

**Political Opportunities in the Post-Soviet Realm:
A Comparative Case Study of Anti-Regime Mobilization and
Success in Azerbaijan and Georgia**

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Introduction

Recent events in Georgia and Azerbaijan reveal the widespread resentment that citizens throughout the Soviet Union harbor towards their governments. On 22 November 2003, thousands of Georgians incensed at the attempt by President Eduard Shevardnadze and his ruling Citizens' Union of Georgia Party to maintain their majority in Parliament by means of electoral fraud stormed the Parliament building and somewhat inadvertently forced his resignation.¹ The resignation had followed several weeks of non-violent protests that surprised both the Shevardnadze regime and the international community in terms of their breadth of popular support and their high degree of organization. In neighboring Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliev, son of and anointed successor to the former president, Heidar Aliev, announced his victory in that country's presidential election in October 2003. Despite the sizeable margin of victory reported in the official results, most international observers and opposition figures cited numerous instances of electoral fraud and voter intimidation, the absence of which likely would have made the results much closer and possibly forced a second-round runoff. In response to the perceived electoral fraud, opposition supporters staged a series of demonstrations over the next several days that were brutally suppressed.

The disparate outcomes of these two post-Soviet elections is somewhat puzzling, given the fact that Azerbaijan over the past several years had witnessed a substantially higher degree of political contention directed against state policies. For the most part, the demands made by protestors have not induced any substantive policy changes on the part of the regime. In Georgia, by contrast, there had been relatively fewer incidents of political contention directed against the regime. However, Shevardnadze's resignation marked just one in a string of successes for Georgian protestors. What factors can account this variation in the scope and outcomes of political contention in Azerbaijan and Georgia? This study attempts to answer that question.

Scope of the Study and Outcome to be Explained

This paper assesses the relevance of the political opportunities framework in explaining the differential rates and outcomes of political contention in post-Soviet Azerbaijan and Georgia, with the second set of national elections in each country (the October 1998 presidential elections

¹ The goal of most of the protestors and the opposition leaders who they followed had merely been to demand a new and more transparent round of elections.

for Azerbaijan, the October 1999 parliamentary elections for Georgia) representing the starting point of the analysis, and the most recent set of elections (which occurred in late 2003 in both countries) held under the Shevardnadze and Heidar Aliev regimes marking the end point.² The dependent variable, *anti-regime political contention*, is defined as any sustained collective action directed against regional or national governing bodies in which the primary motive was to challenge a particular political or economic policy or the general socioeconomic and/or political situation in the country. Two data sources were utilized in the process of compiling a list of contentious actions. The daily news archives at Eurasianet.org and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's website each feature the top stories of the day from a number of post-Soviet states, gleaned from a variety of local and regional newspapers. In this author's estimation, they represent the best news archive pertaining to the Central Eurasian region.

At least 100 non-state individuals must have participated in order for a case to be coded as an incident of political contention.³ Strikes were included only if the strikers were state employees and hence directly contesting state policies. Excluded from the analysis are incidents of armed conflict between government forces and secessionist forces. Both countries have witnessed internal conflict, as ethnic Armenians in the province of Nagorno-Karabakh have tried to secede from Azerbaijan, and South Ossetia and Abkhazia have tried to do likewise in Georgia. The decision to exclude *this* dimension of political contention reflects the author's conviction that these conflicts are rooted not so much in discontent with the policies of either regime but rather in other motivations that are fundamentally different from those behind the incidents of political contention that are examined here. The author did, however, include demonstrations in which protestors expressed their dissatisfaction with the regime's policies vis-à-vis a particular breakaway region.

The selection of national elections as the starting points of the analysis testifies to the fact elections in countries that are struggling towards democracy represent landmark events that

² Following Shevardnadze's ouster, Parliamentary speaker Nino Burdjanadze became interim president until presidential elections were held in January 2004. Mikhail Saakashvili, whose National Movement coalition was widely believed to have really won the contested parliamentary election, was elected by a landslide. Then in March 2004, new elections to parliament were held. These elections, and any potential social mobilization that occurred in their wake, are not considered here, for a couple of reasons. First, the elections were widely hailed as fair and transparent, and there was little for pro-democracy advocates to complain about. This paper is largely concerned with social mobilization in settings that cannot be classified as fully democratic, and thus the inclusion of Georgia's most recent elections might bias the sample. Second, at least in the case of Saakashvili's victory, the election was widely seen as a mandate on the legitimacy of the Rose Revolution, and he ran largely uncontested with the exception of several opponents representing the fringe of the political spectrum.

