

# DIFFERENT GOVERNMENTS IN TBILISI, SAME PEOPLE IN REGIONS: LOCAL ELITES IN THE YEARS OF INDEPENDENCE (THE EXAMPLE OF GURJAANI DISTRICT, GEORGIA)

*Giorgi Gotua*

**T**he ruling political regime in Georgia has changed three times since 1990. Twice the government was replaced through non-constitutional means. None of these regimes were able to consolidate and reach consensus with different groups vying for power regarding basic institutions and rules of game.

Researchers studying the transition from autocracy to democracy point out various structural factors (culture, socio-economic factors) which they say determine the successful consolidation of new democratic regimes. In recent years, more and more attention has been paid to political elites as essential actors able to decisively influence the direction of state development. Choices made by elites at certain stages of state development, the level of power and authority they exercise in society and the character of relations among various factions determine the success of the process of forming and consolidating a new regime.

Studies by G. Field, M. Burton and D. Higley demonstrate that the stability of a regime is directly linked to the degree of consensus among its various factions regarding existing institutions and rules of game (another way to guarantee relative stability of the regime, dominance of one group over another, is not discussed as an option within the framework of this research).<sup>1</sup> Georgia's case can serve as a good example demonstrating the correctness of this thesis.

During the period of independence three political regimes have changed in Georgia. The regime of President Zviad Gamsakhurdia – which followed the

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<sup>1</sup> This thesis is presented in: Field G., Higley J., Burton M., *National Elite Configurations and Transitions to Democracy // Classes and Elites in Democracy and Democratization: A Collection of Readings* / ed. by E. Etzioni-Halevy. NY: Garland Publ., 1997, p. 179.

Soviet collapse and came to power as a result of multi-party elections in 1990 – lasted approximately one year and was overthrown by a military coup in January 1992. The coup d'état was followed by a civil war in which supporters of the ousted president were defeated. The subsequent regime, led by old Communist party functionary and former USSR Minister of Foreign Affairs Eduard Shevardnadze, achieved progress towards stabilizing the situation but was overthrown as a result of a bloodless revolution in November 2003 (the so-called "Rose Revolution") led by current Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili. As many observers point out, both regime changes, in 1992 and 2003, were caused by rifts in the elite and infighting among its various factions.<sup>2</sup>

In this connection, the issue of determining the main players of Georgian politics is of great importance. Analysts of processes under way in Georgia have on many occasions speculated about the influence of local elites under Shevardnadze's rule.<sup>3</sup> Do the local elite really exercise influence on the processes taking place in the country? Do the local district-level elite represent a single coherent group or an amalgamation of groups preserving power at the local level despite the regime change nationwide? And finally, how are actions coordinated and what kind of agreement is formed among the local and national elites? The present article is dedicated to finding answers to these questions.

## Where and how the study was conducted

The present study was undertaken by the author in Gurjaani District in April-October 2006. The Gurjaani is located in Kakheti Province, eastern Georgia. This district was created in the late 1920's as a result of the administrative-territorial division of the country in the first years of the Soviet government. With the passage of time a type of identity took shape that was connected to the district and local patriotic moods started to play a certain role in the everyday life of

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<sup>2</sup> Nodia G., Two Attempts to Establish Democracy in Georgia // Building Democracy in Georgia. Discussion Paper #1. Yerevan: International IDEA, 2003, p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Losaberidze D., Self-Government in Georgia (Development Trends). Tbilisi: Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development, 1998, p. 28; Chiaberashvili Z., Tevzadze G., Power Elites in Georgia // After Shevardnadze: Georgian Security Sector Governance after the Rose Revolution. Geneva: Center for Democratic Control of Armed Forces, 2004. <[http://www.dcaf.ch/\\_docs/SSR\\_RRGeorgia/ChapterIX.pdf](http://www.dcaf.ch/_docs/SSR_RRGeorgia/ChapterIX.pdf)> (15 December 2006).

the district. According to 2004 data, the population of Gurjaani – the largest in Kakheti Province, was 71,500.<sup>4</sup>

The main branch of its economy is viticulture and winemaking. Its location in the fertile valley of the river Alazani is conducive to this type of activity. Most vineyards are owned by small-time farmers. Only recently have large estates been established owned by wine-producing companies.

