

# PERCEPTIONS OF TWO INTERNAL POLITICAL CONFLICTS AND CIVIL UNREST IN GEORGIA'S MODERN HISTORY

*Tiko Tkeshelashvili*

*Hegel was right when he said that we learn from history  
that man can never learn anything from history.*

**George Bernard Shaw**

## Introduction

**A**mong all the opinion pieces about the origins and evolution of a crisis in a country or discussions about related processes, two views usually stand out from the rest. According to one, national memory is too short and its ability to learn lessons from past mistakes is rather limited. The other holds, that no experience, positive or negative, is wasted, that it is probably stored in *collective memory* and that it is one of the key factors in a political culture that shapes the process. The 2009 political crisis in Georgia, marked with massive protest rallies, is just one in a series of events that sparked similar public discussions and raised questions about what kind of political culture has developed in the country since the 1991-92 civil war.

What is a political culture? The term *Political Culture* was first introduced by Gabriel A. Almond (an American political scientist) in 1960s. He defined political culture as a set of expectations, perceptions, and forms of behavior which members of a political system have with regard to this system in general and institutions and actions in particular. It means that political culture can be assessed by finding out what members of a political system know about the sys-

tem they belong to, what kind of attitudes they have and how they act in the given system.<sup>1</sup>

In order to understand political culture fully, one has to study everything it is expressed in: types of political actors, motivation, forms of political competition and participation, decision and choice-making processes, attitudes, values, visions, political symbolism and political communication (applied political language).

At first, political culture studies usually focused on analyzing *perceptions* of an actual political reality. Accordingly, opinion polls and surveys relied on commonly used methods for assessing a given political culture. Later, other variables – such as traditions, history, and national identity – were added to the equation in order to get a *bigger picture* and better understanding of the political culture of a nation.

The present paper looks into only one fragment of the bigger picture. It captures perceptions of political analysts and researchers on political leadership culture in the context of the two civil upheavals that took place in Georgia in 1991/92 and 2009. The paper begins with an overview of the two milestone political events, followed by presentation and analysis of in-depth interviews conducted in March-September 2010.

## Purpose of the study

Despite some similarities, the two aforementioned conflicts in the modern history of Georgia differ in ways which reflect, to a certain degree, the dynamics or change of the political culture in Georgia over the last two decades.

What is the difference between these two conflicts? Have political leaders and various actors involved in the processes, as well as the society as a whole, advanced in terms of their ability to address major political disagreements? The massive protest rallies of 2009 which reached their apex on May 6 and 26 had a less tragic ending than the civil confrontation of 1991-1992 because the modern Georgian society (especially the

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<sup>1</sup> It should be mentioned that popular understanding of political culture in Georgia is different from how it is defined in political science. We often hear people speak about the presence or absence of political culture rather than about the nature of political culture.

political leadership) demonstrates more *responsible attitudes* and is more wary of the potential consequences of its actions? What are the main driving factors of this “rational” approach? Has the Georgian political culture changed since the early 1990s?

It is a changed style of political leadership on both conflicting sides, the argument goes, that seems to have prevented the protest from rallies turning violent and evolving into a new civil war in 2009.

Although it is important to examine perceptions of different groups – members of political parties, authorities, and ordinary citizens – the given research concentrates on political analysts and researchers, because these are the people who study, analyze, and discuss social-political developments in a country as part of their profession and, therefore, can be considered opinion-makers. This paper is an attempt to answer the above-specified questions by identifying and presenting respondents’ perceptions of these two events and analyzing perceived similarities and differences. Another goal of the research is to reveal common and conflicting views in this particular sampling.

The main objective of the interviews was to collect, classify, analyze and present attitudes, perceptions and opinions of a select group of respondents<sup>2</sup> on the two abovementioned events rather than to reconstruct political processes or verify real facts.

The sampling of respondents was based on diverse selection criteria, including their political preferences, visions, backgrounds, and attitudes towards political processes. None of them was a member of any political party. Some of them were fierce critics of the government, while others criticized the opposition. There were also respondents who were equally critical of both the current ruling elite and the opposition forces. But the interviews showed that despite these differences, experts viewed political processes in a similar way and shared certain opinions (presented below).