³ Although other authors within the contention literature have recommended lower thresholds (i.e., 20 or more protestors), the author worried that many incidents featuring much smaller numbers of protestors might not have been recorded in the data sources utilized.

galvanize a diverse range of actors. In both Azerbaijan and Georgia, the second set of elections marked the first real nation-wide debate (restricted as it might have been) on the performance of the regime. In addition, the findings indicate that the majority of contentious actions directed against the authoritarian tendencies of the regimes in question have occurred around election times. The first set of elections held in each country immediately following Shevardnadze and Aliev's ascension to power are not considered here, as these largely represented evaluations of the jobs that each leader had done at bringing stability to their respective countries. In each case, the opposition had had very little time to coalesce and the large margin of victory achieved by each leader seemed to represent genuine disenchantment with the instability that had come before (see below for details; on Azerbaijan, see Altstadt, p. 8; on Georgia, see Stefes, p. 5). An additional reason for this starting point pertains to Osa and Corduneanu-Huci's (2003) observation that there is a dearth of studies of studies of political contention in *stable* non-democratic regimes, as most analyses of mobilization in non-democratic contexts focus on the period of time *after which* the non-democratic regime has been weakened (p. 2). This starting point in part represents an effort to fill this gap.

In addition, this study will attempt to explain the *outcome* of social mobilization. Outcome is coded as success or failure. A contentious action is defined as a success if it influences government policy. The coding process obviously involved a great deal of the subjectivity on the author's part. However, an attempt was made to identify whether a particular contention action, or a cluster of actions directed towards a similar goal, were followed by any change of course.

Case Selection

Azerbaijan and Georgia were chosen for several reasons. First, both are post-Soviet states. The vast majority of works that employ the political opportunities framework have analyzed social mobilization in industrialized, democratic contexts. Recently, a number of works have used the framework to explain contention in authoritarian settings (see Schock 1999; Brockett 1991; Yun 1997; Osa and Corduneanu-Huci 2003) and in post-communist Eastern Europe (Ekiert and Kubik, 1997 and 1998), but there has been little application of *any* theory of political contention to explain developments in the post-Soviet region, excluding several analyses focusing on Russia. Also, in both cases the figures that would come to dominate the political scene of each country for the next decade (Eduard Shevardnadze in Georgia, Heidar Aliev in Azerbaijan) came to power roughly two years after independence promising to end the civil conflicts that had raged in each in each country since the latter days of the Soviet Union. Thus, by

the late 1990's, which represents the starting point of this analysis, the aura surrounding each leader due to their role in bringing relative stability to their respective countries had evaporated. Similarly, each regime had had a similar amount of time to fix the many social ills that plagued each country, and thus people in each country were able to evaluate the merits of their respective government's performance from a similar vantage point.

Azerbaijan and Georgia also measure similarly on several independent variables that are often cited as strong determinants of social contention. Many scholars have emphasized cultural variables in explaining patterns of social mobilization. For instance, the literature on "repertoires of contention" posits that different societies utilize distinct methods to express their grievances (Kertzer). Perhaps Azerbaijanis and Georgians have different understandings of political contention and these understandings in turn lead to rates and forms of social mobilization. The evidence seems to point to the contrary, however. In the process of explaining political contention among ethnic non-Russians under the Soviet regime, Mark Beissinger has compiled a database that lists incidence of mobilization by nationality during the late Soviet era. While Georgians hold a slight lead over Azeris, the lead is not profound, and Azeris demonstrated significantly more of a willingness to express discontent than the populations of the five Central Asian republics, with whom the Azeris share a common Muslim faith.

Another set of theories that enjoyed prominence during the 1970's hypothesizes a correlation between *grievances* and political contention. Perhaps the most common theory within this family is the theory of relative deprivation, made famous by Ted Gurr's *Why Men Rebel* (1971). Relative deprivation theories seek to explain the incidence of political contention (rebellion and civil violence are the most frequently analyzed outcomes within this body of literature) by reference to individual psychological states aggregated across groups or entire societies. The basic premise is that, if enough people in a given society feel deprived relative to a hypothesized standard of well-being, the probability of collective violence will increase. While the present study does not examine rebellion or collective violence per se, it is reasonable to consider the possibility that overall levels of grievances explain part of the variation across and within the two cases presented here.

Unfortunately, there seem to be no surveys in which Azeris and Georgians are asked to rate their overall grievance level. However, the polls reflect that citizens in both countries expressed discontent with their governments during the time period analyzed here.⁴ Furthermore, if we use macroeconomic indicators as a proxy for individual feelings of deprivation, as many

⁴ On Azerbaijan, go to <http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/azerbaijan/hypermail/200104/0016.html>. On Georgia, see <http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/georgia/hypermail/200107/0009.html>.

works within this literature do, the similar scores of each country on this variable become more apparent. Azerbaijan and Georgia suffered two of the worst cases of economic collapse following the demise of the Soviet Union as any of the post-Soviet republics. Between 1992 and 1995, Azerbaijan's economy contracted at an average rate of 15% per year. While the GDP growth rate has recently showed signs of improvement, over half of the country's population still lives below the poverty rate, the unemployment rate hovers at around 25%, and little growth has occurred in non-petroleum related sectors of the economy.⁵ Georgia witnessed a similar collapse, suffering one of the largest drops in output and one of the highest inflation rates among ex-Soviet countries.⁶ In both countries, electricity outages during the winter have been a common occurrence for most of the past decade. Furthermore, the governments of both countries have consistently ranked among the most corrupt in the world according to Transparency International's annual publications.