The main source of information for the study was informal interviews with former and current officials of the district administration, representatives of the local “intelligentsia”, journalists of local newspapers, and activists of local branches of political parties and nongovernmental organizations. Given the narrow circle of persons involved in the political process in this small area, such talks were the only way to obtain significant information about this closed topic.

The issues discussed in the interviews changed in the course of the research. Initially, as the researcher had almost no knowledge about the specificities of the process taking place in the district and had to ask questions based on general knowledge about the processes of political transformation in the country’s recent history. As his knowledge about the situation in the district deepened, more attention was paid to various aspects of the local socio-political reality.

As discussions touched upon very sensitive topics, they were not recorded. Important information gathered during the interviews was written in a notebook and after each interview a brief report was drawn up. This made it possible to preserve the most important information, as well as comments made by informants on a particular topic. The absence of verbatim text explains the lack of citations in the article. For this reason the presentation of the main part of the article will have a narrative character – the character of a historical narrative and description of the different periods of the district’s political life.

Another feature of this study is associated with the style in which many of the informants preferred to talk. Many of them, including those that were actively involved in the political life of the district, chose not to refer or not to focus on personalities and particular situations. Limited level of trust in the researchers, as well as the narrowness of the circle of insiders, were the reasons for their restraint. In view of this, many informants preferred not to give specific answers to the questions asked by the researcher and instead offered gener-

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<sup>4</sup> Data of the Statistics Department of Georgia, <<http://www.statistics.ge/main.php?pform=78&plang=2>> (15 January 07).

alized analyses on issues of interest to the researcher. It is worth noting that these answers and comments served as an invaluable source of information for the study. At the same time, such conversations made it problematic to relate the analyses of the informants with real facts, as well as with the opinions of other informants. After analyzing the information collected, more attention was paid to the testimony of the informants whose analyses corresponded most to information obtained from other sources.

## The problem of determining the region's political elite

The recent territorial-administrative division of the country broadly follows the model of the division of the republic during the Soviet era. The basic unit of the country's territorial division in 1991-2006 was the district. In total, there were 67 districts and five independent cities. Until 2006, the president appointed the heads of district administrations, who in turn were usually responsible for appointing heads of local executive bodies. In the mid-1990s, provinces were formed with their own administrations headed by a presidentially appointed governor. Provinces unite several districts and their borders usually coincide with historical Georgian regions. Kakheti Province is one such historical region.

In most cases, the local power is concentrated in the hands of the President's representatives (governors) and groups linked to him.

Thus, the establishment of this institution increased the element of centralization in the functioning of local government (as per the plan of its architects). At the same time, the establishment of this institution resulted in the creation of powerful regional elites led by regional representatives of the president. Governors were closely linked and often had personal ties with the country's president, and formed a separate group in the structure of the national elite during Shevardnadze's rule.<sup>5</sup>

The spread of informal practices in the local government is partly related to the lack of control by the elected representative government. City councils (district-level self-government bodies), which operated at the district level and were elected by the people, did not possess real power and were unable to

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<sup>5</sup> Chiaberashvili Z., Tevzadze G., *Op. cit.*

affect the operation of the district administration. At the same time, the laws governing the functions of the local administration did not create conditions for the separation of powers between central, provincial and district-level authorities. In reality, this situation allowed for unlimited control over the activities of the district administration from the leadership of the province. It is also worth noting that the spread of corruption and clientalistic relationships at all levels of government was a feature of Shevardnadze's reign.

Taking into account the abovementioned, one of the major objectives of the study was to identify those who could be termed as the elite of the area. The district's political elite were defined as the vested with official power as high-ranking officials of the local administration and/or having influence over activities of the local authorities.

However, a circle defined by such criteria might include persons who fall into the category of provincial leaders, as well as national-level authorities. Despite the fact that during the study informants repeatedly pointed out the influence of higher-level authorities on the district administration, as well as the fact that it was often impossible to separate the management of the provincial administration and district-level authorities, during the analyses local players first and foremost were examined. Such an approach, as will be shown later, gave interesting results in terms of understanding the balance of power and the difference in the survival strategies of elite groups (cliques) at different levels.

