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PROPAGANDA AND POLITICAL DEBATES IN THE NEWSPAPERS OF THE LEADING POLITICAL PARTIES DURING THE PRE-ELECTION PERIOD OF THE 1919 CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY OF GEORGIA (Republic of Georgia; Unity; Public Affairs; Georgia; Labour)

Abstract: Our research explores the democratic processes during the First Republic of Georgia (1918-1921). In essence, this is a complex and intricate subject, therefore, our article is dedicated to a detailed examination of the publishing activities of the four prominent leader parties during that era, with a specific focus on one or two pivotal aspects.

This article delves into one of the most captivating and significant episodes within the three-year span of Georgia's independence: the 1919 Constituent Assembly elections and pre-election activities. We evaluate the political debates and the opposition between the leading political factions from a journalistic perspective, especially since these elections stand out as one of the most democratic in recent Georgian history. Furthermore, this subject holds intrigue in terms of Georgia's Western orientation.

The 1919 Constituent Assembly election serves as an exemplary instance of such distinction. It is characterized by meticulous preparatory work, the formulation of political party agendas, and a high level of political maturity, all of which persisted despite ideological conflicts. It represents a civil demonstration of the proper conduct of opposition.

Within the scope of our research, we aim to rekindle interest in these aspects and systematically catalog articles disseminated through the press as vehicles for party propaganda. This, in turn, facilitates a fresh evaluation of the media landscape from a century ago.

During our investigation, we have identified a set of pertinent questions:

1. What constituted the core themes in pre-election debates among the leading parties in the First Republic?
2. How did each party conduct propaganda through print media?

The materials we have scrutinized unequivocally attest to the relatively high quality of democracy within a nation freshly liberated from captivity.

This article promises to pique the interest of European scholars engaged in the study of democratic processes.

Key words: Constituent Assembly, political campaigning, election propaganda, political parties, agrarian reform.

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Introduction
Methodology

In exploring the research topic, **secondary data** from periodicals preserved in the state archives and the library of the Parliament of Georgia, as well as

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electronic media, were systematically searched, processed, and studied. **The qualitative research** method was employed, proven to be the most effective for delving into historical contexts, especially during critical periods. **Content** and **thematic analysis** of textual materials were utilized to interpret patterns and meanings. The materials underwent detailed analysis using **discourse analysis**, focusing on **propaganda and political debates found in the press pages of leading political parties during the pre-election period of the founding assembly of Georgia in 1919**. **Qualitative data**, such as the Republic of Georgia, unity, public affairs, Georgia, and work, formed the basis for processing and highlighting the propaganda and political debates. Publications were systematically grouped according to their content, genre, and type, yielding valuable insights into the attitudes toward political processes, the state, and the prevalence of narrow-party or populist approaches within the party press.

Introduction

The reshuffling of social and political forces in Georgia at the dawn of the 20th century, coupled with the emergence of distinct groups in the public sphere, laid the groundwork for the establishment of political parties. These parties, each with its unique ideologies and beliefs, engaged in fervent debates about the future development of Georgia.

While more than a dozen political parties existed, four emerged as leaders, attracting renowned political and public figures, active supporters, and wielding influential party print organs—newspapers. Our research centers on these political unions: Social-Democrats, Social-Federalists, National-Democrats, and Socialist-Revolutionaries.

Following liberation from the Russian Empire, the newly independent republic faced numerous challenges, focusing on the establishment of democratic governance and the European model of political arrangement. The National Council of Georgia and the Parliament worked on these key issues, directing efforts toward the creation of the Constituent Assembly, the highest legislative body of the Democratic Republic of Georgia.

The convocation of the Constituent Assembly, mandated by the Declaration of Independence on May 26, 1918, emphasized the importance of universal and equal elections. These elections were seen as a vital confirmation of the Georgian people's will.

Throughout the election campaign, party-printed editions played a crucial role. Newspapers such as "Government Moambe," "Ertoba," "Georgia," "People's Affairs," and "Shroma" served as the primary platforms for political expression and propaganda.