Overview of Political Contention in Azerbaijan in Georgia

The author recorded 79 incidents of political contention directed against the regime in Azerbaijan from October 1998 to October 2003. Of these, 44 were rallies organized by opposition parties. These tended to be concentrated around election days, and a majority of them are reported to have featured over 1,000 candidates. There were seven acts of political contention in which the government's policy in Nagorno-Karabakh was at issue, including one hunger strike by up to 500 veterans of the conflict. There were six recorded protests in a particular village outside of Baku, Nardaran, in which the source of grievance seems to have been local socioeconomic conditions. Five acts of political contention were directed against repeated power outages, three were organized by journalists protesting media repression, one protest was directed towards women's rights and there was one recorded strike by state workers. The remaining incidents were difficult to classify. The author recorded 35 acts of political contention from November 1999 to November 2003. Fourteen of these were organized by opposition parties, and they gained frequency throughout 2003. Six were directed against power outages, three were organized by Azerbaijani minorities and addressed political discrimination, three were organized by Gamsakhurdia followers urging the abolition of Parliament, three were organized by persons displaced due to the conflict in Abkhazia, one was directed against the government's attempt to shut down the

⁵ See 1996 UN Development report on Azerbaijan, available online at <http://www.undp.org/rbec/nhdr/1996/summary/azerbaijan.htm>.

⁶ See 1996 UN Development report on Georgia, online at <http://www.undp.org/rbec/nhdr/1996/georgia/chapter3.htm>.

independent television channel Rustavi-2, there was one recorded strike and the rest were difficult to classify.

As the preceding overview illustrates, a majority of the acts of political contention in Azerbaijan were organized by opposition parties demanding greater inclusion and a relaxation of government repression. There is little evidence that this broad movement has achieved any notable success, as the regime continued to thwart opposition efforts and manipulate electoral results up until the 2003 presidential election. Likewise, the protests in Nardaran village were heavily repressed,⁷ and there is little evidence that the socioeconomic situation there has improved. The only real success was obtained by journalists, as the media situation gradually improved towards the end of Aliev's tenure, although many analysts attribute this more to Azerbaijan's inclusion into the Council of Europe (see Cornell 2003). In Georgia, by contrast, there have been several dramatic successes. In 2001, protestors signaled their displeasure at the government's shutdown of Rustavi-2, which the state later backed away from. In the summer of 2003, protestors at opposition demonstrations demanded that the Central Electoral Commission include representatives from outside of the ruling party, a demand that the Shevardnadze administration eventually accepted. Finally, the most dramatic success occurred following the 2003 elections, when protestors successfully challenged the falsified election results. In the next section, I will outline the political opportunities perspective and then test to see whether it explains the variation in the scope and outcomes of political contention.

Overview of the Political Opportunities Framework

The political opportunities perspective represented recognition by social movement scholars of the dearth of explanatory power inherent in existing theories of political contention. First, it represented an advance beyond the relative deprivation theories that dominated the study of political contention at the time. A strong version of the political opportunities perspective holds that grievances are constant, and that we need to look elsewhere to explain variation in political contention. A weaker, and in this author's view, more realistic version, holds that although grievances vary across time and across different social arenas, variation in this variable is not sufficient to explain variation in the scope of social mobilization. That is to say, grievances are a necessary, but not a sufficient, precondition of social mobilization.⁸

⁷ "Azerbaijani Villagers Renew Demonstrations Over Poor Living Conditions," at <http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/azerbaijan/hypermail/200211/0039.shtml>.

⁸ Some scholars are quick to reject even this minimalist version of the role that grievances play in fostering social mobilization. For instance, McCarthy and Zald argue that social movements can develop absent grievances given the presence of 'conscience constituents,' who they define as "direct supporters of a SMO

The political opportunities framework arose more directly in reaction to the resource mobilization perspective, which began supplanting theories of relative deprivation with McCarthy and Zald's article in 1978. For McCarthy and Zald, one of the primary determinants of social mobilization is the amount of resources located in the 'social movement sector,' which encompasses all of the social movement organizations in a society. Resources are so important because they augment the capacity of movement entrepreneurs to mobilize adherents to their cause. *Financial* resources are certainly an important type of resource that social movement organizations must be able to mobilize. However, the resource mobilization literature has stressed the salience of 'mobilizing structures' and social networks. These refer to connective ties that bind individuals and groups, and they facilitate mobilization by lowering the costs faced by movement entrepreneurs in galvanizing support.⁹

Thus, resource mobilization theory concentrates on attributes of particular social movement *groups*, rather than individual psychological states or macroeconomic indicators. Certain adherents to this approach deny the explanatory power of grievances. For instance, Turner and Killian argue that, "there is always enough discontent in any society to supply the grass-roots support for a movement if the movement is effectively organized..." (p. 251). However, the crucial insight of this perspective is that, if a social movement organization faces a resource deficit, no amount of deprivation will be sufficient to translate grievances into social mobilization.