In the study of elites three approaches were used to determine the circle of the persons belonging to the elite and the nature the power they wielded<sup>6</sup>: a) the positional approach, defining the membership of certain individuals of the elite according to the formal positions occupied by these persons in various spheres of social life; b) the reputational approach, which is based on expert opinion concerning the power and opportunities available to the individuals, c) the "who makes decisions?" approach, in which the criterion for determining membership of the elite is the degree of their participation in the process of solving important problems for the community, as well as the success of the particular group/individual in finding these solutions.

At the beginning of the study the positional approach was favored. Thus, the district-level political elite consisted primarily of the leadership of the local ad-

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<sup>6</sup> See: Ledyayev V. G., *Sociology of Power: Conceptual Issues // Power and the Elite in Modern Russia* / ed. A. B. Dookie. St. Petersburg: A Sociological Association after M. M. Kowalewski, 2003, p. 5.

ministration. But over time, the importance of other groups in the district was revealed, which led us to use elements of other approaches. For example, in accordance with the “who makes decisions?” approach, the informants were asked questions about the impact of different groups on the most important decisions made by the district leadership – for instance, on senior level appointments in the district administration. In determining the relative influence of various groups or individuals the reputational approach was used.

At the same time, for understanding the nature of local elite groups the specifics of the area should be taken into account, in particular its small size. It should be kept in mind that when talking about the elite of the district we are talking about relatively small groups that may consist only of a few people. Accordingly, the relationships within these groups may have a more horizontal nature than may be the case with groups operating within the wider community. It is for this reason that in some cases this paper uses the term “clique”.

Below are described the groups that in different periods have had a significant impact on the management of the district, and therefore can be attributed to the political elite of the district.

1) *The administrative elite of the district.* This is the head of district administration (prefect in 1991, gamgebeli after 1992) and the heads of its constituent institutions, as well as the chairmen of elected bodies. Often, the head of district administration would create a team of colleagues to whom they entrusted the most important positions in local administration that would fall apart with the departure of the leader from the position of the head of the district. During Shevardnadze’s rule, the administration of the district, and in particular its head, were closely related and subordinated to the leadership of the province and its governor, as well as to the informal leader of the provincial authorities.

The structure of this group and relationships within it can be understood by how the informants described the process of distribution of senior positions following the appointment of a new district head. According to them, a new administration head had to balance between three different interests: a) his personal interests that dictated the appointment to important positions of persons to whom he/she personally trusted and with whom he/she was bound by personal commitments and b) the interests of the provincial and in some cases, the central government and c) the interests of local groups with their own stakes in the political and social life of the province.

2) *The economic elite.* Its formation is related to the shadow economy of the Soviet period. During that and following periods, these groups occupied important positions in the economy of the region and controlled some of the enterprises. The richest and most influential was a group that united people from the village of B. Economic groups repeatedly attempted to establish control over the district administration and achieved notable successes: officials associated with these groups, especially with the group from the village B and their lobbyists held significant leadership positions in the district, and in some periods – the post of head of the local administration.

Attempts by economic groups to establish control over the district administration were given a different explanation in the study. One of the explanations related to the illegal nature of the business during the Soviet era. By establishing control over the district administration, economic groups tried to reduce costs associated with the need to maintain good relations with the authorities. Correspondingly, with the decreasing importance of this factor the influence of economic groups began to fall in the late 1990's, according to one informant. In addition, another factor existed, but it was rather symbolic – the possession of certain economic resources pushed the representatives of economic groups to attempt to seize power, which in this case could be viewed as an end in itself. According to some informants "This area was run by people from the village B."

3) *Criminal authorities.* According to various sources, between two and four crime bosses (so called "thieves in law") operated in the district at a given time. Their intervention in the management of the district was less noticeable. With their own sphere of influence, in some cases, they interfered in conflicts between different groups of regional elites, and, apparently, worked closely with representatives of the old nomenklatura-type elite and business.

