



Linking International Development and Political Party Building in Central Asia and the Caucuses

BY ERIC MCGLINCHY



Some efforts of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) in the former Soviet Union have proven more successful than others. Why do some assistance schemes pursued by USAID's two central political party assistance implementers, the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) yield positive results while other strategies go largely unnoticed? Field work conducted in Kyrgyzstan and Georgia in December 2006 points to the fact that, in addition to structural constraints, the success or failure of assistance strategies depends on the civil society organizations with whom USAID partners to further political party development. Local NGOs with both clearly defined mandates and a focus on political processes have proven to be more effective partners in promoting party development than organizations with expansive mandates and which engage in personal politics. NGOs which focus narrowly on decreasing corruption are more capable of changing political elite and political party behavior than youth and women organizations that seek broadly to advance the interests of their membership.

Political parties are critical to advancing democratic reforms in that they enable citizens to hold leaders accountable; enable the electorate to choose among policy and leadership alternatives; institutionalize competition; aggregate interests; mobilize and socialize voters; and make governments more efficient. Despite widespread agreement among scholars and practitioners as to the critical importance of political parties, the comparative literature provides few insights into how such developed, mature political parties emerge in transition polities. Nor, moreover, is there extensive literature addressing how international actors might assist the growth and development of democratically oriented parties in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian political settings. A comparative analysis of political party programming in Kyrgyzstan and Georgia provides tentative conclusions and testable hypotheses as to why some forms of democratic assistance succeed whereas others fail.

USAID, NDI and IRI have sought to achieve the following broad objectives in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan: further the ability of political parties to contest elections; deepen links between central party leaderships and regional party branches; increase youth and women representation in political parties; improve party outreach to voters; and deepen cooperation between political parties and NGOs. Critical to the success or failure of these policy outcomes is how

structural constraints and civil society partners interact with political party development strategies. Variations in structure, that is variations in countries' geography; political legacy; degree of economic development; and unity or disunity of domestic populations, can either impede or support efforts at political party assistance. Structural limitations need not be an exclusive determinative of international assistance's success or failure.

GEORGIA: GROWING EURO-ATLANTIC TIES AMIDST A TROUBLED SOVIET LEGACY

The symbolism and potentially democratizing pull of Tbilisi's growing Euro-Atlantic ties is visible throughout Georgia. The ruling party United National Movement (UNM) pairs its five-cross flag and the European Union's gold star circular emblem in its public relations materials. Most Georgian political parties stress the importance of growing Georgia-NATO cooperation.

At the same time and despite Tbilisi's current leanings toward the west, vast stretches of nominally Georgian territory remain under Moscow's influence. South Ossetia and Abkhazia are de facto independent "statelets" each with populations which, though technically within Georgia's internationally-recognized borders, nevertheless identify more with Putin than with Brussels. Georgia's lack of any pre-Soviet democratic legacy and, at the same time, the persistence of Soviet-style single party politics, presents additional constraints to political party development. Though the democratic language and Euro-Atlantic orientation of Georgia's new ruling United Nationalist Movement is promising, the UNM remains very much defined by monopolistic patterns of rule. Party assistance directed at mitigating UNM inclinations toward monopolistic rule is critical for creating a level political playing field—something desperately needed if a true multiparty system is to emerge in Georgia.

KYRGYZSTAN: A CHANCE FOR REFORM DESPITE AUTOCRATIC NEIGHBORS

Despite being surrounded by autocratic states, Kyrgyzstan presents the best case for political party assistance in Central Asia. Following popular protests which ultimately led to the ousting of former President Askar Akaev in March 2005, Kyrgyzstan's executive and legislative branches have competed to amend, rewrite, and ultimately redefine constitutional mandates of power. The simple presence of this inter-branch competition in Kyrgyzstan is, within the broader context of executive-dominated Central Asian politics, an encouraging development towards multi-party democracy. This said, the country's many structural constraints present difficult challenges for those wishing to develop true, functioning political parties.

Kyrgyzstan is among the poorest countries of the former Soviet Union. With a GDP per capita of just \$319, Kyrgyzstan's poverty

levels are second only to Tajikistan. Paralleling these economic issues are ethnic and regional identities which divide titular Kyrgyz from ethnic Uzbeks and a northern, more ‘Russified’ political elite from a southern, more traditionally Central Asian population. Far from a unified country, Kyrgyzstan is best conceived of as seven provinces loosely linked by Stalin’s peculiar and problematic sense of nation. Developing broad based, inclusive political parties in such an environment is understandably difficult.

Despite these challenges, Kyrgyzstan has moved away from authoritarianism over the past two years. Grass roots social mobilization brought an end to Askar Akaev’s autocratic rule. The new Bakiev executive leadership exhibits tendencies towards excessive presidentialism but thus far is constrained by a vocal parliament. Though a well functioning multi-party democracy likely remains a distant goal, assistance programs that emphasize the development of and subsequent adherence to constitutional and legal foundations of party democracy can move Kyrgyzstan further from autocracy and toward political reform.

Both Georgia and Kyrgyzstan have exhibited encouraging movements toward political reform over the past few years and US political party assistance has proven to be an important factor in advancing reforms. Importantly though, as the next sections illustrate, not all assistance strategies yield equal measures of success. Investigating why some assistance strategies resonate better than others will enable the aid community to better target scarce resources while, at the same time, potentially speed the pace of political liberalization.

