis of 2016 caused the party to eschew resource-intensive party building and adopt a more streamlined approach, displaying a degree of adaptability and ingenuity rare among small, liberal newcomers. Although the party began with no formal links to civil society, it managed to form a coherent membership from young, educated, liberal Tbilisians. Its positions on cannabis consumption and military conscription attracted supporters from rural areas too. It crafted an organizational structure that was cheap to run, interactive and transparent, with members empowered in important decision making, such as candidate selection. It had multiple platforms for value-infusion, such as its TV channel, but perhaps more important than anything else, it had a clear political mission outside of electoral contests. Even when not preparing for elections, Girchi was almost constantly engaged in some kind of campaign directly related to its core libertarian values. Girchi's ideological positions were never likely to appeal to a majority of Georgian voters – especially conservatives and older voters – but Girchi managed to create and sustain a loyal membership base which extended, to some degree, beyond the capital city. It had a clearly-defined electorate and campaigned on issues of direct relevance to that electorate, successfully forming linkages with a popular movement for drug liberalization. In the post-2012 period, no other party has managed to do this so effectively – despite the emergence of noteworthy grassroots movements around environmental issues and workplace safety. In the end, Girchi was brought down by the inability of its leaders to practice the art of compromise and the slavish adherence to doctrinal positions. Whichever one of the two Girchis manages to overcome this organizational dysfunction whilst continuing to innovate in party-building will very likely manage to claim the Girchi brand at the expense of its rival. While Girchi may be considered an 'ephemeral' movement according to the criteria set out in this study, it has at least managed to achieve a modest degree of 'staying power'. Girchi's fortunes are unlikely to change radically in the near future, even if it does survive the current schism, but if the party manages to consolidate its current levels of electoral support, it could well find itself in the running for selection as a coalition partner in future electoral scenarios.

PAATA BURCHULADZE – STATE FOR THE PEOPLE

Paata Burchuladze is an internationally successful operatic bass, whose singing career spanned a period from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s. In 2004, he launched a charitable foundation called 'Iavnana' ('Lullaby'), which organized charitable concerts and provided assistance to children in need. Burchuladze's stature was further boosted by his role as a UN Goodwill Ambassador, which he took on in 2006, later acting in a similar capacity for UNICEF from 2010. Due to his high public stature, Burchuladze periodically fielded questions about his own political ambitions from 2008 onwards,[25] consistently denying his plans. In November 2015, Burchuladze registered a new or-

23   https://civil.ge/archives/389111
24   https://results.cec.gov.ge/#/en-us/election_45/dashboard
25   https://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=17497

ganization – 'The Georgian Development Foundation' – which sparked speculation that he could be about to launch a political party. Burchuladze himself, however, remained non-committal, refusing to rule-out entering politics.[26] Burchuladze's organization was included in the influential IRI public opinion poll of April 2016, which showed that, if it were to become a political party, it would likely enjoy the support of 12% of the electorate. This rating sparked a flurry of party-building, with Burchuladze approaching and recruiting new faces. The party's founding – under the name State for the People – was announced in May 2016, and on 18 August 2016 it entered into coalition with the New Rights (a conservative party that dated back to 2001 and launched the careers of several politicians, including GD Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili), New Georgia and Girchi. However, this decision to form an electoral block with former members of the UNM was controversial among some members, and the following day, one of the party's most prominent new faces – Merab Metreveli – expressed his public dissatisfaction at the decision.[27] Metreveli relates that, during this period, decisions were made behind closed doors, and he was frequently excluded from decision-making, even as he was campaigning publicly for the party. The party's large network of regional offices also reportedly overstretched the organization's finances. During this same period, Burchuladze was also distracted by a public slanging match with Bidzina Ivanishvili, and on 14 September, an investigation was launched into the release of an illegally-recorded phone call between Burchuladze and head of opposition channel Rustavi 2, Nika Gvaramia[28] in which the latter accused Burchuladze of harboring pro-Georgian Dream elements with his bloc. Less than two weeks later, Girchi publicly and acrimoniously left the bloc and the three-party grouping went on to scrape 3.45% of the vote, failing to pass the then 5% threshold for parliamentary mandates. Burchuladze himself left the party – and Georgian politics – in December of 2016 and the party leadership passed to a 24-year-old activist, Nika Machutadze. The party continues to function as part of an opposition alliance, but its individual public rating is less than 1%.

