

THE FUTURE OF GEORGIA PROJECT

Struggle and Sacrifice: Narratives of Georgia's Modern History

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This article is the second of five in a series for the Future of Georgia project run by Carnegie Europe and the Levan Mikeladze Foundation analyzing contentious issues in Georgian society.

“The Roman Empire is extinct but Georgia still exists.” No one knows the origin of this phrase, but it is [frequently repeated in Georgia](#). It expresses a public pride in the idea that the country has possessed a historical continuity of statehood since ancient times that has been interrupted but never extinguished.

Georgia won independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 and was admitted to the United Nations in July 1992. Georgians’ pride in their statehood has shaped a collective memory of the country’s history since 1989.

The story told in Georgia’s public domain about its modern history has a strong focus on the struggle for freedom from Russia and the preservation of independence. Georgians are proud to see their country as an established democracy. Yet, thirty years on, the mainstream historical narrative still portrays the

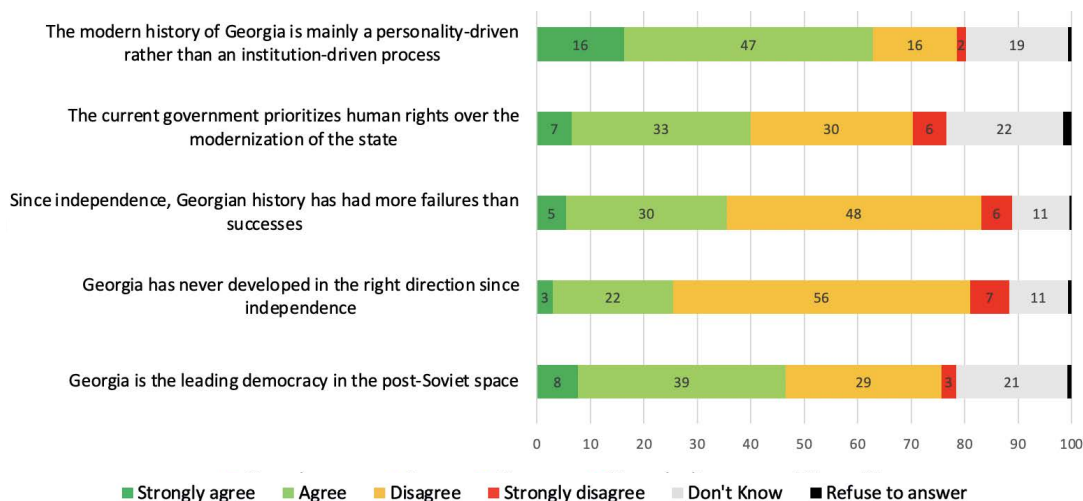
country as vulnerable and facing existential threats to its statehood. That means there is little debate about what mistakes may have been made in 1989–1992 during what is known as Georgia’s national liberation struggle. This narrative also, arguably, limits frank discussion of other issues, such as the country’s conflicts, the status of its minorities, or its socioeconomic development.

THE SACRIFICES OF INDEPENDENCE

Georgians are generally proud of the path their country has taken since independence and believe it to be a democracy. This is one of the findings of a September 2020 [survey by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers](#) (CRRC), commissioned by Carnegie Europe and the Levan Mikeladze Foundation for the Future of Georgia project. Despite civil war and many political and economic crises, 54 percent of respondents disagreed with the view that since independence, Georgia has had more failures than successes (see figure 1). Any negative event is valued and perceived as a sacrifice to achieve the greater historical goal of restoring statehood.

FIGURE 1
Georgians' Attitudes Toward Present-Day Georgia

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about Georgia's post-Soviet history?



SOURCE: September 2020 Carnegie-Mikelladze survey.

Despite their many differences and fierce mutual criticism, both of Georgia's principal recent leaders, former president Mikheil Saakashvili and former prime minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, have helped foster a rather selective collective memory of the national liberation movement in the crucial years 1989–1992 and the role of Georgia's controversial first president and nationalist leader, Zviad Gamsakhurdia. As a result, the Georgian public has a fairly rosy view of Gamsakhurdia that may surprise many outsiders.

In the run-up to Georgia's March 1991 independence referendum, Gamsakhurdia and other leaders of the country's pro-independence movement framed their struggle not so much as a campaign to secede from the Soviet Union and create a brand-new state but as a fight to restore independence, which had been stolen twice: by the Russian Empire in 1801 and by the Bolsheviks in 1921.