The research methodology included:

- ▶ Desk research – overview of articles about political culture and the two events, as well as opinion polls;
- ▶ In-depth interviews with opinion-makers – the central component of the research and the main source of information for the analysis;

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<sup>2</sup> In total 9 in-depth interviews were conducted. No respondents are named in this paper.

- ▶ Analysis – the final stage of the research, analysis of the gathered materials.

The interviews were the main source of information for the analysis. All other materials were used as a complementary source.

The questions of the interviews were designed and arranged into the following thematic segments:

- ▶ Assessment of the civil war of the early 1990s: description of the government and main opposition forces; assessment of the leadership styles; identification and description of the supporters of each conflicting party; assessment of the processes that led to the civil war;
- ▶ Assessment of the present-day situation: description of the government and main opposition forces; assessment of the leadership styles; identification and description of the supporters of each conflicting party; assessment of the processes that led to the crisis.

The interviews produced interesting results and helped reveal the main perceived features of the political leadership during the two researched periods, as well as perceptions of its response to the internal political crisis. A comparative analysis of these perceptions made it possible to find out which features are considered/perceived to have changed or improved and which are new and characteristic of the current leadership.

## The two conflicts – an overview

Two key events are the focus of the present research: the civil war of the early 90s and the internal political crisis of 2009. The former is the first, while the latter is one of the latest<sup>3</sup> internal political conflicts in the two decades of Georgia's independence. Both provide important background for better understanding and comparing of the perceived changes in Georgian political culture.

Since regaining independence, the young and inexperienced Georgian state, which inherited a lot of serious problems, has gone through a number of troubled periods, some of which led to violent conflicts posing a grave danger

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<sup>3</sup> At the moment of the study.

to the statehood and sovereignty of the newly independent country. The first democratically elected Georgian government was in power for only about 14 months. The escalating tensions between the government and the opposition, which accused the president of *dictatorial behavior, totalitarianism, cultivation of extreme nationalism, and unwillingness or inability to carry out economic reforms*, evolved into a civil war in December 1991 January 1992 and resulted in the overthrow of President Zviad Gamsakhurdia. Afterwards, the country was temporarily governed by the so called *Military Council* representing influential warlords and main paramilitary and criminal groups. It was during its rule that Georgia lost control over South Ossetia (in 1992) and Abkhazia (in 1993). Apart from inflicting heavy casualties and extensive damage to the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of civilians, the Abkhaz-Georgian and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts plunged the country into political instability and significantly slowed down its social and economic development. Georgia was long unable (and in some sense is still struggling) to overcome this negative legacy.

It seems reasonable to conclude that the young Georgian state – its political elite and general public – was not prepared for new challenges and responsibilities emanating from the status of a newly independent country. Unfortunately, bitter political rivalry and personal ambitions of the political leaders on both sides of the political divide and their inability to reach a compromise over most crucial issues brought about disastrous consequences for the country.

Some political scientists (this opinion was also reflected in the interviews) believe that this political inexperience stemmed from the negative Soviet legacy. Both the ruling elite and the opposition had little experience of dissident activities. Most of the former Soviet political elite (some of them took up various positions in the Georgian government after the break-up of the USSR) were incapable of independent political decision-making, as previously they had to obey orders from Moscow and implement them in a one-party and generally loyal environment.

A number of significant events have taken place in Georgia since the end of the civil war, including the 2003 Rose Revolution, the November 7, 2007 unrest, and the 2008 August war. The last two had a huge negative impact on the country's social and political life, though it is obvious to me that their characteristics are very different from those of a civil war.

Although the 2009 political confrontation between President Saakashvili and his team on the one hand and the opposition on the other, shows some similarity to the aforementioned conflict of the 1990s (similar emotional overload, the way society was divided and the impact on ordinary people), there are also significant differences (in relation to the development of events, the response of conflicting parties to the crisis and, most importantly, the consequences).

Political opponents<sup>4</sup> heavily criticized the government for adopting what they said were wrong development priorities and irrelevant forms of modernization for the country. The opposition leaders claimed that *the Georgian government was too authoritarian and disrespectful to fundamental freedoms and human rights and the rule of law; that all decisions were actually made by a relatively small circle of the president's confidants and advisers; and that the Georgian political system was too centralized*. In their words, such a regime was unacceptable for a democratic country. The confrontation resulted in a stand-off that prompted a wide range of opposition forces to unite around the idea of bringing an end to the regime. The opposition initially managed to mobilize a substantial number of supporters (some tens of thousands).