The respondents' stories about the activities of the criminal world shed light on an interesting aspect of the functioning of the elites in the post-Soviet society. Despite the fact that the main boundaries of this community were limited to its usual criminal sphere, in some cases it acted as a regulator of the power relationships between the various subjects of power. In certain cases, when difficulties arose in the course of proceedings between individual officials or groups of officials, the thieves acted as unofficial "judges" and took decisions on particular issues which were not subject to appeal. Thus, the thieves filled a certain vacuum in power relations.

4) *Mkhedrioni*. Mkhedrioni represented armed groups active in the years 1992-1995 countrywide. They played a dual role. On the one hand, in the civil war they were one of the pillars of Shevardnadze's regime and to some extent even gained the official status of militia, responsible for assisting the population during emergencies. However, they often displayed criminal behavior and their leaders attempted to usurp power in the country and establish control over the economy. The competition for power between the government and the Mkhedrioni turned into an open conflict, which resulted in the disbanding of the organization and arrests of its members. In 1992-1995, Mkhedrioni to a large extent controlled Gurjaani District, and already in 1993, local elites got involved in the fight among groups supporting Shevardnadze, and, together with the Mkhedrioni, scored a decisive victory.

5) *Party activists*. These players only occasionally appeared on the political scene of the district. Activists of the former informal unions formed the core leadership of the district in 1991, but were forced to cede power to the Mkhedrioni in 1992. Party activists who came to power after the 2003 revolution were unable to establish themselves in the leadership of the district, or took secondary positions and entered into a coalition with representatives of the old elite.

The episodic appearance of these players on the stage of the region's political life underscores the relative stability of the structures of the local authorities. Lack of appropriate resources, such as money or management experience, made the party elite completely dependent on the support of central authorities. The lack of resources prompted the aforementioned party activists to collaborate with other groups of local elites. Over time, party activists lost control over the management system and were partially or completely eliminated in favor of the "old" groups of elites.

## Gurjaani District in 1989-2003: Regime change and the balance of local forces

In this section the change of power in the district during the period from 1989 to 2003 will be described. In addition, groups and individuals involved in the redistribution of power in the given period will be presented.



We are interested in how the change of the political regime in the country is linked to the struggle for control among various groups of the district. Is a change of the local government a direct result of the change of regime in the country or does the fight for power in the region have its own dynamics (albeit dependent on the results of the struggles in the capital)?

### The fall of the Soviet regime, Zviad Gamsakhurdia's rise to power (1989-1991)

The period between 1989 and 1991 is characterized by the collapse of the Soviet system of power in the country as a whole and at the district level in particular. For the groups of local elites this period, as well as the next few years, was a period of struggle for survival and power in the new environment. Some of these groups still continue to play an important role in the political life of the district. First and foremost, it was the party nomenklatura of the district controlling local power institutions. Various representatives of the local nomenklatura had close ties with rival groups in the leadership of the republic, in particular with groups affiliated to Eduard Shevardnadze, former leader of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (in 1972-1985) and to Jumber Patiashvili, who held the same post in 1985-1989. At the same time, the party nomenklatura were closely related to the operation of shadow economic groups in the district. Since the second half of the 1980s, representatives of these groups, bringing together the villagers from B, showed a desire to enter into closer contact with the district leadership and establish control over its operations. Once the group achieved some success in getting power, other economic groups also began to seek and obtain access to the leadership of the district. Thus, by the end of the 1980's, a relationship based on symbiosis between business groups and regional authorities was formed.

At the same time, in connection with attempts to liberalize the Soviet regime, a nationwide social movement gained strength that supported the democratization of social life and favored national self-determination. After the bloody crackdown of April 9, 1989, a radical wing of the movement acquired dominant influence in the society, calling for immediate secession from the USSR and the restoration of Georgia's independence. On the political scene of the district,

a new character appeared – a group of activists of the movement for independence. The leaders and members of local branches of national organizations usually were young men, strangers to political life not related to the nomenklatura regime. Despite the sometimes sharp differences among various leaders resisting the Soviet party and organizations in the center, there apparently was close coordination among the activists of the independence movement on the ground.<sup>7</sup> First of all, the opposition positioned itself against the communist government of the district. However, over time, as the communist government lost its legitimacy and, consequently, its mechanisms of control, activists gained influence, and the need for some coordination between district authorities and leaders of the informal movement evolved. The period starting April 9, 1989 and ending with the coming to power of Zviad Gamsakhurdia is characterized by progressive paralysis of state authority. Therefore such cooperation, according to informants, was necessary for the normal functioning of the government.