Proclaiming independence anew in 1991, these leaders referred to the 1918 Independence Act, which had brought to life the short-lived First Republic, or Georgian Democratic Republic. This multiparty independent

state was crushed by the Bolshevik Red Army in 1921. Speaking in an interview in December 2020, historian Beka Kobakhidze noted that "all nations need symbols for the establishment of statehood, especially for the restoration of independence, and the First Republic was the only example available for Georgians in the late Soviet period."

APRIL 9, 1989: A PIVOTAL MOMENT

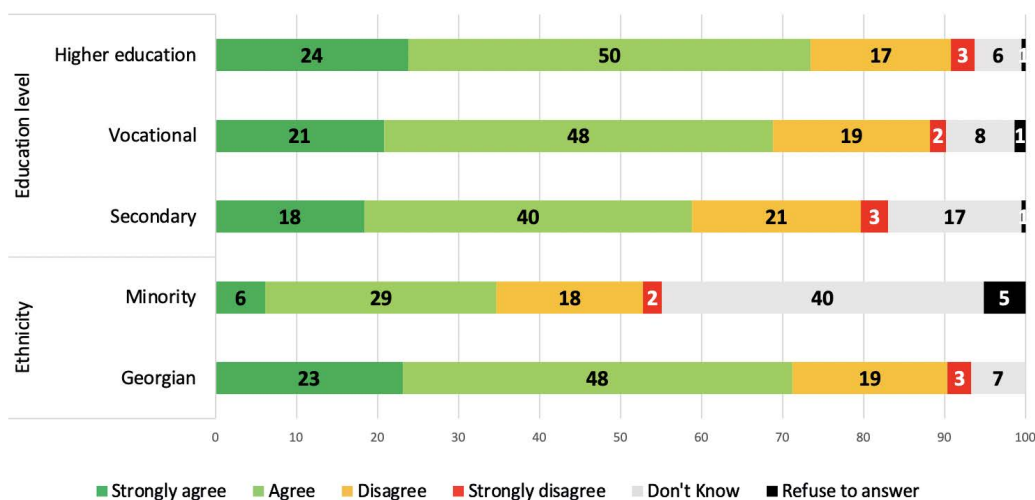
The key foundational event in the period leading up to Georgia's modern independence was the tragedy on April 9, 1989, when Soviet troops brutally suppressed a peaceful demonstration in Tbilisi and twenty-one people died. These tragic events discredited the Communist Party of Georgia and propelled the nationalist opposition to power in Georgia's first free elections.

The April 9 events are regarded as the pivotal moment that persuaded most Georgians to break with the Soviet Union. A series of peaceful demonstrations had been held in the center of the Georgian capital

FIGURE 2

Georgians' Views on Whether the April 9 Tragedy Positively Impacted Independence

Do you agree or disagree that the April 9 tragedy was a positive event insofar as it paved the way to independence for Georgia?



SOURCE: September 2020 Carnegie-Mikeldadze survey.


under the leadership of the nationalist opposition of Gamsakhurdia and his colleagues. What had begun as a protest against moves by the autonomous republic of Abkhazia to loosen ties with Tbilisi developed into a broader demonstration against rule by Moscow. On the night of April 8–9, the Soviet authorities instructed the demonstrators to disperse from the streets of Tbilisi. When they did not, Soviet troops moved in. Most of the twenty-one people who died were women.

According to the survey data, the Georgian public almost uniformly agrees that April 9 was a tragedy: 95 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Historian [Tornike Chumburdze](#) has argued that the central government of the Soviet Union deliberately tried “to present the April 9 massacre as a ‘tragedy,’ in other words as not being the result of deliberate suppression of resistance, but as being the result of wrong decisions [by] individual officials so as to hold local, Georgian, and not central Soviet governments accountable.” This makes critical reflection on the events even more difficult.

Two-thirds of respondents also thought that April 9, 1989, was a positive event insofar as it paved the way to independence for Georgia (see figure 2). April 9 appears to have positive connotations with Georgians for two reasons. First, some associate the massacre with the idea of a necessary sacrifice—the notion that people died for the sake of the noblest idea, the cause of independence and freedom. During the rallies in the days earlier, one of the leaders, Merab Kostava, had explicitly told the protesters that “[readiness for sacrifice](#) was a positive thing.”