Despite ongoing controversies and verbal clashes between parties, the press became the battleground for political debates and struggles.

Parties sought to popularize their ideologies, gain public support, and discredit rival parties through the dissemination of programs and promises.

For our research, party periodicals serve as the primary source. We thoroughly examined publications from five newspapers dedicated to the formation of the Constituent Assembly in the pre-election period. Before delving into our presentation, we find it essential to outline the historical context and state environment that influenced the media climate, drawing upon contextual knowledge.

Proto-Experience of Research

Studies of the period of independence predominantly assume historiographical or political dimensions. However, delving into the press and media landscape poses a considerable challenge due to its multi-profile nature, each facet warranting an extensive examination. This article narrows its focus to explore propaganda methods, given their pivotal role in addressing various state-important issues. Collectively, these methods contribute to shaping a media environment grounded in independent and liberal values, an area largely unexplored at this stage.

The Constituent Assembly, convened through democratic elections, emerges as a paramount component for the political development of the country. Upon studying the materials, it becomes evident that the positioning of one's own opinion on this crucial event, coupled with discrediting opposing views on the press pages, stood out as one of the primary methods employed by participating parties during the elections. According to young researcher Sh. Kezherashvili, controversies and political debates during the pre-election period of the legislative body, the Constituent Assembly in the years of Georgia's independence, were indeed democratic. (Kezherashvili, 2019)

It was also intriguing for us to note that Georgia was embroiled in war conflicts during the mentioned period. However, this did not hinder the pre-election campaign from unfolding in a highly democratic setting. The question of how democratic and pluralistic the environment was becomes significant. Based on media texts, we assert that freedom of speech, election meetings, free movement, rallies, and the display of portraits of politicians, posters, and campaign slogans were unrestricted.

In the theoretical analysis of the conducted election campaign by T. Nikvashvili and Ts. Jananashvili, authors express the opinion that Georgia, undergoing significant changes, exhibited a profound emotional backdrop to the elections, a characteristic that remains sharp even in modern times. Conversely, the global pre-election agitation adopted an aggressive and rather uncivilized appearance. Thus, we comprehend that the elections of the Constituent Assembly a century ago adhered to

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all principles of democracy. (Nikvashvili & Jananashvili, 2018)

The election campaign of the Constituent Assembly receives a high democratic index in nearly all studies dedicated to this issue. Iremadze directs attention to the diverse content within print media. Starting from mid-January, periodicals of the leading political parties have extensively featured articles on their programs, ideologies, highlighting the shortcomings of others, and showcasing their own superiority. (Iremadze, 2018)

Each party endeavored to showcase its merits in the attainment of Georgia's independence, outlining its distinctive role in various matters of state importance. Moreover, each party presented its program on newspaper pages. Historian Otar Janelidze, a researcher of the First Republic, views party promises as notably generous. The author's documentary materials are intriguing, referencing the content of pre-election campaign materials. He highlights an instance where the Social-Democrats, aiming to discredit their political opponents, issued a poster featuring a Georgian prince, urging voters to tarnish candidates from the National-Democratic Party as 'exploiters of the peasantry' and 'defenders of landlord interests.' 'I have become!' (Janelidze, 2018)

The mentioned parties and their programs garnered additional strength through public support.

Before delving into our main topic, we deemed it fitting to provide a brief overview of the ideologies embraced by the four political parties within our field of interest.

The Political Spectrum in the Pre-election Campaign of the Constituent Assembly

In November 1919, following several months of deliberation, the parliament ratified the law titled 'Regulations on Constituent Assembly Elections,' wherein every aspect governing the elections was meticulously formulated. The complete text of the regulation was published in the official newspaper 'Republic of Georgia,' which also provided detailed explanations regarding the election system.

In January, the party participating in the elections commenced its election campaign. The Central Election Commission ultimately approved the list of candidates from 15 political entities. (Iremadze, 'The Greatest Event in the Life of the Nation - Constituent Assembly Elections,' 2018)

№1 was awarded to the main leading party - the Social Democratic Party of Georgia. №2 is the National Democratic Party of Georgia, №3 is the Party of Socialist-Revolutionaries of Georgia, №5 is the Socialist-Federalist Party of Georgia. (Here, we have listed only the political unions chosen as the object of our research).