Multiparty elections in late of 1990 resulted in a victory for Gamsakhurdia's "Round Table – Free Georgia" bloc. In accordance with the decisions of the new leadership of the republic, the district was headed by a prefect appointed by the president. Unlike many other districts, the prefect in Gurjaani was not a representative of the old nomenklatura, but the head of the local branch of a party belonging to the ruling bloc. According to witnesses of the events of that period,<sup>8</sup> two factors determined the election of this person, first as the majoritarian MP of the district, and then his appointment as prefect of the district: membership of the party headed by the president, and the shadow of popularity that the charismatic leader of the country cast over his supporters.

The district leadership had two main objectives: the formation of a new district-level authority and the normalization of relations with the existing powerful groups, primarily with economic groups, which included managers of wineries and other businesses. The district administration solved the first problem by completely sacking old personnel associated with the former regime. This, according to some informants, caused an acute shortage of qualified personnel. In regards to the second problem, the government began to establish control

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<sup>7</sup> Information about the main events of the late Soviet regime and the relationships between various elite groups during the government of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, was obtained mainly from the local members of national parties. Among the informants were those who came to power as a result of victory of Gamsakhurdia's Round Table in the elections and those who had not received any job in the district leadership. The information obtained was compared to the observations of persons not involved at that point in the political struggle.

<sup>8</sup> In particular, this information we received from a local journalist.

over the income of different enterprises, and in some cases even tried to involve its henchmen in the management of enterprises. Despite the fact that the type of relations based on regular payments to the authorities was not new to businesses and business leaders of the Soviet period, the new prefect's intractability caused dissatisfaction among the economic elite of the district.

At the same time, a schism was growing between the new leaders of the district and activists of the national movement. When time to hand out posts came, party solidarity receded into the background and personal relationships came to the fore: people who had not even participated in the independence movement were appointed to positions in the district administration and some activists were dismissed from the power structures. As a result, a group of former activists of the national movement and the leaders of the provincial government was formed, which opposed the prefect of the district. In this struggle, according to some reports, the opponents of the prefect won the support of the old *nomenklatura* and the economic elite.<sup>9</sup> This circumstance further emphasizes the growing influence of the members of the "old" elite in the political process taking place in the country.

After a few episodes in which the confrontation between the prefect and his opponents became apparent, the prefect of the district was dismissed by the president. The deciding factor according to some witnesses of those events was the loss of confidence by the country's top leaders, including the president, in the prefect.

After a brief struggle for power, a delegate representing the district in the parliament of the republic was appointed as the prefect. Crucial to his victory was, apparently, a perfect combination of two factors: the ability to bypass the competitors at the level of the national authorities and the support of the local elite, including the *nomenklatura*. His arrival as head of the district government marks the return of representatives of *nomenklatura* to a range of high positions and the growing influence of the old elite. According to some informants, this is explained not only by alliances struck by the representatives of old and new elites, but also by the need for competent personnel necessary to govern the district. The subsequent period is characterized by gradual loss of the levers of power by

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<sup>9</sup> I collected information about the details of the ensuing conflict of this period from an informant, who occupied a significant position in the leadership of the district during that period. The facts and analytical observations provided by this informant greatly helped the author in understanding developments during that period.

representatives of the ruling party and the growing influence of the old nomenklatura. According to one of the informants, as the district administration was losing control over the situation, another group – crime bosses, which enjoyed influence in the Soviet period – started to play an increasingly important role.

### Return of Eduard Shevardnadze and the subsequent power struggle (1992 – 1995)

In January 1992, as a result of an armed coup President Gamsakhurdia was overthrown. A coalition consisting of National Guard troops, armed Mkhedrioni and Gamsakhurdia's opponents came to power. The number of Mkhedrioni members in the district by that time was considerable and this group played a leading role in the governance of the district.<sup>10</sup>

After returning to the country in March 1992, Eduard Shevardnadze<sup>11</sup> began to surround himself with representatives of the former nomenklatura elite. Representatives of the nomenklatura of Gurjaani District used old ties with the new head of the country and were appointed to senior positions in the local administration. In the beginning, representatives of the nomenklatura were supported by the Mkhedrioni, who apparently calculated that they could use the experience and networks of the new heads of the district for cover while they concentrated the real power in their own hands.