The second explanation may be that two years later, Gamsakhurdia chose the second anniversary of the tragedy to sign the Act on the Restoration of Georgia’s State Independence. In Georgians’ collective memory, independence can be said to have been achieved through sacrifice, and the date of achieving that independence—April 9—coincides with the date of mourning for the dead.

So, Georgians perceive the April 9, 1989, tragedy as a sacrifice for the country’s independence, while



Gamsakhurdia's April 9, 1991, declaration of the restoration of independence has had a positive impact on both this date and attitudes toward him.

THE GHOST OF GAMSAKHURDIA

Gamsakhurdia served as Georgia's first president for less than a year in 1991, but he still casts a long shadow. He already had a heroic, semi-mythical status before he entered opposition politics. His father, Konstantine Gamsakhurdia, was one of the most famous Georgian writers of the twentieth century. The younger Gamsakhurdia became a prominent dissident and was one of the few Georgian dissenters to be jailed by the Soviet authorities in the late Soviet period.

To many outside observers of Georgia, Gamsakhurdia's brief period as the country's leader is associated with chaos and conflict. He demonized his opponents and had several of them imprisoned. He was also a fierce ethnic nationalist, who helped trigger conflict in the autonomous region of South Ossetia in 1991.

Hundreds died and thousands of both Georgians and Ossetians were displaced in the South Ossetia conflict. The causes of the conflict are complex, but one of them is undoubtedly the discourse propagated by Gamsakhurdia and others that Ossetians were guests on Georgian soil and deserved fewer rights than ethnic Georgians. As [Human Rights Watch](#) summarized the situation, "a fiercely nationalist grouping of dozens of political parties, the Round Table [coalition] staunchly advocated complete independence from the Soviet Union and popularized the slogan, 'Georgia for Georgians.'" However, in general, the Georgian public does not blame Gamsakhurdia for the start of the conflict—or for the war in Abkhazia that began after his downfall.

In December 1991, Gamsakhurdia was violently overthrown by his opponents. Dozens of people died in the center of Tbilisi. Gamsakhurdia fled Georgia, briefly returned to try to lead an armed rebellion in

1993, but died shortly afterward. The circumstances of Gamsakhurdia's overthrow are variously remembered as either a civil war or a coup d'état against an elected leader. In a December 2020 interview, historian Davit Jishkariani said that Gamsakhurdia's successor as president and Soviet-era predecessor as leader of the Communist Party of Georgia, Eduard Shevardnadze, had suffered from a deficit of legitimacy because his name was associated with the overthrow of "the only legitimate president" of Georgia, Gamsakhurdia.

The CRRC poll shows that 76 percent of Georgians believe that Gamsakhurdia's ouster was a bad thing for Georgia (see figure 3). Eight-one percent of those surveyed thought that Gamsakhurdia was a true patriot, as his name is associated with the country gaining independence, while half thought independence would not have happened without him. (It is also symbolic that the 1991 referendum was held on March 31, Gamsakhurdia's birthday, adding a positive nuance to his personality and strengthening the association between him and the restoration of independence.) Georgia's ethnic minorities, however, hold much more negative and uncertain attitudes toward the country's first president.

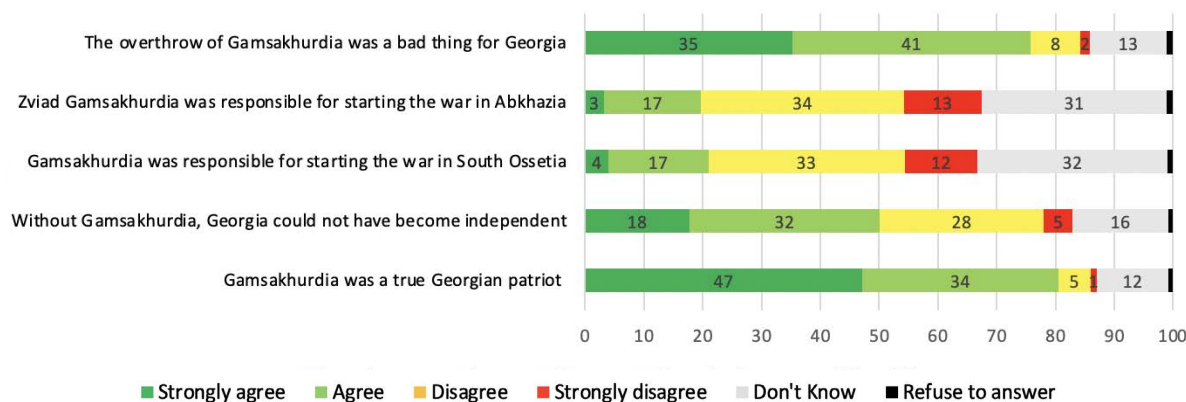
Georgia's last two main leaders, Saakashvili and Ivanishvili, have partly rehabilitated Gamsakhurdia. Saakashvili had Gamsakhurdia's remains transferred from Chechnya back to Georgia and reburied in the Mtatsminda Pantheon, where the country's most illustrious citizens are interred. Gamsakhurdia was also posthumously awarded the title of national hero. At a [memorial service](#) on March 31, 2007, to mark what would have been Gamsakhurdia's sixty-eighth birthday, Saakashvili praised the former president while stressing that he—unlike Gamsakhurdia—believed in Georgia as a multiethnic society.