The political opportunities framework sought to fill the gap due to resource mobilization's almost exclusive focus on factors internal to a particular social movement industry. Meyer (2004) points out that scholars working from a resource mobilization perspective had "factored out much of the stuff that comprises politics, particularly the nature of the political context and activist grievances" (p. 127). The central insight behind the political opportunities perspective, by contrast, is that scholars must look to factors *external* to a particular organization of social challengers in order to explain the incidence and outcomes of social mobilization (Tarrow, p. 20). Thus, even if grievances (be they economic, social, or political) are prevalent throughout a society, and even if social movements formed to address these grievances possess a

who do not stand to benefit directly from its success in goal accomplishment" (p. 1222). While this is a useful concept that deserves further elucidation, it applies more directly to social movement activity in post-materialist democracies. Besides, it can be argued that these 'conscience constituents' do harbor grievances, if we expand the definition of grievances beyond the traditional notion of economic deprivation. In short, this article holds to the necessary but not sufficient conceptualization of grievances outlined above.

⁹ See McAdam (1986) and Morris (1984) for analyses of the role that social networks played in the American Civil Rights Movement. See Katzenstein (1998) on the role of social networks in facilitating feminist movements within the Catholic Church.

significant amount of financial resources and can turn to highly developed, preexisting social networks among their constituents, social mobilization may not be forthcoming or effective if the structure of political opportunities does not work in its favor.

But what exactly are political opportunities? Tarrow defines them broadly as “consistent-but not necessarily formal, permanent, or national- dimensions of the political struggle that encourage people to engage in contentious politics” (p. 19-20). They work to encourage contention by lowering the costs of confrontation. Since this confrontation is typically vis-à-vis the state¹⁰, political opportunity theorists have traditionally looked to signals emanating from the state in their search for evidence of an expansion or contraction of political opportunities. For example, in one of the first uses of the political opportunity concept, Eisinger (1973) examined variation in the ‘openness’ of American urban governments to account for differential rates of urban protest, and concluded that cities with relatively ‘closed’ systems experienced higher rates of protest because they precluded more institutionalized forms of redressing grievances.

Causal Variables

This paper is less concerned with specifying a precise definition of political opportunities than it is with testing the predictive and explanatory power of the individual independent variables that scholars working within the political opportunities framework have isolated as significant, and with clearly specifying the causal mechanisms that account for these variable’s effects. In particular, this paper aims to apply the findings of scholars that have tested the impact of variables specified by the political opportunities approach in non-democratic settings. In his wide-ranging review of the social movement literature, Tarrow (chapter 5) identifies several dimensions of political opportunities that recent scholars have applied in analyses of non-democratic contexts.

Repression. Although there is a consensus within the literature that the level of repression that the state brings to bear on societal challengers is influential in determining the scope and outcomes of contention, the findings with regard to the precise relationship have been ambiguous. Tilly (1978) was one of the first scholars to identify a curvilinear relationship between repression and protest. While low levels of repression can make protest obsolete by allowing challengers to utilize more institutionalized routes in making their political demands, extremely high levels of repression can stunt the development of social networks and political consciousness among

¹⁰ This is not to say that all social movement theorists are satisfied with the tendency of the literature to almost exclusively focus on collective action directed towards the state. For instance, David Snow (2002: 24) has called for an expansion of the substantive domain studied by social movement theorists to incorporate such diverse phenomena as communal movements and religious “cults.”

potential constituents. It is in the middle range of cases where social mobilization is most likely. Osa and Corduneanu-Huci reaffirm the ambiguous nature of this relationship in their study of mobilization in two dozen authoritarian regimes. While they detected mobilization in certain countries that were experiencing an upsurge in repression, they find that repression can forestall political contention if leaders are able to simultaneously prevent media access and the development of social networks (p. 18).

Elite division. Scholars have demonstrated that the degree of fragmentation among state elites affects both the incidence and outcome of social mobilization. Tarrow (p. 79) argues that elite divisions act as a signal to societal challengers that the costs of collective action have decreased, thereby increasing the incentive to engage in confrontation. Schock argues that elite divisions might be particularly salient in non-democracies, since such divisions tend to be over the type of political system that is in place, rather than simply over economic and social policies (p. 362). In addition, Brockett finds that elite fragmentation can increase the success of social movement outcomes if certain elite actors share the objectives of social movements (p. 268). Attracting elite allies to one's cause significantly emboldens social movements as these figures can provide crucial material and symbolic resources.

