

## Democracy and "PowerPointocracy" – the dusk of a PR campaign for the Rose Revolution

By David Losaberidze

The government-sponsored PR campaign usually describes Georgia as a most, if not the most, successful developing nation in the world – "The best place for doing business", "Heaven for big foreign investments", "The spearhead of the global fight against corruption", etc. It is obvious that these PR stunts are designed, first and foremost, for home use, i.e. aim to please local voters rather than impress the world. As a result, a considerable number of the Georgian citizens genuinely believe that what they are told by the government is true, while sceptics struggle to find compelling evidence to challenge the government's propaganda.

Unsurprisingly, according to various sociological surveys, the level of public confidence and optimism remains quite high in Georgia. As long as ordinary Georgian citizens get information mainly from the state-funded TV, they think that even though their situation is dire, "at least something is making progress" in the country. A majority of the Georgian residents do not speak English and, therefore, cannot rely for information on alternative, foreign sources. That is why they are unaware that reports of international organisations often portray a very different picture of Georgia, concerning its political, economic or social development, which is a far cry from what the Georgian government claims:

- When analysing recent political trends in the country, it is easy to notice that the Georgian leadership has shifted emphasis from pushing forward democratisation reforms to "building a strong state". Its main slogan – "There Is No Time to Think" – underlines the need for prompt action.
- In the field of social and economic development, the increasingly ultralibertarian rhetoric is used as a cover for the ongoing merger of state and business power and monopolisation of the national economy by the political elite. This tendency has hampered efforts to rebuild social structures in Georgia, a country where state institutions and institutionalised social relations suffered a total collapse in the last decade of the past century.

The following examples can illustrate the above point.

**Political development.** Many international organisations agreed that the socio-political context has worsened in Georgia, especially after 2007. Progress achieved by the new government in the first post-revolution year is felt to have stagnated or even reversed in some areas.

Below is Freedom House's ranking for Georgia based on a scale of one (highest) to seven (the lowest):

- Election process – 5, the same position as in 2002. Besides, Georgia has no longer been classified as "electoral democracy" since 2009, though in 2008 it was listed in this category along with other 119 countries.
- Independence of media fell from 3.5 in 2001 to 4.25 in 2011. Today Georgia is ranked as a partly free country (60 on a 100-mark scale), just one step away from non-free nations category (61 and over).
- Democratic governance – 6.0 for national democratic governance (5.0 in 2002) and 5.5 for local democratic governance (2010).
- Judicial framework and independence – 5.0 in 2011, down from 4.25 in 2002.
- Corruption – 5.0 (2011), no improvement from 2000, despite the government's repeated claims to the contrary. These figures indicate the increasing magnitude of elite corruption, though the widespread public-sector corruption has indeed declined.

They are also consistent with Transparency International's data, which ranks Georgia as 64<sup>th</sup> in the world in its Corruptions Perceptions Index. In 2008, Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index rated corruption in the Georgian public service at 3.9 by the decimal rating system. The rating placed Georgia between Swaziland and Ghana and indicates an above average position. People's perception of high-level corruption remains high.

At the same time, Georgia has achieved visible progress, acknowledged by international organisations, in such spheres as government effectiveness, regulatory quality, and control of corruption. Since the

Rose Revolution these parameters have improved more than threefold (respectively 64.1%, 70.8%, and 54.1% in 2010). However, without a respective increase in the quality of democratisation, these improvements, shrouded in liberal rhetoric, indicate only the increasing role of state structures.

***Social and economic development.*** Although the government has insisted that the country's economic situation is much better now than before, the reality seems less exciting. According to the World Bank, the estimated per capita income as of 2010 for Georgia was 2,690 USD, ranking the country as 135<sup>th</sup> in the world, 3.5 times lower than the world average and 14.5 times lower than in Eurozone countries.

Of the country's population, 14.7% live on US\$1.25 a day (2011), while 30.4% of the population earns less than US\$2 a day. This means that in the period 2000 to 2006, 54.5% of Georgian citizens lived below even the Georgian official poverty line.

Considering the fact that during the Soviet period the standard of living was significantly better than it is now, the situation has radically worsened, when compared to the 1980s:

- In 2008 the average electricity consumption per capita was 2,876 kWt/hour in the world, 6,925 kWt/hour in Eurozone countries, and 1,649 kWt/hour in Georgia (down from 3,039 kWt/hour in 1990).
- The world's average fuel consumption per capita was 1,839 kg in 2008. For Eurozone countries it amounted to 3,738 kg, compared to 681 kg for Georgia (down from 2,521 kg in 1990).

So, while in 1990 Georgia was relatively close to European standards, today it is far behind the world average. In 1989 Georgia's industrial output and services accounted to 42.4% of GDP; in 2009 this indicator plummeted to mere 29.5%.

The economic decline has had a profoundly negative impact on the country's social situation:

- UNDP Human Development Index for Georgia decreased from 0.739 in 2000 to 0.733 in 2011. In this case, Georgia is also in 75th place (2011), falling behind OECD and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries, and Eastern and Central Europe, and has more in common with Latin American and Caribbean countries.
- In 1991 only 2.9% of the 13-14 year olds dropped out of school and moved to vocational education institutions; in 2008 the drop-out rate among 10-11 year olds reached 13.3%. As a result, quite a few Georgian youths (5-6% in small rural communities) can neither read nor write nowadays, though in 2005 Georgia's literacy rate (100%) was ranked as the highest in the world.
- Life expectancy in Georgia (currently 71.6 years in 2007) has decreased in recent years. This places the country on the 90th place in the world ranking today, situated between the Philippines and Jamaica. Furthermore, due to a combination of low birth rates and high mortality rates, the annual population growth fell from 0.6% (1990-1995) to 0.0% (2005-2010).
- Other negative developments in the health care system include the first reported malaria cases since the beginning of the 1920s, and also a rise in the number of TB cases (from 53 to 84 cases per 100 thousand citizens in the period between 1990 and 2005, though these figures represent only registered cases). There has also been a three-fold increase in the number of maternal mortality at birth per 100 thousand from 22 in 1995 to 66 in 2005.

Unfortunately, the Georgian government does not seem willing to make these figures public. On the other hand, there are no requests from the public to discuss these issues openly, most likely due to the government's efficient PR technologies. Some of my colleagues dubbed the current Georgian system "PowerPointocracy" for its excessive use of visual presentations.

But those ordinary Georgian citizens who have somehow gained access to such kind of information are now facing a dilemma as to whether they should believe the government's information or international organisations' reports.