

## Democracy through Education Reform in the Republic of Georgia

Stephanie K. Kim<sup>a,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*University of California, Los Angeles, USA*

Since 2009 I have been involved in coordinating much of the efforts in the USAID Georgia Education Management (GEM) Project. The project aims to build long-term institutional capacity to better manage the education system, and increase effectiveness of education policies on decentralization, finance, and accreditation in the Republic of Georgia. Specifically, my role on the project is to coordinate a team of academic specialists in order to establish an educational leadership masters program at Ilia State University based upon a Western model of decentralized education management and governance. The broader goal of the project is to promote a more democratic environment within the university and the Georgian education system at large through a liberal education curriculum. Future graduates of the masters program will assume leadership roles in schools and other education authorities and will bring to their positions the influences of a Western education that will change the direction of Georgian education policy.

Decentralization is one of the most important phenomena to come to educational planning in the last several decades. Decision-makers raise questions as to why a country should decentralize its education system. Such an inquiry asks fundamental questions on who should control education and what level of government involvement and market efficiency should influence these controls. Under a current wave of neoliberalism, developing countries are under pressure to reduce public spending and increase efficiency in the use of resources, and education decentralization has become a reality in many of these places. Indeed, there are many

reasons to support education decentralization. Sometimes it is a matter of increasing efficiency in management and governance. Where the governing institution seems slow and burdensome, decentralization can allow a faster identification of problems and solutions. Decentralization also helps increase accountability and delineate responsibility among different institutions. In some cases, decentralization allows for mobilization of resources at the local level through special taxes and community participation. Decentralization is also sometimes the natural evolution of political democratization: citizens want to be involved in the decision-making processes that directly concern them.

In the Republic of Georgia, drastic education reforms have been implemented that would make Milton Friedman proud. One reform is the implementation of a national examination system. The national examination requires that all university-bound students must achieve a certain score as a prerequisite to attend university in Georgia. As students aim for entry into graduate programs, they take another examination that determines their eligibility for programs of their choice. When I began working on the GEM Project in the fall of 2009, approximately six thousand Georgian students took the national examination for entry into graduate programs. The highest-scoring two thousand students were guaranteed admission into the programs of their choice. Additionally, the highest-scoring one thousand students received scholarships. The other one thousand students could also receive scholarships if they enroll into less popular graduate programs (education being one of them). This new system reduces opportunity for corruption in schools, especially in a country where it is not uncommon to find teachers who accept bribes in exchange for high grades and other forms of student advancement. In effect, the national examination system

---

\*Corresponding author: Email: [stephaniekim@ucla.edu](mailto:stephaniekim@ucla.edu); Address: Center for International Development Education, University of California, Los Angeles, Box 951521, Moore Hall, Los Angeles, CA 90095, USA.

creates a fair playing field for Georgian students based on their individual merit and not on their ability to make illegitimate payments. Additionally, another reform measure was introduced with the implementation of a school voucher system at the K-12 level. The Georgian government issues vouchers to each student, who can then apply to attend the public school of his or her choice using the vouchers. Each school receives appropriate funding based upon its student population. This would mean that students attend the schools of their choice through a systematized application process. In theory, the best schools will attract the most students and receive the greatest level of funding, creating a kind of meritocratic award system not just for students but for schools as well. These reforms follow the inauguration of Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili in 2003 and are part of the Saakashvili anti-corruption campaign. The mission to decentralize the Georgian education system follows the new administration's spirit of liberal reforms that move away from leftover Soviet influences of centralized authority and rampant corruption and move towards a system of greater local participation and better accountability. The GEM Project certainly chose a most fitting site to pursue this mission: Iliia State University refers to itself as "the only higher education institution in Georgia employing principles of liberal education" and is named after the Georgian writer Iliia Chavchavadze who spearheaded the Georgian national movement and awakened Georgia national ideals during nineteenth century Russian rule over Georgia.

Yet Georgia's reform process can arguably be called a form of shock-therapy democracy, where democratic principles are suddenly put into practice in a region without a strong democratic history and tradition. Following Georgian independence in 1991, the Georgian political sphere has witnessed violent coups and bloody wars, particularly over the contested regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia where an ongoing crisis between Russia and Georgia erupted in the 2008 South Ossetia War and continues today. The Georgian government has displayed a strong desire to free itself of Russian influence, and it will use whatever soft means it can in order to do so, including using its education sec-

tor as a tool for political mobilization. We can see this even in recent current events: in 2010 Georgia also changed its national secondary language from Russian to English (while maintaining Georgian as its national primary language). On one level this can be viewed as a way to better engage Georgians in the US-dominated global community; on another level it is a passive-aggressive snub at the Russian imperialists.

The United States has become a key player in establishing a new democracy in the Republic of Georgia, and the education sector has become a way to advance US influence. Some scholars have called such attempted reforms as cultural imperialism, where education reform is an American counteraction against recent Russian encroachment into Georgia through subversive means. In turn, Georgia has mutually looked to the United States to help deflect Russian advancements. While a realist may interpret this as a small state seeking refuge from a powerful neighbor by siding with the opposing superpower for lack of a better alternative, regardless Georgia welcomes an American influence. Against an increasingly aggressive Russian agenda, the United States has a vested security interest to promote a democratic culture in Georgia to offset potentially increasing Russian imperialism. Investing in Georgia's education sector is a way to influence Georgian social thought and culture to be further sided with that of the United States. From an ideological perspective, advancing democracy in Georgia is not without its intrinsic merits. Democracy provides a more accountable government, better security, and greater economic prosperity compared to other forms of government. From a pragmatic standpoint, cultural imperialism is not necessarily an insidious state act if it creates beneficial results for both the state and its "conquest." Georgian education reforms are both warranted advancements on the part of the United States and voluntary domestic executions on the part of Georgia. While they are dramatic in implementation, the attempt to reduce corruption and create a more meritocratic education system is nonetheless refreshing. The 2003 Rose Revolution of the bloodless transition of power from Shevardnadze to Saakashvili perhaps signaled the beginning of a larger transition, one that suddenly transformed a demoralized

society into an energetic and experimental democracy. It is certainly encouraging that a society can summon the courage and wherewithal to transform itself into something more than it is, and such ambitious education reforms cannot be dismissed simply because of their drastic nature or tacit political agenda. Instead, one must examine why the Georgians desire the reforms and how the reforms can be achieved effectively. Context matters.