The Mkhedrioni gained ever greater influence, establishing themselves not so much in the political arena, as with threats of physical violence. Crime bosses had to temporarily retire, giving Mkhedrioni members their sources of income. Sources of income for members of the organization were looting, kidnapping and extortion. The attention of the Mkhedrioni was mainly focused on the representatives of the old district elite, which in Soviet times had managed to accumulate significant financial resources. However, compulsory levies were also applied to farmers. Mkhedrioni threatened not only the material wealth, but

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<sup>10</sup> Information about the early stages of the formation of the Mkhedrioni was collected from one of the founders of the local branch of the Mkhedrioni. The story about events following the coup of 1992 is based on evidence gathered from different informants.

<sup>11</sup> Eduard Shevardnadze led the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1972-1985. After his appointment as the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the USSR, he continued to influence political developments in the republic through his supporters in the leadership of the Georgian Communist Party. In March 1992, he returned to the country at the invitation of the military junta, which organized the coup in the winter of 1991-1992 and was soon elected as the head of state. By 1995, he managed to consolidate power and was elected president.

also lives of the elite and local residents. Mkhedrioni established control over the activities of the district administration and began to pursue leadership positions through their proxies.

During the time when the Mkhedrioni fully controlled the district, the popular head of the district administration died in Gurjaani under mysterious circumstances. It was rumored that he was poisoned by one of the leaders of the Mkhedrioni. By that time, the conflict between Eduard Shevardnadze, the head of state, and the Mkhedrioni had ripened. Local elites, along with other supporters of Shevardnadze, became actively involved in preparations for the final battle with the militia as it was extremely unpopular among the population. The police stepped up after having been inactive during the terror of Mkhedrioni. The old district elite gradually started to gain ground and win back control of the district. The struggle against the Mkhedrioni in the region was led by N., the former first secretary of the district party committee of the neighboring Telavi District, who due to close ties with Shevardnadze achieved a high position in the regional nomenklatura. In summer 1995, mass arrests of members and leaders of the Mkhedrioni took place in Kakheti Province and elsewhere in Georgia.

The period of domination over the district by the Mkhedrioni and the fight against it demonstrated the viability of the old district elite and their ability to fight for power in the toughest conditions. In the ensuing struggle for power the district elite was able to take the side of the coalition supporting Shevardnadze and mobilized available resources for this fight.

### Stabilization of Shevardnadze's regime (1995-2003)

The period from 1995 to 2003 was characterized by relative stability. After the victory over the Mkhedrioni, the local regional elite – represented first and foremost by the informal head of the district nomenklatura, N., established its power in the district.<sup>12</sup>

The very authoritarian governance of N. concealed a complex system of interactions between different groups, including between various district cliques.

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<sup>12</sup> During the Soviet Union N. was the first secretary of the Telavi District Committee of the Communist Party. Later, during Shevardnadze's rule, she held the post of *gamgebeli* (administration head) of Telavi District, from which she effectively led the entire province of Kakheti. She secured this influential position in large part because of her close ties to the president's family.

Many features of the management system established during this period recalled the Soviet era. Noteworthy was the return of crime bosses to the district scene. Let us here consider only the most important features of the system of power distribution in the second half of the 1990's.

One of the characteristics of this period is the increased centralization of control. With the establishment of the structure of the provincial administration in the mid-1990's, formally headed by the governor, but having a more influential leader in the person of N., the district leadership came under the control of regional authorities. In accordance with the division of influences among the different elite groups during the Shevardnadze era, Kakheti was considered to be N.'s exclusive stronghold.<sup>13</sup> However, when an influential figure was appointed to the position of governor, who in addition had good communication with the central authorities and pursued an independent policy, he was able to partially counterbalance the impact of N.

It appears there was a certain distribution of spheres of influence between the president's provincial representative (governor) and the informal leader of the local elite. In this regard, it is important to note that the governor is a native of Gurjaani District and on various occasions held the position of head of the district administration.