Burchuladze is a classic example of an unrooted entrepreneurial entrant. He came to Georgian politics without a clear legislative or economic platform and didn't even openly commit to the political career he had started until 6 months before the election, preferring to let 'life' show him if politics was the right path for him.[29] The strategy of creating a foundation in order to consolidate support and build membership seems to have been an expensive waste of funds with no obvious benefits. Not only were ordinary members excluded from decision-making, prominent members were also left out in the cold. The formation of an electoral bloc so early in its life-cycle indicates that the party lacked a clear identity of its own, and the party's proportional list of candidates included some individuals who weren't even party members.[30] The party lacked

a consistent platform, ideology and message from the very beginning, and chose to co-opt inexperienced journalists, political commentators and other elite figures in imitation of the ruling party that it opposed. Fundamentally, when confronted with the conflicting imperatives of building a sustainable party organization and pursuing short-term, personal ambitions, Burchuladze was unable to balance or compromise. Today, State for the People is functionally dead, and its young chair has proven unable to turn this state of affairs around. Hindsight is, of course, a wonderful thing, but State for the People was on a collision course with failure right from the start, and the lessons its story offers should be heeded by all potential new entrants to the Georgian system.

LELO – FOR GEORGIA

Lelo – For Georgia is the creation of Mamuka Khazaradze and his long-term business partner, Badri Japaridze. The pair founded a new bank – TBC – during the chaos and collapse of the 1990s which went on to become Georgia's second biggest commercial bank by the mid-2010s, listed on the London Stock Exchange. In 2016, the Georgian government awarded Khazaradze's Anaklia Development Consortium a $2.5 billion contract to construct a deep sea port at Anaklia on Georgia's Black Sea coast, a potentially game-changing piece of infrastructure and key link in east-west freight routes. The Consortium initially enjoyed government support, but disagreements over who would underwrite the large amounts of debt the project would incur eventually soured the deal and the contract was cancelled. In July 2019, Khazaradze announced his plans to create a political movement to participate in parliamentary elections in 2020, and five days later the Georgian government brought charges of fraud against both him and Japaridze, relating to a transaction made in 2011[31]. Khazaradze condemned the move as politically motivated, left TBC Bank and proceeded to launch a social movement called 'Lelo', which refers to a 'try' in rugby, as well as being the name of a Georgian version of the game. The social movement consisted largely of former employees of the Anaklia Development Consortium and TBC bank, and a period of intense co-optive recruitment followed. The new movement attracted well-known newcomers to politics, such as the prominent lawyers Ana Natsvlishvili and Kakha Kojoridze. Ahead of its official founding, the party also announced that Lelo would be absorbing both the New Rights party and the Development Movement, which had been led by former parliament speaker Davit Usupashvili. The party was launched in December 2019 and some polls indicated support of up to 10%. However, internal tensions became public in June 2020, when executive council member Lasha Bakradze left the party in protest at comments made by Khazaradze against same-sex marriage. In July 2020, five members of the Telavi office of Lelo, including the local chair, left the party,[32] claiming that important decisions on staffing were being made without con-

26 https://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=28791

27 http://www.tabula.ge/ge/verbatim/110931-metreveli-ukmakofi-lo-var-gaertianebit-ar-aris-gamoricxuli-davtovo-partia

28 https://agenda.ge/en/news/2016/2169

29 https://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=28791

30 Including Davit Jandieri, who was interviewed for this paper and was

actively involved in the work of both the foundation and the party.