On April 7, 2009 the leaders of the opposition alliance which spearheaded the mass protests from April to June issued a statement demanding President Saakashvili to step down on the grounds that he *“has abused power in all possible ways; launched a war, ignoring the will of the Georgian people and being well-aware that it was impossible to win and would result in the loss of Georgian territories and claim hundreds of lives among the Georgian military and our fellow citizens in Tskhinvali; ruined the Georgian economy and sold most national assets to Russians; deprived his people of basic freedoms including freedom of speech; illegitimately destroyed and confiscated private property; widely used election fraud and manipulated votes in the last presidential elections to remain in power. All this means that he has lost legitimacy and the trust of his people, and cannot lead this country any longer. If he stays in power, Georgia will face a real danger of a new war and even more destruction.”*

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<sup>4</sup> President Saakashvili and his party, which has a constitutional majority in the Parliament, were challenged by the opposition, namely an alliance of several oppositional parties, which pressed for his resignation and snap presidential and parliamentary elections.

The mass protest rallies and demonstrations concentrated were mainly in Tbilisi and involved radical actions, such as the blockade of streets and administrative buildings over a long period of time (April-August 2009). Except some small-scale skirmishes between pro-government and opposition supporters, the 2009 demonstrations were largely peaceful. But on May 6<sup>5</sup> and May 26<sup>6</sup> tempers suddenly flared up and the protest turned violent, leading to clashes between the protesters and the police. A group of protesters even briefly blocked the main railway. Fortunately, the conflict soon de-escalated and bloodshed was prevented.

It is worth noting that both presidents – Gamsakhurdia (86% of the votes) and Saakashvili (96% of the votes in the first term and 53% in the second) – came to power with substantial electoral support and a high level of public confidence. And both lost people’s support in a relatively short time. In both cases the protest began as civil unrest, involving large numbers of people from almost all strata of the population, and was marked with heightened tensions and emotional overload.<sup>7</sup> It is also important to note that both conflicts involved different social groups and different parts of society stood across a dividing line. The extreme polarization of society is a common feature of these two events.

While these two conflicts are similar in the sense that they split society into two conflicting and irreconcilable camps, I agree with the opinion that this was not the case during the Rose Revolution. In 2003 the Georgian society seemed more consolidated against Shevardnadze’s rule due to massive and immense public discontent with the government over a wide array of issues (corruption and economic stagnation).

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<sup>5</sup> “Several opposition politicians and activists were injured as a result of confrontation with the police outside the Tbilisi police department headquarters late on Wednesday evening. Protesters arrived at the headquarters after the popular singer and the activist Giorgi Gachechiladze suddenly showed up at the rally outside Parliament on Wednesday evening and called on the protesters to march towards the Tbilisi police department to demand a release of three activists arrested in connection with an assault on the public TV.” Civil.ge, May 7, 2009 <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=20863&search=>.

<sup>6</sup> “Tens of thousands of protesters gathered on May 26 – Georgia’s Independence Day and the 48<sup>th</sup> day of street protests – demanding President Saakashvili’s resignation. After Giorgi Gachechiladze’s speech the protesters moved towards the St. Trinity Cathedral to attend a prayer by Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church, Ilia II. Amid the heightened tensions, Ilia II issued a statement suggesting that the opposition should drop its demand for President’s resignation. Late on May 27, hundreds of opposition activists and supporters blocked the main railway at the Tbilisi central railway station for about three hours – it was the first time the opposition has employed this tactic since the protest began on April 9<sup>th</sup>. Civil.ge, May 27, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> The civil war of the 1990s had a huge impact on society, leaving scars that lasted for years. In the following years Gamsakhurdia’s supporters were arrested en masse and/or marginalized in society.

The peaceful character of the 2003 Rose Revolution led local and international political analysts to assume that civil and political culture in Georgia had changed and become more *mature* in comparison with the early 1990s. It was widely seen as a success story for the entire region. After the revolution, a majority of local and international experts concluded that despite some minor problems, it had a positive impact on the country's political, social and economic development and society's transformation process. It was perceived as a successful example of a peaceful change of power. It seemed that Georgia's civil and political culture had substantially improved and the country entered a new, more advanced phase of the state-building process. But later dramatic events, namely the forceful break-up of a peaceful demonstration on November 7, 2007 and the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008, caused some experts to question the sustainability of the Georgian state institutions and the Georgian leadership's ability to maintain stability in the country.