INTEGRATING WOMEN AND YOUTH POLITICS IN POLITICAL PARTY ASSISTANCE STRATEGIES

Increasing women and youth representation is a central goal of NDI and IRI political party assistance strategies. Though normatively laudable, this goal is not necessarily attainable in the near run in many political environments. This in of itself is not justification for abandoning youth and gender-focused political party assistance strategies. Given sufficient resources, an emphasis on youth and gender inclusiveness concomitant with a focus on fundamentals of party capacity building can achieve broadened political representation in the long run. Most often, though, the party institutes’ resources are limited and, in the Kyrgyz and Georgia cases, NDI and IRI’s focus on youth and gender initiatives detracts from more immediate and pressing needs to build ideologically coherent political parties.

These findings on political party development parallel those of social mobilization theory more broadly. Students of social mobilization including Sidney Tarrow, Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink find that those social movements which succeed in attracting broad followings are ones with clearly defined and readily understandable ideologies. Research conducted in the region

supports the notion that parties with the broadest, most inclusive support tend to be those which first and foremost have clearly articulated ideologies and positions and are not necessarily parties which seek greater youth and women representation.

In post Cold War transition countries such as Romania and Serbia where political parties have begun to articulate clear ideologies, stressing the normative and strategic value of women and youth participation to a male-dominated party elite may indeed encourage greater party inclusiveness and more equitable representation.

In Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, however, where parties function as self-promotion vehicles for a narrow political elite, and where mobilizing political support is accomplished through patronage politics rather than through ideological affiliation, gender and youth assistance strategies will have little resonance. Achieving equitable political representation, though again normatively good, rarely inspires social mobilization. Indeed, as Keck and Sikkink note of an earlier attempt to secure women’s equitable economic representation, of USAID’s 1973 creation of the Women and Development Bureau: “its demands are important but prosaic... [and the] concerns were so systemic that they defied individual or group efforts to effect change.” In short, women and youth inequalities, though widely recognized as a problem—or perhaps precisely because they are so widely recognized as a problem—rarely inspire activism. Not all gender equality movements fail however and understanding why some movements do succeed provides instructive insights both for USAID’s political party assistance programs and USAID’s broader goal of furthering gender and youth equality.

In contrast to the passively supported women and development movement, anti-violence against women campaigns have proven widely successful. The reason these movements succeed in drawing a broad base of supporters – and more broadly, the reason any mobilization based organization succeeds in drawing a broad base of supporters – is that they clearly articulate compelling and readily understood platforms. That is, whereas one may agree with but might not be moved to campaign for women’s rights to equal economic opportunities, it is difficult for most people to remain passive when confronted with the ills of sexual slavery or domestic violence, that is, when one is confronted with concrete practices that violate the core understandings of human dignity. The under representation of women and youth in Georgian and Kyrgyz political parties is not an affront to the core understandings of human dignity because political parties in these countries, unfortunately, are largely devoid of ideology and meaning. The question of political equality for women and youth will remain peripheral until political leaders address this shortcoming and parties have meaningful platforms. As such, in inchoate or non-existent party systems like Georgia and



Kyrgyzstan, the best strategy for furthering equal representation is to first assist platform articulation so that political parties become organizations women and youth find worthy of supporting.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CIVIL SOCIETY AND POLITICAL PARTY ASSISTANCE

Though often treated by donor agencies as programmatically distinct, civil society and political party development are closely interrelated. The broad spectrum of this interrelationship, importantly however, is imperfectly understood, or at least imperfectly articulated, by both donor agencies and implementing partners. Thus, while USAID and the party institutes actively encourage cooperation between political parties and election monitoring organizations, other productive interrelations between civil society groups and political parties are largely ignored. There are four civil society-political party interrelationships which might best be advanced through a more consciously integrated civil society/party assistance strategy rather than being treated as analytically distinct targets for assistance:

- *Party Watchdog:* Civil society organizations defend against the manipulation of and corruption within political parties;
- *Leadership Training:* Civil society organizations provide leadership, organizational, and analytical skills which activists can use should they wish to become party activists;
- *Interest Aggregation and Representation:* Civil society organizations may better aggregate and represent grass roots demands for reform than inchoate parties still weighted by hierarchical patterns of patronage politics; and
- *Capacity Building:* Civil society organizations devoted to issue advancement provide expertise that parties and party elites, pre-occupied by furthering personal power, cannot.

The civil society-political party relationship can also contribute to illiberal political change. Of particular concern are the following two potential dynamics:

- *Illiberal Interest Aggregation and Representation:* In cases where xenophobic or otherwise divisive ideologies emerge, civil society's associationalism enhancing qualities can accelerate rather than dampen illiberal political change.
- *Politicization of what should be nonpartisan public goods:* In cases where civil society organizations, most notably, election monitoring groups, develop partisan affiliations, the pursuit of broader, universal values such as free and fair elections are jeopardized.

It is these last two dynamics, the potential for civil society to accelerate rather than dampen divisive ideologies and to politicize what be best left as non-partisan public goods, that understandably makes international donors weary of closely linking civil society and political party programs. In Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, ostensibly neutral election monitoring organizations are widely perceived as either pro-government or pro-opposition. And in neighboring Uzbekistan and Russia, typically pro-reform civil society organizations, most notably youth groups, are proving to be critical institutions for fueling state sponsored ethno-nationalist ideologies.

As these examples illustrate, the reformist potential of civil society-political party relations rests on a paradox: if civil society is to protect against illiberal politics, and if it is to promote competitive, multiparty democracy, civic organizations must themselves remain non-politicized. Multiparty democracy benefits from—and political party assistance strategies are wise to promote—organizations which can serve as watchdogs against corruption, which can represent and articulate social interests and which can improve the capacity of parties by making available qualified experts. To achieve this productive and liberalizing relationship, however, party assistance strategies must not only embrace civic organizations, they must actively assist civic organizations capable of acting as honest rather than politicized brokers in struggles against the incompetence, corruption and abuses of power which so often define transitional political systems.

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