31 https://eurasianet.org/in-georgian-politics-its-millionaire-vs-billionaire

32 https://1tv.ge/news/lelo-saqartvelostvis-kakhetis-organizacia-parti-is-khutma-wevrma-mat-shoris-tavmjdomarem-datova/

sultation. Like all parties in 2020, Lelo's pre-election activities were hampered by the global Covid-19 pandemic, but even before restrictions were introduced, Lelo struggled to break into news cycles and the public conscience. It won 3.15% of the vote in the parliamentary election of 2020, winning four seats in parliament. It joined other opposition parties in boycotting parliament before eventually taking its seats under the EU-brokered 'Michel Deal' of April 2021. During the municipal elections of 2021, Lelo received 2,71% of the proportional vote nationwide, thus receiving less support than one year before.

PARTY BUILDING SEEN FROM WITHIN - THE AUTHOR'S ADVENTURE WITH LELO

Since the author finds himself in the unusual position of having been a member of one of the parties analyzed here, it seems remiss not to include some personal reflections within the body of this paper, for which the reader will forgive a digression into first-person narration.

I joined Lelo in November 2019 together with two other left-of-center public figures with electoral or campaign experience, Irakli Kupradze and Grigol Gegelia. I had previously stood as an independent candidate for Tbilisi's Municipal Council (Sakrebulo) in October 2017, running a grassroots campaign in the central Tbilisi district of Saburtalo. My pre-election campaign drew on my profile both as a vociferous campaigner against urban chaos and an anomaly in the world of Georgian politics, being a naturalized citizen of British origin with (relatively) fluent Georgian. During the campaign I turned down offers to explore 'cooperation' with two parties, including Georgian Dream, and chose to back the mayoral candidacy of Aleko Elisashvili, who had been elected to the seat I was contesting in 2014. I managed to garner 14% of the vote in Saburtalo, putting me in third place ahead of many more established players and I managed to score an effective PR goal in the midst of defeat, by publicly undertaking the removal of my own election posters from the city streets. The story of the conscientious European candidate, contrasted with ruling party (and more generally, Georgian) complacency went viral and I enjoyed a period of intense coverage on Georgian TV chat shows at the end of 2017 – an opportunity I approached with both enthusiasm and trepidation. Throughout 2018 I struggled to transform my newly-elevated public profile into an effective grassroots movement for better urban politics, leading an unsuccessful campaign against a new traffic flyover in Saburtalo in 2018, and a well-attended but ultimately fruitless rally for road safety in the wake of a cyclist's death in a traffic accident in early 2019. Also in 2019 I became involved in the campaign to elect Grigol Gegelia, a left-wing campaigner recently returned from studies abroad, to the parliament in the contentious by-election of May that year. Due to what I perceived as a lack of basic organizational ability within the group of campaigners, I withdrew active support for the campaign without making it public that I had done so. Gegelia finished fifth in that race with 3.14% of the vote.

In October 2019, Gegelia, Kupradze and I began discussing the possibility of joining Lelo as new faces of the movement. All of us had enjoyed some public exposure (Kupradze as a campaigner for the rights of students and workers) but were also frustrated with having to campaign with limited resources. A meeting with Mamuka Khazaradze, Badri Japaridze and other party members made it clear that the leadership saw Lelo as a centrist political force that could draw on ideas from both left and right and we received an assurance that we would be able to shape the party's policy on a living wage and increased powers for the country's Labor inspectorate.[33] As such, I joined Lelo on 15 November 2019 and immediately set to work promoting the party brand and increasing membership.

