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Higher Education as Politics in Post-Rose Revolution Georgia

Brian Lanahan

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This book is dedicated to the life and work of Charlie McLaughlin. He indeed Did Start the Fire in the lives of many young people.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction to the Republic of Georgia

RATIONALE FOR BOOK

At its start, the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic was a rural outpost on the outskirts of the new Soviet Union. The birthplace of Stalin eventually became known as the “Soviet Riviera,” a summertime playground for party officials and a source of fine wines. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Zviad Gamsakhurdia became the first elected president, but was almost immediately ousted during a bloody coup d’état, succeeded by Eduard Shevardnadze, who enjoyed the support of the Russian military (Höltge, 2009). Georgia immediately fell into a devastating civil war that ended in late 1993, when it emerged as a bankrupt and near-failed state.

November 2003 saw Georgia’s dramatic defiance of Russian influence and rampant corruption with the Rose Revolution. Several days of protest over a fraudulent election led to the peaceful deposition of the 75-year-old Shevardnadze. Mikheil Saakashvili, Zurab Zhvania, and Nino Burjanadze led the protestors into the parliament chamber holding roses and deposed Shevardnadze as he tried to convene parliament. Shevardnadze fled the chamber and resigned as president the next day. Two years later in 2005, Saakashvili was elected the third president of Georgia (Welt, 2006).

Education was one of the first areas targeted for reform, “From kindergartens to Ph.D. programmes, the country’s entire education system is getting a full makeover” (BBC News, 2005). Even before Saakashvili’s election in 2005, reforms that were decidedly Western in orientation began in education policy, including implementing European accreditation and comparison schemes such as the Bologna Process, curriculums, and financing systems. One of the first and most publicized reforms was the adoption of the Unified National Examination (UNE) for university entrance in 2005 (Orkodashvili, 2010). The UNE sought to combat the previously corrupt system, under which more than USD 100 million was paid each year by students and families in “tutoring” fees and outright bribes to gain university admission (Rostiashvili, 2004). At the same time, the 2004 Law on Higher Education paved the way for the 2005 joining of the Bologna Process and the adopted Western models of financing, management, and governance (Heyneman & Skinner, 2014).

Despite these successes, education in Georgia still faces significant challenges. In spring 2017, more than 20% of 12th-grade high school students failed the recently revised school-leaving exams (JAMnews, 2017). Internationally, Georgian 15-year-olds scored significantly below the OECD average in science, math, and reading according to the 2015 PISA results (OECD, 2015). Moreover, Georgia lags behind all of the developed world, with only 2.7% of its total GDP being spent on all levels of public education (Tabatadze, 2015). In comparison, most Western European countries spend on average more than 3% of their GDP on higher education alone (Tabatadze, 2015).

Georgia underwent a historic economic downturn after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The broad economy experienced a 75% reduction in GDP between 1990 and 1994, resulting in a decline in the education sector funding described as “one of the most severe in the region and unique in the history of education systems worldwide” (Matiashvili & Kutateladze, 2006, p. 195). The education sector expenditures as a proportion of the GDP fell from over 7% in 1991 to below 1% in 1994 (Sharvashidze, 2005). By 1996, the state budget for education was only 5% of what it had been in 1989 (World Bank, 2009). This impoverished legacy still persists today, with the total government spending on education among the lowest in the region and world (Chakhaia & Bregvadze, 2018).

More broadly, Saakashvili led Georgia in the rapid modernization of the government and a turn toward Western economic and democratic systems. “The government took an axe to the Soviet practices and