Influential Allies. Scholars have demonstrated that influential allies external to a particular social movement are instrumental in providing organizational and economic assistance (Schock, p. 361). Most of the findings emphasize the role of influential allies in leading to successful *outcomes*, rather than political contention *per se*. For example, although people power movements developed in both of the cases that Schock looks at, it was only in the Philippines, where the movement benefited from the moral and organizational support of the Catholic church and the business class, as well as widespread international condemnation of the Marcos regime, that the movement succeeded in bringing down the regime (p. 368-69). Similarly, Gamson finds that the success rate of "conflict groups" groups in the United States was similarly dependent on whether they had influential allies (1990: 64-6). Nevertheless, the presence of influential allies is theorized to increase the *scope* of political contention, since, "Challengers are encouraged to take collective action when they have allies who can act as friends in court, as guarantors against repression, or as acceptable negotiators on their behalf" (Tarrow, p. 79). Osa (1995) argues that the Catholic church served this function in facilitating anti-regime activity in 1980's Poland. While Schock argues that influential allies in authoritarian regimes must come from outside the realm of the state (p. 361), this study leaves open the possibility that disaffected state elites *can* serve as influential allies in semi-authoritarian cases such as those looked at here.

Media Access. Scholars have long grappled with the impact of media on public opinion and social mobilization (see Gitlin 1980 for an examination of the role of media on social movement dynamics). Page, Shapiro, and Demsey (1987) were among the first to demonstrate a significant correlation between the content of television news and policy preferences. Although their study focused on the United States, scholars have attempted to extend their findings to a variety of contexts. Within the literature on social movements in non-democratic settings, Schock was among the first to demonstrate a linkage between alternative (i.e., non-governmental) media and social mobilization. Media freedom facilitates political contention by raising political consciousness among potential movement constituents and by exposing illegitimate government actions. In the absence of a free press, leaders can more easily shift the blame for poor social conditions onto other actors (foreign governments, corrupt lower-level bureaucrats) and justify heavy-handed tactics as necessary to the maintenance of public order. Although Schock theorizes that press freedom should impact both the *incidence* and the *outcomes* of political contention (p. 370), the precise connection between the media and social movement outcomes is not really demonstrated in his analyses of Burma and the Philippines, and the theoretical linkage remains underdeveloped within the literature.

Social networks/movement resources. Most political opportunity theorists treat social networks as an intermediate variable between political opportunities and social mobilization. That is, their contribution to collective action only kicks in *after* political opportunities have already opened up. Nevertheless, Osa and Corduneanu-Huci identify several instances of political contention in non-democracies in which social networks *created* political opportunities, rather than simply responding to their expansion. They conclude that strong feelings of group identity/solidarity can serve as a basis for social mobilization in the absence of significant political opportunities (p. 622). In addition, while the political opportunity perspective treats mobilizing structures as an insufficient factor in explaining political contention, most theorists still regard it as a necessary one; that is, regardless of how favorable the political opportunity structure is, challengers are unlikely to succeed in their objectives if they lack resources and if they are not united by any connective ties.

Hypotheses and Variable Measurement

In light of the foregoing theoretical discussion, the following hypotheses will be tested:

H1: Increases in the level of state repression vis-à-vis non-state challengers will be associated with fewer incidents of political contention and less successful outcomes.

H2: Higher levels of elite unity will be associated with fewer incidents of political contention and less successful outcomes.

H3: The absence of influential allies will be associated with fewer incidents of political contention and less successful outcomes.

H4: Lower levels of media freedom/information flow will be associated with fewer incidents of political contention and less successful outcomes.

H5: Lower levels of resources and less dense networks among social challengers will be associated with fewer incidents of political contention and less successful outcomes.

The independent variables are operationalized as follows:

X1: *Repression*: A qualitative variable encompassing the government's overall toleration of opposition to the region, both through formal means such as elections and informal means such as political protests.

X2: *Elite fractionalization*: A qualitative variable indicating the presence of actors *within* the ruling organs of the state that differ fundamentally over the *political*, as well as social and economic, situation in the state. Leaders of opposition parties that do *not* hold state positions are not considered.

X3: *Influential Allies*: A qualitative variable indicating the presence of actors external to the social movement that contribute material and symbolic resources to the movement's aims.

X4: *Media freedom*: A qualitative variable indicating the presence or absence of alternative sources of information, particularly sources that are critical of government policy.

X5: *Resources/Networks*: The presence of organizations or connective ties other than grievance-related ones that bind participants in contentious actions together.

In the next two sections, I will discuss the political opportunity structures in Azerbaijan and Georgia, respectively, and then conclude with an analysis of the implications of the findings for the political opportunities perspective and the study of political contention in general.