Accordingly, a certain right to influence the district was prescribed to him and the "legitimacy" of his interests in the district was recognized. In any case, the regional center had a significant impact on political processes in the district, exemplified by the informal procedure for the approval of the deputy gamgebeli. According to informants, such approval was mandatory, though in some cases a formal procedure.

The role played in this system by the head of district administration shows the distribution of power in the district in 1995-2003. While in most cases, the government in the district was appointed by the provincial government (although in some cases, candidates came from the local elite), the head of the district administration, supported by his/her patrons, had the opportunity to form a team of "his/her" government officials, to whom he/she entrusted leadership positions in the local administration. But at the same time he/she was forced to consider the interests of local groups and appoint representatives of these groups to senior positions in the

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<sup>13</sup> The fact that N. enjoyed unlimited power in the province is a matter of common knowledge regarding the distribution of power in the province during Shevardnadze's rule and it was presented as such by the informants. More precise information about the relations between N. and other actors was received by asking follow-up questions during the interviews, as well as several meetings with more informed persons, mainly representatives of the previous authorities.

local administration, or leave their positions untouched and enter into various transactions with their representatives. According to informants, positions in the district administration have always been held by individuals who retained the position for a long time and enjoyed the support of the regional administration or economic groups. The head of the district had virtually no opportunity to remove such people from their positions. Replacement of certain officials in the district administration by one gamgebeli trying to demonstrate his determination to carry out his own policy was one of the reasons for the collapse of his professional career.

During this period, old economic groups broke up, and their influence on the management of the district weakened. To a large extent this was due to increased centralization of the control over the district. The old economic elite apparently did not have sufficient economic resources at their disposal to counter the growing influence of the provincial authorities to manage the district and ensure the loyalty of local officials. The reduction in the influence of economic groups became apparent when in the late 1990's, a once-influential group established by businessmen from the village of V. was unable to ensure the appointment of their representatives in the district administration. However, the collapse of the old group did not mean the exit from the scene of their "representatives" in the government. On the contrary, many of them retained their positions in the district leadership, maintaining close contacts with individual businessmen and representatives of the upper echelons of power. Illustrative of how influential these economic groups were during a certain period of the political life of the district is the fact that until the late 1990s all the district leaders were from the village of V. or the surrounding villages.

The collapse of the system of power distribution in the district and in the region as a whole followed the fall of Shevardnadze's regime in 2003. The threat of regime change was felt by the elites. It can definitely be said that the local elite attempted to establish links with the opposition before the "Rose Revolution", which brought that opposition to power in the country.<sup>14</sup> However, after the revolution and the collapse of the old configuration of power, the problem of retaining their positions became more substantial. One of the tasks faced by the elite was to find a common language with politicians who emerged in top

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<sup>14</sup> Thus, despite the unconditional support given by the local elite to the candidates from the ruling party in the parliamentary elections in 2003, many of its members supported the candidacy of the opposition party that later was included in the revolutionary coalition.

positions in the district administration as a result of the revolution and possibly neutralize their influence. Both of these tasks were largely met. Local activists of the United National Movement – the party which led revolutionary demonstrations in Tbilisi – got almost no top posts in the district administration and were largely relegated to secondary posts. Despite the fact that some new faces emerged in the district leadership after the revolution, people connected to the former nomenklatura regime gradually returned to power and their influence grew. Hence, the local elite has once again demonstrated its ability to regroup amid changes occurring in the country, thus preserving power and influence on events and processes taking place in the district.

**Table: Key political events in the country and changes at the level of local elites**

	Developments in the country	Provincial elite	District elite
1988-1989	The rise of the national movement		Emergence of local branches of national parties
1990-1991	The arrival in power of the Round Table – Free Georgia political bloc		Changes of the district authorities at all levels and the resulting crisis of local government
1992	Overthrow of President Gamsakhurdia		Return to power of representatives of the nomenklatura and shadow businesses, establishing control over the district by the Mkhedrioni
1995	Victory under the leadership of Shevardnadze's government over the Mkhedrioni		Dismantling of local Mkhedrioni groups and arrests of its members
1995-2001	Stabilization of Shevardnadze's regime	N. establishes control over the province, establishment the institution of governor	Local authorities cede power to regional cliques, influence of local economic groups falls
2003	Rose Revolution	Departure from the political scene of N. and affiliated regional cliques	The arrival of district government officials associated with the new regime