The steady escalation of tensions in 2009 fuelled widespread fears that violence, i.e. a clash between the police and the protesters, was unavoidable. Assessments and opinions expressed in various public discussions, TV or radio talk shows, and newspaper articles, suggested that the situation was very much reminiscent of the events of the early 1990s. Parallels were drawn between the two confrontations, triggering a heated public debate. A deep split in the society was evident,<sup>8</sup> and the public began to ask: why are we getting into the same trouble and turmoil again and again? Are we able to learn anything at all from the past experience?

Fortunately, the political opponents managed to prevent the worst fears from coming true. Although the prospect of violence was quite real, the conflicting parties demonstrated a sufficiently rational and responsible approach.<sup>9</sup> The main question is how it was possible. What prevented the 2009 events from becoming a repeat of 1991?

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<sup>8</sup> A good illustration of this could be the fact that there were groups of pro-government and pro-opposition artists.

<sup>9</sup> CRRRC blog on Freedom House 2010 Report: "Nation in Transit": "...report notes that despite political unrest and demonstrations, both the protesters and the government mostly refrained from violence, which had been a severe problem in previous years. As a result, it may be construed that Georgia is making certain attempts at progress in this realm." <http://crrc-caucasus.blogspot.com/2010/07/post-soviet-states-democratic-decline.html>.



## 1991-92 – perceived features

This section describes the respondents' views and assessments of the above-mentioned developments. The first question asked the respondents to evaluate Gamsakhurdia's leadership first as chairman of the Supreme Council of Georgia and then as president. Respondents identified key actors and groups that influenced political processes and their proponents, political goals of the leaders and the means by which they planned to achieve these goals.

► Political leadership and society were described generally in similar terms. The respondents used the following adjectives to characterize these actors: inexperienced, unethical, populist (negative connotation), radical, extremist, immoral, unrealistic/inadequate, selfish, irrational, prone to confrontation, unprincipled and dishonest. It is noteworthy that Gamsakhurdia and his team didn't expect that they would eventually come to power. Therefore they had little idea what to do and how to govern the country in the event that it became independent. Some respondents attributed the leadership's inexperience to the negative legacy of the Soviet past, emphasizing that generations of Soviet citizens were brought up without knowing anything about how the government works and what state management is. One of the respondents recalled attempts to establish the Soviet model of management in certain governmental agencies. Former Soviet functionaries and government members proved largely irrelevant in the new reality because they were used to implementing Moscow's direct orders in a one-party environment with no opposition.

*“Those who came to power had no idea how to govern the country and how the state functions, especially in a transitional period which, on the one hand, often generates self-destructive processes and, on the other hand, requires to handle these processes correctly in order to transform” (A. R.).*

Gamsakhurdia and his team had also little experience in political relations. They tried to stifle and suppress all dissent and opposition, labeling opposition supporters and leaders as “enemies” and refusing to talk to them. One of the important questions of the interviews was about the origin of conflict. Gamsakhurdia's weak leadership and inability to govern efficiently caused rifts and

discord within the government. Some of his closest allies – Sigua, Kitovani – defected to the opposition, eroding his legitimacy and authority. According to the respondents, Gamsakhurdia and his team had used wrong approaches all along. In the words of one of them:

*“They had a feeling that they were surrounded by a hostile environment, both outside and within the country. The biggest external danger was the Soviet Union, the Kremlin. Besides, they expected sabotage and resistance from the existing elites [inside the country]” (G. N.).*

The respondents described exaggerated hopes and expectations of western assistance and involvement (UN, the US, European states) and unrealistic estimates of Georgia's resources (water, tea) as wishful thinking which was characteristic of Georgian society in the early 1990s.

*“Both the general public and the leadership had strong mytho-poetic thinking: history was mythologized (all Georgians were said to be brave) and it was widely believed that the country would be able to live solely on profits from Borjomi mineral water. Unrealistic as they were, such views were very popular in the society” (D. L.).*

In terms of values, the ultra-nationalistic ideology pursued by Gamsakhurdia's government was another indicator of its incompetence and irrelevance. On the whole, the Georgian society had a rather vague system of values at that time.