Almost immediately, internal communication, organization and strategy was an issue. I would miss important meetings because I hadn't been told about them and lots of time was spent chatting about ideas that never got off the ground. Throughout November and December of 2019, the party was consumed with the formalities of how to participate in anti-government protests sparked by GD's failure to pass amendments to the electoral law. Discussions about whether Lelo should cooperate with this or that opposition figure or party were unfocused and, for many of my colleagues, this seemed to matter far more than the urgent need to articulate a distinct political identity. Work on Lelo's external communication and strategy for success was conducted without the participation of the growing group of 'faces' (of which I was one) by a group of UK-based consultants who worked in relative isolation behind closed doors. The party offices, spread over three locations in Tbilisi, employed a staff drawn from former employees of TBC Bank, the Anaklia Consortium and other businesses directly associated with Khazaradze and Japaridze. Natsvlishvili and Kojoridze had apparently been hired on separate contracts for legal services to the new social movement, although they acted principally as spokespeople for the nascent party brand. Assurances were given that the other party 'faces' would also be given job descriptions (including responsibilities in policy-making) and salaries, but that this would be sorted out after the party's founding congress to be held in December 2019. The founding congress was an uplifting event, attracting 2000 delegates from around the country and delivered to a high standard of production. I was honored to be one of the speakers at the event (granted this privilege – no doubt – by dint of my distinct background) and was elected to the party's internal oversight body to deal with membership issues and party finances. At the end of 2019, the party moved into new offices in the shopping center attached to Tbilisi Central train station.

After spending two weeks in the UK over Christmas and New Year, I returned to our Tbilisi office in January 2020 to find that new biometric security locks had been put on the doors of my workspace and that I no longer had access to the office space where the procurement or membership teams worked. I was told that this was to protect membership data, which was partially undigitized, but it also meant that I couldn't plan events for members or discuss the availability of modest event funding without writing emails, which were often left unanswered.

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33 These assurances were duly honored and Lelo continued to formally support these policies throughout my time there.

Access to the party executive became increasingly difficult, as they occupied rooms on the floors above the lower, more public, office and there were no set office hours. All of this increased my anxiety that I was expected to act simply as a medium-level public face for the party, and would have no influence on policy making. Agreement on payment of a salary continued to be delayed. The only system for internal communication at this point was a WhatsApp group consisting of members of the Executive Political Council, the Audit Committee, heads of new regional organizations and other public faces of the party. This form of communication proved to be extremely frustrating, and many members complained that important information about events, meetings and political messaging got lost in spurious chat and late-night correspondence. There was minimal use of our new party email addresses.

During February, March and April, I chose to shift my focus to the grassroots organization that I believed to be my strength. During this period Lelo enjoyed an influx of young people inspired by the invitation to participate in a new political movement for change. I chose to set up a group for volunteers interested in environmental issues, and chose to focus on practical projects – such as community litter picks and environmental campaigns – in order to give members a framework for their volunteer efforts. Similar groups were set up by other 'faces' on foreign affairs, security and cultural issues, but these groups became moribund almost as soon as they were established when it became clear that ordinary members would not be involved in forming policy positions or running campaigns and therefore had nothing to do. During this period Lelo lost a large number of young volunteers who left in frustration at having no practical outlet for their interests. Party leaders would hold large public events in the office's indoor amphitheatre space, but the point of these meetings, beyond articulating platitudes about Lelo's political aspirations and the competency of its core team, was often unclear. Overall, new members were treated with an odd mixture of welcome and mistrust – they were encouraged to sign up to boost membership figures, but their interest in actual involvement in party activities was generally seen as something of an inconvenience, and more than once I heard comments to the effect that young people are only signing up because "they want paid jobs during the campaign".

Eventually salaries were paid to members of the Political Council and Audit Committee in May, but the second payment I received was subject to a 40% reduction due to restrictions coming into force with the Covid 19 pandemic. Having worked full time hours for Lelo for 5 months without any remuneration, this ad hoc reduction felt like a profound insult to those of us who had been working hard to give the party an effective grassroots base. Sources of party funding were never made clear to me, despite requesting financial returns in my capacity as member of the party's internal oversight committee, but my own feeling is that the party's executive, which also included its main donors, had miscalculated the amount of cash available and were seeking to close the gap.