Saakashvili made use of Gamsakhurdia's reputation to bolster his own ambition to be Georgia's national leader, according to historian Lasha Bakradze. "Saakashvili needed Gamsakhurdia to legitimize that he was the successor to Georgia's independence

FIGURE 3

Georgians' Attitudes Toward Gamsakhurdia

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about former Georgian president Zviad Gamsakhurdia?



SOURCE: September 2020 Carnegie-Mikeldadze survey.

and to Gamsakhurdia himself,” Bakradze said in a December 2020 interview. “On the one hand, he needed to mobilize Gamsakhurdia’s large and active [base of] supporters; [on the other hand], he needed legitimacy.” Bakradze added that it was no coincidence that Saakashvili had called his political party the United National Movement (UNM), a modernized name for the national movement of the 1990s.

Ivanishvili, despite being Saakashvili’s nemesis and sworn enemy, concurred in declaring Gamsakhurdia a national hero. In 2019, [Ivanishvili visited the village of Khibula](#) in western Georgia, where Gamsakhurdia had died, and said that he would “fund the construction of a museum honoring the life of the late President, as well as a park and a church in the nearby area.”

Overall, for the Georgian public, Gamsakhurdia’s divisive legacy is overshadowed by the importance of restoring independence. The reburial of his body was performed as a state act, which, by implication, means that any criticism of the move is considered to be against the state. There is no political benefit for any Georgian politician to criticize Gamsakhurdia. Although he was ousted from power and died in obscurity, Gamsakhurdia has emerged as a historical winner and remains a source of legitimacy for Georgia’s political leaders.

THREE LEADERS, ONE GEORGIA

According to the CRRC survey, 63 percent of Georgians agree that modern Georgian history has been mainly a personality-driven rather than an institution-driven process (see figure 1). Since Gamsakhurdia’s downfall, independent Georgia has had three regimes associated with strong and charismatic individuals: those of Shevardnadze, Saakashvili, and Ivanishvili.

Each of these three reaffirmed a commitment to democracy and a pro-Western foreign policy. Yet, each also sought to reset the clock on taking office. As each leader came to power pledging to overcome a political and economic crisis, he mobilized the public by declaring a sharp break with his predecessor.

Shevardnadze, a former leader of the Communist Party of Georgia and then Soviet foreign minister under Mikhail Gorbachev, returned to his country as de facto leader in March 1992. He was elected president in 1995 and served until he resigned under pressure in 2003.

Shevardnadze’s era as leader was crowded with events: the signing of a Russian-dictated peace agreement with South Ossetia, a civil war in western Georgia, the outbreak of war in Abkhazia, economic troubles, and

electricity blackouts. There were successes in foreign policy, as Georgia joined international organizations, applied to join NATO, initiated major oil and gas pipelines across its territory, and successfully negotiated the withdrawal of Russian military bases. Yet, strikingly, 28 percent of people surveyed found it difficult to name a success of Shevardnadze's government, while 34 percent said it had had no successes at all.