*“In fact, they [Gamsakhurdia's government] failed to understand that Georgia was a multiethnic country and, therefore, their policies tended to be apparently discriminatory” (M. C.).*

According to one of the respondents, the fact that a known criminal managed to build enormous political influence and power also illustrates what kind of society Georgia was in the early 1990s – a society with corrupt values, where criminals were respected and even admired.

*“The intelligentsia turned against Zviad because of his extremism but at the same time they tolerated Jaba Ioseliani. This cannot be denied. He was even elected to the parliament. They sat alongside each other in the parliament and nobody told him: You are a criminal. They treated him as an ordinary man” (G. K.).*

Respondents generally agreed that the part of society that challenged Gamsakhurdia regarded the alliance of Ioseliani and Kitovani as nothing more than an instrument to get rid of the ruling elite. They wanted to overthrow Gamsakhurdia at all costs, while Ioseliani and Kitovani wielded real power backed by force – Mkhedrioni and elements of the National Guards. Another explanation of why Ioseliani was accepted by the society is that the country was in chaos at that time.

The respondents also emphasized that the lack of values made people feel totally disorientated in the new reality. That period, referred to as transitional, saw a lot of random people take up positions in government and various political unions, trying to exploit the country’s chaotic situation for personal gain (to get power, money). Also, the society’s political choices and preferences were based mainly on emotions rather than rationality.

► The overall context was described as chaotic, disordered and uncertain. Chaos was said to be everywhere – in the government, in social and political life. The decision-making process was extremely disorganized. The society felt disorientated, especially when the anti-Gamsakhurdia campaign gained strength. The external context was largely unpredictable and vague due to the collapse of Soviet Union.

► Key political actors/groups: former dissidents mostly from academic circles/humanists; former Communist Party members; criminal groups.

► The main groups of supporters: the so-called provincials, i.e. rural residents from the regions which were Gamsakhurdia’s main powerbase; intelligentsia, which was overwhelmingly opposed to Gamsakhurdia; armed forces and paramilitary groups – Mkhedrioni and elements of the National Guards under Tengiz Kitovani.

It is noteworthy that several respondents mentioned philosopher Merab Mamardashvili as one of a very few people who managed to retain common sense. Their assessment suggests that Mamardashvili had certain influence on part of the society.

*“Merab Mamardashvili was the only 'bright spot'. He looked as if he were from another world. He preferred truth to nationalism... He said that nationalism could not and should not be an excuse for violation of human rights” (M. C.).*

One respondent pointed out, however, that it was precisely Mamardashvili's ideas that laid the foundation for anti-Gamsakhurdia campaign and were effectively used by the opposition to justify and legitimize its radical anti-government actions.

Some of the respondents appeared to have shared the view that then Georgian society at the time was waiting for a “savior” who would solve all the problems of the country at once. Some respondents held a different opinion, arguing that citizens were quite active – once the civil war broke out they took up arms and fought for what they thought was right.

► Background: Soviet system and its collapse. Most of the respondents agreed that the Soviet system had a huge impact on society and several generations of Georgians. That is why the people who came to power immediately after breaking away from USSR were hardly able, if at all, to de-Sovietize the country in a short period of time and replace the old Soviet system with a new one. It was equally hard to change the deeply rooted Soviet mentality. The leaders of the Georgian national movement emerged precisely from this system. According to the respondents, they knew well enough how to challenge the system and organize protests, but had little idea of how the state functions.

In brief, the respondents' assessment of the main actors of the time – political leaders and the general public – was considerably critical and even negative. All characteristics were given in critical and negative terms. One respondent was even self-critical and acknowledged that what he did in 1991-1992 no longer seemed right to him as it led to very bad consequences for the country.