Political Opportunities in Azerbaijan

Repression

Under the regime of Heidar Aliev throughout the latter half of the 1990's and up until 2003, Azerbaijan possessed a hierarchical, semi-authoritarian regime with virtually all policy-making power vested in the executive branch.¹¹ Although national and local elections have been held on schedule and were theoretically open to candidates representing a diverse array of ideologies, Aliev and the ruling elite utilized a variety of tactics to thwart opposition activity. One of the most commonly employed techniques has been to make it as difficult as possible for opposition leaders to register as candidates. For example, the Central Electoral Commission (CEC), itself made up exclusively of representatives of ruling Yeni Azerbaijan (New Azerbaijan) Party (YAP), rejected the applications of 8 parties to field candidates for the list proportional portion of the 2000 parliamentary elections. The rejections were based upon claims that the parties had forged signatures, although no evidence was presented and the parties were not allowed to refute the charges. Among those excluded were the popular Musavat and Azerbaijan National Independence Party (ANIP). A number of independent candidates that had planned to contest open seats in the single-member constituencies were also denied permission (Cornell 2002, 83-84). The rebuff to Musavat was particularly damaging to the opposition, as independent polls taken before the election showed that Musavat commanded as much popularity as the ruling party.¹²

In 2002, a referendum was organized by Aliev in which a number of constitutional amendments were up for debate. Most observers criticized it as an attempt by Aliev to portray the country as democratic so that it would help Azerbaijan's chance of gaining access to the Council of Europe. The results, which were widely criticized by outside observers as rigged, favored the regime. One of the consequences is that the list proportional portion of election to parliament was abolished, a serious blow to opposition parties.¹³ That same year witnessed additional negative developments for opposition parties. Several members of the Azerbaijan Democratic Party (ADP) and Musavat were arrested, and police destroyed one of the ADP's local branches. Meanwhile,

¹¹ Observers have also noted traces of a personality cult (or, more accurately, attempts to cultivate one), as portraits of Aliev adorn billboards and government offices. This practice has continued even after his death, and portraits of Ilham, the new president, are now placed alongside those of his father ("Azerbaijan: Long live the King," *The Economist*, November 20-26, 2004, p. 54).

¹² See for example, Liz Fuller, "Musavat's Popularity On The Rise," RFE/RL Analytical Report, Volume 3, Number 43, November 3, 2000, also online at <http://www.rferl.org/reports/caucasus-report/2000/11/43-031100.asp>.

¹³ See "Opposition leaders say Azerbaijani referendum marred by fraud," *Eurasia Insight*, August 26, 2002. Available online at <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav082602.shtml>.

authorities forced the ANIP out of its headquarters for the second time in two years (Cornell 2003, p. 106-07).

The Azerbaijani government has been roundly condemned for seriously misrepresenting election results in every national election since the 1993 presidential election. In the 2000 parliamentary elections, the ruling party's victory was largely made possible by stuffed ballots and the ejection of international observers from numerous polling stations.¹⁴ In the October 2003 presidential election, international observers noted widespread disenfranchisement of voters due to manipulated voter registration lists, in addition to making the usual charges of ballot stuffing and outright misrepresentation of results.¹⁵ It is difficult to determine the extent to which vote-rigging was responsible for the 77% of the votes Ilham Aliev claimed to receive. Several independent exit polls showed the ruling party's candidate running neck and neck with Isa Gambar of Musavat.¹⁶ David Sip, director of NDI Azerbaijan, argues that a clean election would have been much closer, and that Aliev might not have received the requisite 60% needed to avoid a second round runoff between the top two vote-getters.¹⁷

A final dimension of repression that bears discussion is the Azerbaijani government's consistently harsh policy towards dissent. There were numerous instances of police brutality against demonstrators protesting the refusal of Heidar Aliev to postpone the 1998 presidential election until the composition of the CEC included more opposition figures. Police used similar tactics at times during protests aimed at the 2000 parliamentary elections, the appointment by Ilham Aliev as Prime Minister in August 2003, and the falsification of the 2003 presidential elections. Repression was especially severe vis-à-vis the latter protests, as several deaths and numerous arrests were reported. The right to protest in Azerbaijan is difficult to obtain, and the costs can be extremely high.

Elite Fractionalization

During his tenure in office, Heidar Aliev managed to maintain a great deal of unity within the ruling apparatus. He did this through several mechanisms. The most important of these was his concentration of power within the executive branch. The legislature remains a weak entity relative to the presidential office (Cornell 2002, p. 81). In addition to its weak standing within the Azerbaijani polity, parliament is firmly controlled by the YAP, largely as a result of the practices

¹⁴ "Azerbaijan: What Next?," *The Economist*, November 9, 2000.

¹⁵ See for example Daan van der Schriek, "Azerbaijan: a long way from stability and Democracy," *Caucasus Election Watch*, November 5, 2003. Available online at www.csis.org.

¹⁶ "U.S. restraint on Azerbaijan's election encourages instability," *Eurasia Insight*, October 17, 2003. Online at <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav101703a.shtml>.