For the largest number of Georgians, the biggest failure of Shevardnadze's government was economic collapse (see figure 4). His rule ended quickly and peacefully with the bloodless November 2003 Rose Revolution, which followed a falsified parliamentary election. For much of the public, Shevardnadze's rule had become synonymous with economic malaise and endemic

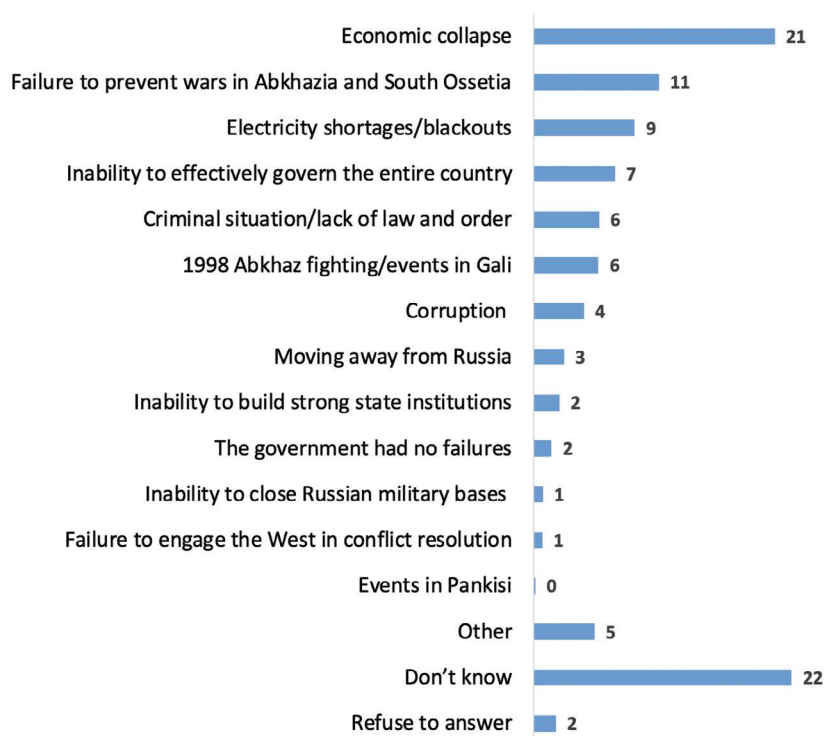
corruption. In that election, the slogan of the leader of the revolution, Saakashvili, was “Georgia without Shevardnadze.”

Saakashvili won Georgia's January 2004 presidential election with more than 96 percent of the vote and became the youngest national leader in Europe. As in 1992, the new leader's message was that Georgia's nation-building project was starting from zero—that “we did not have a state” before the 2003 revolution.

Saakashvili changed the country's national symbols. Georgia adopted a new national anthem entitled “Tavisupleba” (“Freedom”) in May 2004, just six months after the revolution. The country was given a new coat of arms and a new flag, replacing that of the

FIGURE 4
Georgians' Views on the Largest Failure of Shevardnadze's Government

What was the largest failure of the 1992–2003 government of then Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze?



SOURCE: September 2020 Carnegie-Mikeldadze survey.

First Republic, which had been readopted in 1991. The new president announced in 2005, “Now the time has come to fulfil our spiritual, historic mission.”

From 2003 to 2012, several key themes emerged in Georgia’s memory politics: an attempt to construct new identities using symbols, a reinterpretation of some historical events, and a transformation of relations with Russia from partners to adversaries. In the words of political scientist Tamar Karaia, “a new phase of state-building had begun.”

Respondents to the CRRC poll credited the UNM government with fighting crime and achieving economic growth while faulting it for human rights violations and an inability to avoid the 2008 war with Russia (see figure 5).

Georgia experienced another big disjunction in 2012, when Saakashvili’s party lost power to the Georgian