*“I didn't support Zviad. Today I'm not ashamed of this but I'm not sure whether I was right to oppose him. But they [Gamsakhurdia's team] made a lot of mistakes. They didn't have any idea what to do” (A. R.).*

One explanation of this negative perception is that people usually view the above-described events in terms of their disastrous consequences and destructive impact on the future of the country. It is for this reason, it seems,

that the respondents were extremely critical of everybody who was involved, directly or indirectly, in the civil confrontation, contributed to the escalation of tensions or did nothing to prevent them, and considered them responsible for the consequences. This explains why the society as a whole was assessed negatively, as a nation with vague values, which proved unable to ward off the turmoil of the early 1990s and allowed political actors to pursue private interests and ambitions. A majority of the respondents claimed that, after all, it is the society's responsibility to prevent political leaders with controversial and suspicious agendas, adverse for the public interest, from fulfilling their ambitions and goals.

► External factors were also examined and discussed, as they arguably contributed to the confrontation too. It should be noted, however, that the internal factor – namely the political leadership's incompetence and inability to manage processes efficiently – was identified as the main cause of the conflict. As to external factors, the respondents pointed the finger at Russia, claiming that it played a major role in provoking the tensions and had a negative influence on political processes. According to the respondents, Russia had an interest in destabilizing the situation in the newly independent Georgia and tried to achieve its goals by manipulating certain political groups.

There was a broad consensus among the respondents that the conflict was caused mainly by internal factors, while external forces simply exploited the situation to their own advantage. Therefore, in their opinion, solutions are to be found within the country, not outside.

## 2009 – perceived features

The respondents had very different opinions about the current government. Most of them accused the current leadership of having an authoritarian or semi-authoritarian style of governance. But they differed widely in their understanding of the main reasons for the rise of authoritarianism in Georgia. According to one view, the government is neither interested in nor willing to build a democratic society in Georgia and, therefore, it should resign. The respondents put forward various hypotheses to explain the deficit of democracy in Georgia. Most of them argued that it was caused by the weakness of society

in general and, particularly, the opposition's inability to challenge the country's leadership and launch a meaningful debate around the pressing issues. The complex geopolitical context was cited as another important reason. According to its proponents, the regime is anxious to concentrate political power and authority in the hands of the executive in response to national security threats coming from Russia, which is looking to destabilize Georgia with the help of various pro-Russian groups within the country. It is for this reason that the ruling elite has sought to strengthen its control as much as possible and adopted authoritarian methods, one of the respondents emphasized.

► When describing the current political **leadership**, the respondents were more specific.

The ruling elite was mainly portrayed as arrogant and indifferent to other people's opinions and feelings, especially those directly affected by their decisions. Although the ruling elite has proved its ability to implement successful reforms (for instance the reform of the police), it is said to be lacking political will to achieve consolidation of democracy. The ruling elite was also accused of employing forceful means to change – or modernize – the society while paying little respect to traditional Georgian values. It was also emphasized that the core of the current ruling elite was made up of young reformers who emerged from Shevardnadze's elite.

*“Today we have a more educated team of young reformers who are implementing reforms in a way they think is appropriate and efficient. They do not have much respect for public opinion, because they think that the Georgian society is still too backward and reforms should be imposed from above. It seems that their main priority is not democratization but a strong centralized state” (G. T.).*

The role of personalities in politics was also highlighted:

*“The personal characteristics of the leaders have a strong impact on the country. This is because there are no democratic control mechanisms to oversee the government's policies” (N. S.).*

The opposition. All opposition forces were assessed predominantly in negative terms. They were described as weak, disoriented, fragmented and disorganized.

According to the respondents, the opposition consists of a wide variety of different actors and motley groups with unclear goals and ideology. Although some opposition groups were said to be more patriotic and caring about Georgia's interests than the rest, their aims and agendas did not seem quite clear to the respondents.

► The main groups of supporters within society: according to some respondents, the ruling elite's supporters include mainly public servants, as they are heavily dependent upon the government, those who really believe the government and those who simply do not see an alternative, and those who gained relative financial sustainability under this government and are afraid to lose it. The opposition is supported mainly by those who are highly dissatisfied with or have a grudge against the government, those who failed to adapt to the current system and those living in poor social and economic conditions. There are also members and activists of opposition political parties and their relatives, and those who lost their former status and role (representatives of academic circles, intelligentsia).

► Society. Society's political choices are still based on emotions ("who is better for Georgia") rather than reason ("what is better for Georgia"). Part of the society remains opportunistic and tends to support everyone who promises more benefits. People are still looking for a charismatic leader. There is also some tendency towards nihilism and religious radicalism.