As we know from officially confirmed documents, the Social Democrats of Georgia had 130 candidates nominated because they represented the

majority in the temporary parliament and did not intend to give up their positions in the Constituent Assembly.

It is necessary to mention the leaders of the mentioned party who created and propagated the ideology of their party. These are famous writers and figures in Georgia: Egnate Ninoshvili, Noah Jordania, Silibistro Jibladze, Grigol Lortkifanidze, Irakli Tsereteli, Akaki Chkhenkeli, Viktor Nozadze.

The Social-Democrats had developed a rather interesting action program. They considered the economic revival of the country as their primary task. They intended to eliminate social and political contradictions between the classes, and they planned it by following democratic principles. The society was promised protection of the interests of the working masses.

The social democrats named the people as the main leaders of the central government: 'The central government has no way to be organized separately, and it gradually approaches the people, becoming a people's government.' (Bendianishvili, 2001)

One of the crucial aspects of economic progress for the Social Democrats was the land issue, i.e., agrarian reform. They also emphasized the necessity for reforms in the field of education. The foreign researcher Steven Jones, in his work 'Socialism in Georgian Colors,' highlights the international perspectives of this party alongside the national ones.

The second position on the list was occupied by the National Democratic Party of Georgia. It is essential to note that the origins of this party trace back to the associations of Ilia Chavchavadze and his allies. Consequently, it is not surprising that the party's primary political demand, its foremost concern, is the national freedom of Georgia. In the vision of the national democrats, a peaceful Georgia prioritized the citizens' free will as the most significant value.

In the pledges of the National Democratic Party, significant emphasis was placed on the blueprint for the advancement of entrepreneurship and trade. The land issue and the welfare of the working class were acknowledged as vital and challenging matters.

Although only 8 MPs from the party list secured a place in the Constituent Assembly, they made a substantial contribution to formulating numerous program laws, and the provisions they created were adopted by both the Parliament and the subsequent Constituent Assembly.

The sources indicate that the National Democratic Party was established as the right-wing opposition to the majority Social Democrats in the founding assembly.

We reviewed the programs of each party and observed that the National Democrats' program stood out for its diversity and a well-structured legislative system. The party impressively emphasized key areas such as citizens' rights, education, and economic growth through land reform regulation.

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It is a documented fact that the National Democratic Party viewed political freedom as integral to the creation of the nation's property, spiritual well-being, and physical strength. Upon reviewing the party's program and comparing it with those of other parties, it becomes evident that they held distinct perspectives on various issues. Notably, the party's leaders, in a departure from social paths, prioritized the development of private property, highlighting their differences with the Social Democrats on numerous fronts.

The third position was allocated to the party of Social Revolutionaries, commonly known as CP.

The CP organization that emerged in Georgia at the beginning of the 20th century had Russian roots, initially being part of the Russian CP party. The program was adapted from the Party of Social Revolutionaries of Russia. Although modifications were introduced to the program over time, the core remained unchanged, leading to clashes with opposing leading parties on multiple occasions.

We find it essential to highlight that the socialization of land was a pivotal issue in the program of the Socialist-Revolutionaries, as our article focuses on the primary object of the political media struggle being the aforementioned issue.

The Socialist-Federalist Party of Georgia was registered as number five. The primary objective of the Federalists was to liberate the working people and foster prosperity centered around them.

From the outset, the party opposed all bourgeois initiatives and viewed a socialist political arrangement as the correct form for the country. It was this party that resisted the agrarian bill devised by the sword-wielding Social-Democrats.

Having briefly explored the election programs of all four parties, it was evident that the most significant discord arose regarding agrarian reform. Each party held a distinct position in this regard, with some points of agreement, but the ruling power failed to reach a consensus with the opposition parties. Further details on this matter will be discussed below.