A new regional office in Saburtalo – the area I had campaigned in in 2017 – was opened but almost immediately failed to become effective as Covid 19 restrictions made it hard to access potential new members. By June 2020, an overwhelming sense of frustration with Lelo and the realisation that standing as a candidate for the party would be almost completely pointless, led me to leave the party. I made no public announcement about my departure – having willingly sunk into the shadows feeling that the fatuous and shallow character of Georgian media coverage was inconsistent with my own personal brand of politics – and left Georgia for good three months later, a month before parliamentary elections.

Lelo – For Georgia is fundamentally an entrepreneurial-opportunistic movement with no linkages to organized social interests. Its party-building strategies have been remarkably similar to other liberal new-comers. Like State for the People before it, it also chose to invest in a social movement ahead of its party launch, despite there being no clear political dividend for delaying party formation and 'testing the waters'. Like countless liberal newcomers before it, Lelo – For Georgia chose to co-opt minor politicians from across the political spectrum rather than create a vibrant membership structure in which new leaders could emerge. This process of absorbing figures with an existing public profile seems to have come to an end in 2021, and the list of candidates for local elections in October consists largely of recycled majoritarian candidates and unknowns from within the party. The party has experimented with internal democracy, with members electing the heads of their local organizations, but this experiment appears not to have extended to the selection of electoral candidates.[34] It's also unclear to what extent members are involved in shaping the party's policy platform. On the other hand, Lelo has not adopted an entirely 'open' platform by forming electoral alliances, for example, or inviting independents to stand as candidates. Clearly party affiliation means something to Lelo, even if it isn't always clear exactly what.

Lelo has struggled from the outset to escape the accusation that it only exists to protect Khazaradze and Japaridze from prosecution and imprisonment by the Georgian authorities, but as a co-optive newcomer, it also contains within itself a number of old and new politicians with their own ambitions and expectations. The distribution of power within the party is also skewed towards a small group of decision makers, who are also, presumably, the party's principal source of funding. All of this makes the party inherently unstable and it would likely cease to exist in the event of a dispute between Khazaradze and Japaridze. Outside of elections, the party has no significant legislative agenda independent of the executive's own individual topics of interest – such as the Anaklia Port project. Despite pre-election ratings of close to 10% in 2020, the party won 3.15% at the polls. As such, Lelo – For Georgia appears to have settled quite comfortably into ephemerality within the Georgian party system and – given its severe internal dysfunctions in organization and leadership – it will likely struggle to maintain even its current level of support.

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34 Interview with Executive Council Member, Medea Metreveli, 13/10/2020.

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CONCLUSIONS

The first question that this paper set out to answer is why there are so many new entrants to Georgian politics. As we have seen, Georgia has experienced long periods of economic and institutional instability since independence – separatist conflicts, civil war, a war with Russia, revolution and mass mobilization. Trade unions and other forms of civil society remain weak and linkages with political leaders are minimal. Additionally, this context of institutional instability has created extremely brittle ruling parties with oligarchical leadership structures, generating dissatisfaction, defection and – ultimately – more new parties. This context means the odds of achieving persistence and success are stacked against new parties. Structural conditions incentivize individualistic, short-term behaviors and de-incentivize investment in social organization and power-sharing. Leaders struggle to do the one thing necessary for a new party to have a shot at survival – to place the imperative to organize, routinize and institutionalize over their own narrow, short-term personal ambitions for power.

We can clearly see this dynamic at play within State for the People, perhaps the most ephemeral of the movements we've looked at here. This party's example clearly shows how a leader's high public profile, or access to campaign funds, is no proxy for rootedness and no substitute for a vibrant, empowered membership. It also goes to show that, despite their popularity among new entrants, co-optive coalition building and programmatic fuzziness rarely bring newcomers the electoral rewards they seek. The example of State for the People also reminds us that temporary, pre-party structures like NGOs, social movements or foundations can be resource-intensive distractions from the real work of planning and building sustainable party structures.