The opposition is described as a wide array of political actors and groups, some of which were in government in different periods in the past.

When talking about the 2009 unrest, almost all respondents agreed that every involved party should take its share of the blame: the ruling elite – because it makes decisions and determines the rules and, respectively, bears the main responsibility – and the opposition – because of its inefficiency and inability to represent the will of the people and challenge the government effectively.

The respondents evaluated the current society as nihilistic. They said it has confidence and interest neither in the government nor in the opposition, and is largely indifferent and passive in social and political life.<sup>10</sup> In the respondents' opinion, the widespread nihilism and indifference can pose a serious danger to the internal stability of the country.

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<sup>10</sup> The Barometer 2009 (by IPS) showed that up to 40% of the population doesn't support any political leader or party. An additional 17% are undecided. This means that more than half of the population have no confidence in political actors (the ruling regime or the opposition).

*“People have lost all illusions. They have witnessed and experienced a lot of hardship and don't trust anyone – it is very bad for the country. The spread of apathy in society is always dangerous, because it can turn into aggression” (N. S.).*

Experts say that society has always been and will always be a key driving force of development, peace and stability. But they admit also that the current Georgian society is not mature enough – it lacks critical thinking, its choices are still based on emotions, and it fails to understand that it bears primary responsibility for the country's future.

*“We have always hoped that a kind king will come and solve all our problems” (A. R.).*

Such views are very much reminiscent of the perceptions in the early 1990s. In other words, people do not understand what their own role is and are still looking for a good leader in the hope that he/she will solve all their problems.

At the same time, however, the respondents noted that public attitude towards peace has obviously changed in Georgia. In their words, both the general public and political leaders have learnt the lessons of the past, both negative and positive:

*“Today peace is valued in Georgia much more than before... I clearly see this progress... In 2009 people were ready to take even the most radical action, if urged to do so by opposition leaders. But current political leaders have explicitly denounced such actions” (I. A.).*

## General perceptions/summarized statements

The summarized perceptions of the respondents:

► In their answers the respondents frequently used the term “democracy”, e.g., how democratic, how much democracy. The rule of law and fundamental human rights were defined as key principles of democracy;

► The respondents, regardless of their backgrounds and political preferences, shared a common understanding of what happened in Georgia in the early



1990s (although their opinion was mostly negative; President Gamsakhurdia was often spared from criticism). At the same time, their views on the current situation were somewhat contradictory and incoherent (whether the ruling elite have the political will for democratic transformation and whether the opposition is capable of bringing about any change);

▶ There were two dominant opinions as to what groups are in power now and what groups were in charge in the past: (1) the first maintained that the same group had been in power since Georgia regained independence and there was no space for political competition, as outsider groups have no opportunity to challenge the ruling elite. Accordingly, it was argued that Georgia had never undergone true regime change in the post-independence period. (2) According to the second, three successive governments (under Gamsakhurdia, Shevardnadze, and Saakashvili) – i.e. different groups and types of leaders – with different political goals and agendas have been in power in Georgia since independence;

▶ Extremism and internal confrontation were said to be integral parts of Georgian political culture;

▶ All respondents agreed that society has always been and will always be a key driving force of development, peace and stability, and bears prime responsibility for the country's future;

▶ When asked to characterize the political leaders, the respondents described Saakashvili as a hybrid – a mixture of Shevardnadze and Gamsakhurdia. The respondents used different/opposing terms in their assessment: populist, elitist, charismatic/non-charismatic, mentally unstable/balanced;

▶ Some of the respondents pointed out that the two conflicts – in the early 1990s and in 2009 – were similar in terms of their emotional impact, as both split the society into two conflicting groups. But other respondents argued that these conflicts were essentially different and there was no similarity between them.

## Conclusion

There are many analytical articles and research papers about the past two decades of Georgian history. Political scientists have approached the social and political changes in Georgia from different conceptual perspectives and proposed different theories to explain them.<sup>11</sup> The perceptions of the respondents were basically consistent with the opinions expressed in these analytical papers.

According to the respondents, in some aspects Georgia's political culture has changed little since the early 1990s. Emotional rather than rational approach to political events, extremism expressed in "black-and-white thinking", intolerance of difference and lack of communication with opponents, easy-to-split and hard-to-unite society, consumer rather than participatory attitude to the state-building process and, consequently, minimal sense of civil responsibility remain deeply rooted in Georgian political culture and create a fertile ground for internal conflicts.