¹⁷ See cit. 12 for quotation.

discussed in the preceding section. Another factor augmenting the elder Aliev's ability to maintain elite unity was the foreign investment that has poured into Azerbaijan as a result of the country's oil-producing potential. Azerbaijan has consistently ranked among the top ten countries on the annual UN foreign direct investment (FDI) indices, which evaluate a country's performance in attracting FDI relative to the overall size of its economy. The oil industry accounts for up to 70-80% of the country's foreign investment, and the oil sector is largely under the control of the State Oil Company (Bayulgen). During the elder Aliev's reign, his brother Natik Aliev and his son Ilham were the president and vice president of the monopoly, respectively. Such tight control over such a lucrative source of revenue gives the Azerbaijani regime the appearance of a "rentier state,"¹⁸ and allowed Aliev to dispense patronage to members of the elite, many of whom come from his home region (Herzig, p. 31).

Influential Allies

There has been relatively little outside support for pro-democracy activists in Azerbaijan. Due to the country's desire for tighter integration into Western organizations such as NATO and the Council of Europe, representatives of Western human rights organizations have been invited to observe national elections, although their access has often been restricted. Thus, these groups' frequent condemnations of the electoral process within Azerbaijan have served as a sort of moral vindication for protestors. However, there has been little in the way of material assistance flowing into the Azerbaijani opposition movement. Compared to the denunciations by Western governments of the electoral outcome in Georgia one month later, for example, there was little condemnation of the presidential election in Azerbaijan in October 2003. The reasons for this are hard to pin down; some cite Western reluctance to criticize a regime that has been so cooperative in working with foreign investors.¹⁹ Opposition parties have been the main allies of the pro-democracy movement; indeed, many of the protestors are themselves party activists, and opposition parties often organize the demonstrations against authoritarian actions. Nevertheless, to the extent that opposition parties have been marginalized in the country, they do not represent particularly influential allies.

Media Freedom

Media freedom has seen a marked improvement over the past decade. In their annual *Nations in Transit* series, Freedom House has ranked the Azerbaijani media "Partly Free" over the past half decade. Official censorship was abolished in 1998, and Azerbaijan's entry into the

¹⁸ See Ross (2001) for a confirmation of the deleterious role that natural resources often play in the development of democracy.

¹⁹ See cit. 16.

Council of Europe in 2001 placed pressure on Aliev's to provide a more conducive atmosphere to independent journalists. Nevertheless, journalists continued to face a great deal of harassment up until the presidential election in 2003. In October 1999, the government ordered the closure of Sara Television and Radio because the network broadcasted an interview with a member of the opposition Azerbaijan Party, while ANS TV was shut down in July 2000 for broadcasting an interview with Chechen rebel leader Shamil Basayev (Lepisto, p. 8). Authorities regularly order the closure of news outlets on the basis of false charges, as is evident in the seizure of \$320 million worth of equipment from ABA TV on the pretense that the company had obtained it illegally. Azerbaijani law also allows officials to file libel suits against journalists, and many news outlets have had to spend resources defending themselves against these accusations in court (Cornell 2002, p. 87). Authorities also place pressure on businesses not to advertise in critical newspapers, thus placing additional burden on newspapers to raise profits through sales alone.²⁰ The level of harassment probably reached its highest point prior to and after the 2003 election, when dozens of journalists were beaten for covering the campaign and the post-election protests.²¹

Nevertheless, the range of opinion expressed in the print media is quite diverse. The largest opposition newspaper, *Yeni Musavat*, has a circulation of 14,000. Several other independent newspapers have circulations of around 5,000 (Cornell 2003, p. 112-13). Besides the continued harassment of journalists, however, two problems prevent the media in Azerbaijan from playing a more crucial role in fostering more intense pro-democratic sentiments. First, the few truly opposition newspapers that do exist generally do not have large readerships outside of the capital city, Baku. Second, television remains the most popular source of news throughout the country, particularly in the regions, and it is controlled almost exclusively by the government. The only two television stations that reach audiences throughout the entire country are government-operated (Cornell 2003, p. 113-14).

Resources/Networks

There is little evidence that the political contention that occurred in Azerbaijan from 1998-2003 resulted from the coordinated activities of interlinked groups other than political parties. Indeed, most of the acts of political contention were organized by opposition parties in response to their real or perceived exclusion from the political realm. Azerbaijan has not witnessed the birth of any student movement comparable in scope to the Iranian or Indonesian

²⁰ See "Azerbaijan: Media, the Presidential Elections and the Aftermath," *Human Rights Watch Briefing Paper*, August 4, 2004.

²¹ *Ibid.*

student movements, or the Kmara movement in Georgia discussed below. The country has witnessed the growth of a modest indigenous NGO sector. There are numerous NGOs working on a variety of women's and local issues, but the NGO sector's influence on the political process has been modest, and the public's awareness of their activities remains weak (Cornell 2003, p. 111). In 2002, 150 NGOs from around the country formed an organization, "Free Elections, Free Will," that was designed to ensure a fair electoral process and increase public awareness of political issues, but the group was prohibited from monitoring the national referendum in August of that year.²² Trade unions remain marginalized, and do not seem to have developed the capacity or the inclination to mobilize members to engage in political contention.