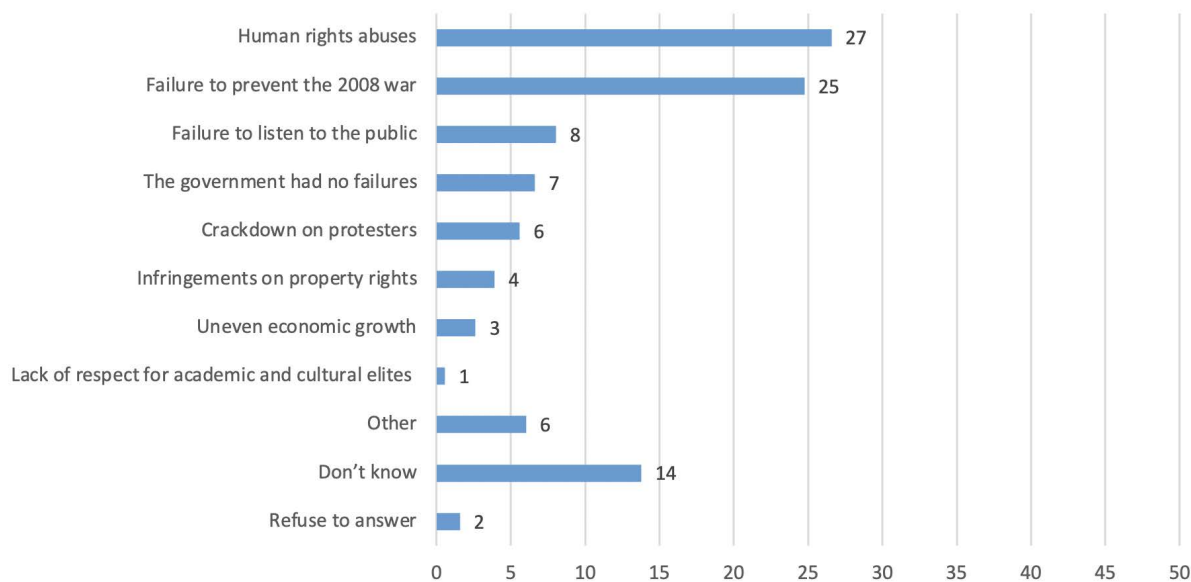
Dream coalition, led by Georgia’s richest man, Ivanishvili, who then became prime minister. Unlike its predecessor, Georgian Dream, which subsequently won the 2016 and 2020 elections, rarely chooses the distant past for political mobilization. Instead, Ivanishvili evokes the rule of his predecessor, Saakashvili, and his UNM to convey the message that in the current political environment, no party is better than Georgian Dream. The biggest failure of the Georgian Dream government, according to the survey, has been weak economic growth, which was cited by 26 percent of respondents.

Georgia is still dominated by the two big personalities of Ivanishvili and Saakashvili, whose parties came first and second, respectively, in the 2020 parliamentary election. That result makes it difficult to discuss the achievements and failures of their governments as events in the past. Overall, survey respondents found it difficult to recall the successes of all three of Georgia’s post-Soviet governments but easier to name their mistakes.

FIGURE 5

Georgians’ Views on the Largest Failure of Saakashvili’s Government

What was the largest failure of the 2004–2012 government of then Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili?



SOURCE: September 2020 Carnegie-Mikeldadze survey.

CONCLUSION

Georgians generally conceive of their thirty-year history of independence as a story of gaining sovereignty, restoring and celebrating independence, and securing decolonization from Russia. This focus on one story leaves much else in the shade: this narrative mostly overlooks post-Soviet Georgia's conflicts and ethnic minorities. When those conflicts are discussed, they are seen as part of Georgia's perennial struggle for independence and freedom. The country's mainstream narrative of history says that all of this was achieved through the events of April 9, 1989. Yet, historians modestly ask the question: even if the April 9 tragedy hadn't happened, wouldn't Georgia have become independent anyway?

Three decades of independence have also linked the country's historical narrative and state policies with the actions of individual political leaders. Each of Georgia's post-Soviet leaders has come to power in opposition to the previous one and, eventually, experienced a crisis of legitimacy. Change is necessary, yet experience has proved that replacing a leader without altering policy only temporarily eases the situation and, in the longer run, fosters a sense of frustration and polarization in society.

In contrast to some other post-Soviet nations, the public in Georgia perceives the state and its political leader as different from each other. Even if the leader lacks full legitimacy, the state continues to move in the right historical direction. The perception is that the state is pursuing a long journey through history, while the leader is a temporary figure. In [public opinion polls](#) conducted annually since 2010 by the National Democratic Institute in Georgia, Georgians have cited jobs and poverty as the most important national issues, followed by the country's territorial integrity.

If the goal of the national movement in the 1990s was to restore independence, in modern times the narrative is that there is still a danger of Georgia losing its independence—so the overriding goal is to preserve it. Russia and its occupations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are seen to pose an existential threat, which drives Georgia's ongoing aspirations for its integration into the EU and NATO. The result is a political formula in which independence must first be strengthened and only then is the country's social and economic development possible.

Thirty years after Georgia gained independence, it is worth asking whether the country's national project is complete. As long as Georgians see their struggle for independence as continuing, that question remains unanswered. Other issues, such as Georgia's conflicts and ethnic minorities, receive less attention. A narrative of recent history centered on existential threats has created a sense of an ongoing state of emergency, in which every issue is seen only through that prism.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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NOTES

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