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The long road to democracy

Why a neoliberal path to democratic development won't work in the Caucasus

Read this article in Russian.

In April this year, the US-based non-governmental organisation (NGO) Freedom House presented the findings of their recent report entitled *Nations in transit 2018: confronting illiberalism*.

There's been much handwringing in the West over the rise of strongmen leaders such as Russia's Vladimir Putin, Hungary's Viktor Orban, and Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, as well as populist movements that reject the liberal norms espoused by 'mainstream' parties on the left and right. Hardly surprising then that the Freedom House report received wide coverage in European and US newspapers, which focussed on the erosion of media freedoms.

In the former Soviet Union, however, the document went down like a warm flat beer. When Georgia slipped a modest 0.07 points to 4.68 in Freedom House's illiberalism index (on a scale of 1-7, with 7 representing the least democratic countries), it caused a ruckus among politicians, journalists and civil society groups in the country.

The prime minister accused Freedom House of presenting 'biased' information about 'the quality of Georgia's democratic development'. Better rankings for Georgia in the Heritage Foundation's 'Index of Economic Freedom', the World Bank's 'Ease of Doing Business' index and Transparency International's 'Corruption Perceptions Index' did little to alleviate the sense of injustice.

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Much of the outrage stems from the way in which Georgian governments base their political platforms on indicators provided by international institutions, rather than local public needs and preferences. This distorted perception of democracy, continuously reproduced by local and international elites, is

anti-political at its core. It's rather like an episode of the dystopian TV series Black Mirror, in which humans are given a score for every aspect of their existence.

Democracy and liberal individualism

In the era of late capitalism, various transnational NGOs emerged in the West with a mission to spread liberal, and very often, neoliberal democratic values across the globe. They have since taken on the job of measuring and assessing the quality of this democracy.

Previously, it was the academic community that would study democracy and other political systems in ethical, moral, philosophical or political terms. In the postmodern era, academia has been deprived of this privilege. Instead, NGOs offer their own simplistic interpretations of democratic systems. The philosophical assessment of systems of governance has been replaced with reports and policy briefs.

NGOs such as Freedom House take a neoliberal approach in considering whether countries are 'democratic'. Essentially this boils down to how effectively local elites have adopted Anglo-American political traditions.

The Polish sociologist and political scientist Jerzy Wiatr offers a strong critique of this dominant liberal ideology, arguing that the Anglo-American model is not the only type of democracy. Wiatr notes there are many forms of democracy in political theory. For example, whereas American democracy emphasises the value of liberty, French democracy focuses on equality between citizens.

Democracy without development?

NGOs in the post-Soviet world usually see democracy as the precursor to economic growth, rather than the other way round. However, recent historical examples show that economic development often leads to a greater demand for democracy: industrial development creates jobs for citizens, whose higher incomes enable greater access to education. Learning leads to self-reflection, and a desire to form one's own opinions and express them at the ballot box. With more taxes going into the state's coffers, it is able to give more education to more people, thus further accelerating democratisation.

South Korea is one of several recently industrialised countries that has followed this trajectory. In 1961, an ambitious, middle-aged general

called Park Chung-hee led a military coup, overthrowing the country's Second Republic. He became president two years later, serving for another three terms until his death in 1979.

It is time for Georgia and other post-Soviet countries to reject policies aimed at ticking Western boxes on what 'progress' should look like.

Park could hardly be considered 'democratic' in the Western sense of the word: he kept a tight grip on the media, oppressed opponents and oversaw the expansion of the fearsome – and feared – Korean Central Intelligence Agency. In the 1970s he imposed martial law.

However, by implementing a state-sponsored, export-led industrial strategy, Park turned his country into one of the fastest-growing economies in the world. This president-cum-dictator thus created the conditions that led to the true multi-party democracy we see in South Korea today.

Post-Soviet countries should likewise focus on economic growth and development in place of liberal democratic development. Moreover, organisations such as Freedom House should stop pretending that neoliberalism is the only path to development.

Its *Nations in Transit* report gives clear examples of how international NGOs expect middle-income countries to follow a neoliberal path to development. In 2017, Tbilisi's City Court issued hefty fines to Philip Morris and British American Tobacco – two foreign companies – for dumping and predatory pricing. This decision resulted in a 'democracy downgrade' on Freedom House's scorecard. The Freedom House report cites Transparency International when it claims that by fining foreign companies, the state 'damages the investment environment and image of the country which ultimately damages the state budget and economy'.

Epilogue for change

Western liberal democracy (along with its twin sister, neoliberalism) is in a state of crisis: just look at the UK's decision to leave the EU, and the election of Donald Trump, the 'anti-liberal', in the US. However, this ideology still remains international organisations' main export to developing countries. The trend towards neoliberal development receives further backing from non-Western elites who take their cues on development from Western institutions such as Freedom House.

It is time for Georgia and other post-Soviet countries to reject policies aimed at ticking Western boxes on what 'progress' should look like.

Instead, policymaking needs to consider the fundamental needs of the ordinary people, including access to jobs, healthcare and education. As Abraham Lincoln declared, a government should be 'of the people, by the people, for the people'.



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