## Key findings

Our study confirmed that the main characteristics of the local government after independence (since 1991) are the centralized nature of local governance and the dominance of informal practices over legal standards in the district administrations.<sup>15</sup> Both of these features are a legacy of the Soviet system of management and were propagated by the slow change of the legal framework, as well as through the influence of old local nomenklatura groups. This has in many cases to a large extent determined the choice of local elites in favor of adaptation strategies during different regimes. This strategy proved highly successful, as it enabled local elite groups to control power on the ground and at the same time not associate themselves with different regimes. In doing so, the local elites were able to evade responsibility for problems connected to the activities of this or that government and avoid the fate of the regimes replacing each other.

The study revealed the coexistence of two groups of elites at the local level – the provincial and the district-level elites. Provincial elites developed during the rule of Shevardnadze as a result of attempts by the center to strengthen the centralized governance. At the same time, the attachment of the provincial elite to the general structure of Shevardnadze's neo-patrimonial regime determined its instability during the subsequent regime change.<sup>16</sup> Various district groups, on the contrary, occupied a subordinate position in relation to the regional elite, but after changes in the central government, they had a better chance to retain power.

The main groups of district-level local elites were quite stable. Except for those brief periods when the control of the district moved to the hands of central authorities nominated by party activists, or to semi-criminal structures, power in the region was mainly concentrated in the hands of the same bureaucratic and economic groups that existed since Soviet times. At the district level, the gradual decline of the influence of economic groups and strengthening of the regional-level bureaucratic elite was observed, but officials connected in the past with economic groups did not lose their power and kept it within the framework of a corrupt bureaucratic system of government.

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<sup>15</sup> Losaberidze D., *Op cit.* p. 43.

<sup>16</sup> Eisenstadt S. N., *Revolution and the Transformation of Societies*, Moscow: Aspekt-Press, (1999 [1978]).

The answer to the main question of this study – the role of district elites in the country – is the following: There was a circle of persons in the district during the present research period able to influence, and even control, the governance of the district. We can say that processes of power redistribution observed in the district took place to a certain degree in an autonomous regime and did have limited relation to events taking place in the country. After several regime changes nationwide, a redistribution of power also took place at the district level, but at the same time other processes were also observed: Certain groups and coalitions were formed and dissolved inside the district's elite – groups associated with the former regime prevailed over the representatives of the ruling regime (such was the case, for example, with Zviad Gamsakhurdia's short rule).

Due to the lack of resources, the district elite could not compete with higher-level elites during the process of political transformation. Therefore, the interests of local groups focused exclusively on the district authorities, but they were forced to share power with the elites connected with the upper levels of government (provincial or central). Resolution of conflicts between various groups in the local elite took place precisely at the highest levels of governments – at central or provincial levels. The purely local character of district elite and its hierarchical relationships with national elites hindered further connections and unions with other elites countrywide. The strategy of local elites was to adapt to successive central governments rather than to actively participate in politics at the national level. Provincial elites were also closely associated with the structure of government established under Shevardnadze, and met their end with the change of the regime. Thus, a local elite capable of participating in the power struggle at the national level has not yet been formed. There was no faction representing the interests of local groups among the various groups of the national elite fighting for power in 1990-2003.

It can be said that the absence of a group representing interests of local elites on the national political scene has narrowed the range of the main participants in the struggle for power and decreased the possibility of reaching a compromise between various elite groups on the rules of the game. This in turn became one of the factors contributing to the overall instability of the regime. At a time when a power struggle unfolded among small numbers of players, in many cases between two players, politics easily turned into a zero-sum game.

The struggle for power in such circumstances was uncompromised and continued until the full expulsion of the opponent from political life. At the same time, the political dependence of the local elites and their strategy for adapting to new regimes allowed them to attribute the inefficiency of local governance to the policy of the country's leadership and claim that it led to the erosion of the regimes at the lower levels of government. This, they maintained, was primarily manifested in the growing inefficiency of governance and the loss of trust in the regime locally.

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