In our case study of Girchi, we've seen one party break the mold to create a membership structure that is flexible, transparent and empowering. It managed to identify and interact with its own part of the electorate, as small as that has been, and capitalize on the loyalty, expertise and other resources of its members. It managed to create a vibrant and empowered organization with clear goals and platforms for participation even outside of electoral cycles, linking it to interest groups within society. Girchi arrived at this point after a deep crisis, in which the breakdown of its political alliances and loss of revenue forced it to adopt creative solutions in order to continue the pursuit of its political goals. The example of Girchi raises

questions of the theoretical models we have explored here, namely what is the role of crisis in formation of new parties? Can a deep, internal crisis help a party to 'reset' its party-building trajectory, nudging the organization away from oligarchic management and asymmetrical power distribution and back towards its members?

The example of Lelo – For Georgia shows that even in 2021, the classic post-Soviet model of socially-unrooted, programmatically indistinct, structurally oligarchical parties is still relevant to the Georgian party system. In some ways, it's remarkable that a party like Lelo can walk so confidently into making many of the same mistakes as similar ventures before it, such as State for the People, although on a far less dramatic scale. The example of Lelo underscores the arguments made in our chapter on party formation in Georgia, that structural conditions in Georgia that have remained unchanged since 2012 – a polarized information environment, weak civil society, economic and institutional instability and insecurity vis-a-vis the threat from Russia – all exert pressure on the Georgian party system, skewing the fate of new entrants towards ephemerality.

The municipal elections of October 2021 – billed by the opposition as a 'referendum' on Georgian Dream rule – provide further material for the study of Georgia's party system in the post-2012 era. A new liberal pretender in the form of Giorgi Gakharia emerged, whose party For Georgia received 7.8%. Gakharia served as Prime Minister between September 2019 and February 2021, when he resigned unexpectedly over the decision to detain UNM leader Nika Melia. It seems that the origins of Gakharia's new party have already – according to our model – condemned the movement to ephemerality within a few electoral cycles. On the other hand, Georgian Dream has so far not had to endure such a high-profile defection from its ranks, and the current leadership of Georgian Dream are clearly taking his defection very personally.[35] Whether or not the party will be able to syphon off sufficient support from the ruling party, to articulate a program for governance whilst in opposition, to forge a distinct identity and legislative agenda outside of electoral periods and to prioritize party-building over Gakharia's own personal ambitions remains to be seen.

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35 https://civil.ge/archives/425449

Programmatic and ideological distinctiveness, sustained focus on a key social demographic and the ability to practice organizational innovation are all important tools in the party-building box. But party staying power is primarily contingent on the leadership's willingness to divest themselves of top-down powers and create a more even power structure within a robust party organization. Given Georgia's febrile media environment and deep levels of economic and institutional instability, it's likely that real staying power will continue to elude new political parties in Georgia for many more years to come.

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IMPRINT

„STAYING POWER"

Accounting for Ephemerality in the Georgian Party System Since 2012

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This paper looks at new political parties in Georgia that have emerged since 2012. The period immediately before and after the parliamentary elections of October that year represent a 'liberalizing' moment in Georgian political history, with the transfer of power from the increasingly repressive government of the United National Movement to a political newcomer – the Georgian Dream coalition.

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Despite the fact that the current ruling party of Georgia is itself a 'successful' newcomer to the party system (being registered as a party only six months before the 2012 elections it subsequently won), the full story of the Georgian Dream's rise to power and its ability to weather a number of deep crises in recent years involves wider questions about governance and the state that lie far beyond the remit of this study of Georgia's party system.

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In the Georgian context, new entrants have typically been rootless entrepreneurs, as we would expect in a new democracy. Georgia's legacy of instability and insecurity incentivizes opportunistic, oligarchic behaviors among leaders and effectively institutionalizes party cleavages, resulting in a particularly high number of new entrants whose fate is – by virtue of their origins – skewed towards ephemerality.

Further information on the topic can be found here:
www.southcaucasus.fes.de