Agrarian Reform: The Central Topic of Political Debates and Intense Confrontations

Modern Perspectives on Agrarian Reform: Assessing a Progressive Move in the Democratic Republic of Georgia Despite a Century-Old Political Controversy. The complexity arises from the fact that this reform was developed and adopted during the constituent assembly elections, turning it into a frequent point of contention among the leading parties.

We must consider the plight of the Georgian peasantry and working class during that era. Over 80 percent of the population resided in rural areas, with 65 percent of peasants leasing land. The nobility possessed vast land holdings, and the initial stage of the reform—confiscation of land from owners,

initiated in 1918—was effectively executed and, by 1919, essentially concluded.

The peasantry, and society at large, expressed significant concern about the distribution of confiscated lands. The program presented by the Social Democrats to the Parliament proposed the municipalization of lands, transferring them to peasants who privately worked on the land. The state retained control over forests, waters, pastures, natural resources, and certain farms.

The legislation governed the transfer and redistribution of lands, sparking contentious debates among political factions. According to the Social Democrats' plan, the land would be allocated to the new owner at a discounted price rather than for free. However, the extent of affordability for everyone during that period was a subject of ongoing discussion among opposition parties throughout the pre-election campaign.

'Ertoba' newspaper extensively covers the agrarian reform in the majority of its issues, providing a detailed analysis to the public. The publication asserts that the legalization of land as private property is highly advantageous for both the peasants and the economic progress of the state.

At the start of January, Ertoba dedicated a series of articles to this issue. The article, initiated in No. 11 under the title 'Agrarian Project,' continues in subsequent issues of the newspaper. 'Agrarian reform is geared towards the peasant, addressing the matter of agriculture. A preferential price will be set to cover the necessary expenses involved in the implementation of the land reform.' (Ertoba, 1919)

In the following article, the Social Democrats elucidate why land cannot be distributed for free. Owing to the bank's debts and the state's financial constraints, they establish prices for the lands.

The newspaper 'Georgia' articulates the stance of the National Democratic Party, which opposes free land confiscation. This represents a distinct position: 'Our conscience cannot align with the idea of free land confiscation. Such confiscation without compensation is deemed as tyranny and robbery.' (Georgia, 1919) The National-Democratic Party asserts that it does not oppose compulsory land confiscation but condemns the social-democratic approach to this confiscation, deeming it primitive. In an article published just before the constituent assembly elections, it openly accuses the ruling power of disunity and questions the viability of its project: 'This is the state creation of our social democracy. There are many tears, much blood, and chaos in the national economy.' (Ertoba, 1919)

As observed, the leaders of the National Democratic Party found common ground with the ruling party on several matters. However, the Social-Federalist Party engaged in a radical conflict over the agrarian issue.

The newspaper 'People's Affairs' extensively and sharply addressed this matter, advocating for the free

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distribution of land to farmers with the slogan 'Land to the tiller, free of charge and free of charge!' Public Affairs overtly pledges to its supporters that it will eliminate private land ownership, transforming it into public property.

Samson Firtskhalava eloquently addresses the land issue with his customary intelligence and a composed, healthy tone. In the January 23 edition, he dedicates a special article to this problem. Firtskhalava delicately articulates his own position and chastises the Social-Democrats for hasty decision-making.

Unlike Firtskhalava, the publicist of 'People's Affairs' and advocate for the social-federalists, Tedo Ghloni, publishes sharply critical articles. He directly accuses the ruling party of impoverishing the working class and establishing a bourgeois state.

On January 14, 'People's Affairs' fully presented the draft agrarian law, scrutinizing it article by article. For example, it pointed out inconsistencies and flagged flaws.

Concerning the agrarian project, we did not encounter insulting or obscene words directed at opponents. However, during our review of relevant literature on the issue, we unfortunately came across such instances, reflecting a flaw in the political ethics of the period.

The 'Shroma' newspaper aligns with the social-federalists on the agrarian issue. Its pages feature the program of the social revolutionaries (ESRs). The ESRs urge the ruling party to postpone the adoption of such a crucial project until the Constituent Assembly elections. According to the SRs, the land issue should be addressed by the newly convened democratic Constituent Assembly, which enjoys the trust of the people.