The respondents outlined some potential conflict situations. Today, in their opinion, a leader with a criminal background (and/or openly involved in criminal activities) is highly unlikely to get access to power and be accepted by society. But they admitted that exploiting nationalistic sentiments and religious feelings of Georgians can give a political leader a fairly good chance to win substantial support among the voters. Such a leader would then try to use *dark sides* of the nation to obtain and cling to power, and mobilize supporters against his/her opponents. In other words, the interviews suggested that the danger of a violent internal conflict was still quite real in Georgia and it may materialize if an extremist leader takes the helm. Most of the respondents deemed that the best way to reduce the danger was to build strong state institutions.

Although the respondents generally assessed the current leadership's competence and management skills as advanced, they emphasized that much has to be improved. In their words, the current ruling elite manages the country better than its predecessor did in the early 1990s, but it is not enough to maintain internal stability. The government needs to find efficient ways to engage in a constructive dialogue with its opponents, they said.

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<sup>11</sup> Views of 16 experts on these issues are gathered in: Political Forum: 10 Questions on Georgia's Political Development published by CIPDD in 2007.

The respondents proposed several indicators to gauge the level of stability in the country. *Adequate and efficient work of law enforcement agencies* is one of them. According to the respondents, the government should control illegal arms sales/trafficking and take measures against weapons offences, including possession of unregistered weapons by citizens. Efficient policing is another important factor – the police should serve the society and maintain the law and order. In brief, efficient arms control and policing can considerably reduce the danger of civil conflict and violence. Based on the respondents' answers, it can be assumed that the authorities managed more or less to ensure that both factors were in place and helped to avoid violence. Recent public opinion polls clearly indicate that the Georgian police are widely viewed as one of the most trustworthy institutions of the country, as the citizens are mostly satisfied with how the police work, especially if compared with the *corrupt* and *ineffective* *militsiya* (Soviet term for police). So, one can conclude from these indicators that in the respondents' opinion the country is heading in the right direction. But is the increased capacity of dealing with civil unrest enough to make the country stable? Nearly all respondents said that the weakness of democratic institutions could contribute to tensions and conflicts. In their words, a democratic political system should enable *healthy* political interaction without leading to civil confrontation.

As mentioned above, today people value peace more than in the past. The trend was confirmed by a 2009 opinion poll,<sup>12</sup> which showed that people considered peace, followed by family and health, to be the most important facet of life. Also, the percentage of those who advocated military solutions to territorial conflicts was considerably low (4-5%).

In the respondents' opinion, during the 2009 crisis the authorities and society in general knew well enough what was at stake. The respondents shared opinion that violence was avoided in 2009 mainly due to the responsible attitudes of both the government and opposition leaders. But their motives seem to be different: the government could be interested in maintaining peace in order to secure support (both at home and abroad) for its policies and efforts to overcome the consequences of the 2008 war. For its part, the opposition might have been well-aware that it lacked resources to assume power in the event of the government's defeat. It remains to be seen, however, how long the people will remember the civil war.

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<sup>12</sup> Georgia Public Opinion Barometer 2009 by IPS.

Even if a more experienced and skilled political leadership comes to power in Georgia, some potential for destabilization may remain anyway. On the one hand, the respondents ruled out ethnic and religious factors as primary sources of conflict. On the other hand, however, they argued that any political confrontation triggered by ethnic or religious reasons can easily turn into a serious conflict. It is a worst-case scenario, but not an impossible one.

*“We are moving very slowly, we are lurching. We are too slow in learning the lessons of the past, though other countries did it quite quickly after gaining independence” (A. R.).*

To sum up, we can say that the Georgian culture of political leadership has noticeably changed since 1991. Current politicians seem more experienced and competent than their predecessors. But if we consider internal conflict as a two-phase process (pre- and post-escalation situation), we can conclude that the 2009 crisis demonstrated some progress with regard to the second phase, i.e. post-conflict development. Georgia's political culture has yet to learn how to exercise caution and restraint in the pre-escalation phase of a crisis, and facilitate a dialogue and communication between political opponents and with society.

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