In the January and February issues, the 'Shroma' newspaper publishes extensive articles whose authors contend that the Social-Democrats' project will once again favor the rich, leaving the working class and peasantry disillusioned. The Socialist-Revolutionaries advocate the slogan 'Land should not become an object of trade.'

Finally, we can confidently assert that before the election of the Constituent Assembly, there existed an 'agrarian issue front,' and each party engaged in this battle with its own ideology and methods, fully aligning with the pre-election propaganda struggle.

Conclusion

Before concluding our paper, it is essential to reiterate that the pre-election campaign unfolded under equal conditions among the parties. It stands as the epitome of democracy, with no restrictions on the expression of opinions, freedom of speech, organization of rallies, pre-election meetings, and, certainly, the articles we scrutinized published in the press pages serve as a clear confirmation of this.

With the materials we presented, we ascertained that opposition and criticism in the information domain were highly intense.

Our objective was to illustrate the characteristics of propaganda and debates during the pre-election period. Consequently, we selected the agitation surrounding the agrarian reform as a focal point, yet we could not sidestep other vital problematic issues where strategies of promoting one's activities and the mutual struggle of opponents were distinctly visible.

Within the framework of the research, we deemed it necessary to highlight one more detail. During the analysis of the materials we studied, it was found that the situation quite familiar today, involving the polarization of the media and, therefore, public opinion, was not unusual even a century ago. In one of the issues of "People's Affairs," a response was given to the article published in the 'Georgia' newspaper, which discussed the division of the Georgian political spectrum into two camps, socialist and non-socialist.

All middle groups are disappearing and should disappear. The Social-Federalists, as a middle group, will be wiped out, leaving two forces on the battlefield: the National-Democrats and the Social-Democracy. (People's Affairs, 1919)

While recounting the cases of discrediting, we came across an article by the Social-Federalists, in which the ruling power was directly exposed to violence and blackmail. The publication, authored by Sanganidze, describes the Social Democrats' violent and threatening intimidation and pressure on the public. 'If you don't have the label of Social Democrats, you won't be able to boldly go to the ballot box. Violence, threats, and injustice reign where there should be justice, non-violence, and directness.' (Sanganidze, 1919)

Of course, 'Ertoba' newspaper did not remain in debt, and on January 16, it published a rather hot and embarrassing publication. Federalists are referred to as gossips and slanderers in the mentioned article. 'We will not engage in polemics with them on this basis. It would be humiliating for our dignity. We don't think that posting such headlines and articles will add anything to the capital of Social-Federalists, except garbage.'

As we can see, the parties did not shy away from belittling each other in public, and we considered this to be a way of avoiding politics; however, there are not many such examples, and offensive and obscene words are not often found.

Finally, we should note that all four parties reviewed by us, through their printed organs, articulate their own ideological lines, focus on problematic points, and offer their own versions of solving the problems to the electorate.

Each newspaper actively opposes multiple rival parties, emphasizing key issues and prominent political figures. Employing a variety of means to

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discredit opponents, these actions are categorized within the realm of political agitation by our theoreticians.

Every newspaper typically features one or two leading publicists considered the primary agitators. Our study reveals a diverse range of article genres, including appeals, interviews, conversations, criticisms, and portraits.

Historians and political scientists assert that the 1919 Constituent Assembly elections were conducted with a high level of democratic quality and adherence to democratic principles. We concur, recognizing the outstanding significance of the debates and

propaganda during this election, establishing a foundation for a healthy tradition.

Despite occasional scathingly critical letters and offensive publications, the election campaign and debates contributed to the creation of a fairly intellectual media landscape. While the social democrats secured a significant majority in the constituent assembly, the ideas presented by individual parties were intriguing and thought-provoking for the public, influencing their decisions. In conclusion, each party genuinely engaged in democratic and patriotic discourse to fortify their positions and contribute to the building of a better state.

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