Political Opportunities in Georgia

Repression

Outright repression of opposition parties was far less prevalent in Georgia than in Azerbaijan during the period under consideration. The notable exception was in the province of Adjara, where the regional leader, Aslan Abashidze, ran an autocratic system in which parties other than his Revival Party were banned from campaigning.²³ The only people that were heavily targeted for their political affiliation are supporters of the former President Zviad Gamsakhurdia. Many of them were imprisoned and there have been occasional amnesties in which small groups of them have been released. The most frequently employed tool of repression by the central regime was electoral manipulation. The ruling Citizen's Union of Georgia (CUG) Party owed much of its large victory in the 1999 parliamentary elections to such tactics, and the same can be said concerning Shevardnadze's victory in the 2000 presidential election.²⁴ In addition, police often responded to demonstrations with force. They particularly targeted demonstrations featuring Gamsakhurdia supporters, refugees forced to leave their homes due to the violence in Abkhazia, and Communists.²⁵ Nevertheless, clashes between police and protestors were far less prevalent in Georgia than in Azerbaijan.

²² See "New Azerbaijani Coalition to Campaign for Free Elections," online at <http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/azerbaijan/hypermail/200207/0075.shtml>.

²³ After Saakashvili assumed the presidency, Abashidze adopted a recalcitrant posture towards the new administration, refusing to submit to the national constitution. He was brought down on May 5 by popular protests similar to the ones that brought down Shevardnadze. Political contention in Adjara was not excluded from this study, although no incidents were recorded during the time period that was covered.

²⁴ "Shevardnadze faces massive task," *BBC World News*, April 10, 2000, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/708409.stm>.

²⁵ See "Georgian Police Break Up Communist Demonstration," at <http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/georgia/hypermail/200103/0055.html> and "Police Forcibly Disperse Georgian Opposition Demo," at <http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/georgia/hypermail/200105/0059.html>.

Elite Fragmentation

There were clear divisions within the ruling elite by November 2003, as evidenced by the fact that several high ranking politicians were openly running against the CUG and had announced their plans to contest Shevardnadze in the 2004 presidential election. Some have argued that these divisions had been present since Gamsakhurdia's ouster in 1992, and that they only became apparent in the latter part of the 1990's (Stefes). Regardless of the origins of this elite disunity, most observers argue that one of the instigating factors that made it visible was Shevardnadze's promotion throughout 2000 and 2001 of a group of 'young reformers' within the CUG to the upper echelons of the party. Prominent among these was then-Parliamentary chairman Zurab Zhvania, whom Shevardnadze appointed deputy prime minister in 2001. Mikhail Saakashvili had been appointed justice minister the year before. While there is speculation as to Shevardnadze's motives for these promotions, the immediate effect was to create a split within the executive branch, as these young reformers clashed with the party's old guard (see Devdariani). As these young reformers grew disillusioned with the widespread corruption and overall direction of the party, they began leaving in droves and formed their own parties. Saakashvili formed the National Movement, while Zhvania formed the United Democrats party, which was later joined by the popular parliamentary speaker, Nino Burdzhanadze, herself a former high-ranking CUG leader. As Stefes notes (p. 13), by the time these figures fled from the CUG to form their own parties, they had acquired a substantial degree of political capital from their tenures in the executive branch. Not only did their resumes earn them legitimacy among the population, they also had acquired many political allies.

Influential Allies

Contentious actors in Georgia have enjoyed the support of more influential allies than their compatriots in Azerbaijan. Several of the disaffected elites that left the CUG to form their own opposition parties served as allies of protestors on several occasions. The most obvious of these, of course, was the social mobilization that occurred in the wake of the 2003 elections. Saakashvili of the National Movement and Burdzhanadze and Zhvania of the United Democrats set aside their ideological differences and presented a united front to the protestors. Prior to this most dramatic example, however, contentious actors benefited from the presence of elite allies on separate occasions. Following the widely unpopular attempt by the state to close the independent Rustavi-2 television station, Zhvania, a CUG member at the time, denounced the state's actions

on television as the ranks of protestors swelled. Zhvania used the occasion to resign from his position of parliamentary speaker.²⁶

At least with regards to the political contention that brought down the regime, Georgian protestors benefited from international influential allies, as well. Compared to the large-scale protests that had occurred in Azerbaijan just a month before, the events in Georgia earned an immense amount of media coverage around the world, almost all of it sympathetic. Part of the reason probably lies with the influence that the figures leading the protests held in the West. Zhvania had traveled to a number of Western countries as deputy prime minister, and he and Burdzhanadze were admired for the reforms that they had helped to push through parliament. Saakashvili is U.S.-educated, and reportedly has good links with figures such as George Soros. Indeed, Soros gave a \$500,000 grant to the student organization Kmara, one of the leading actors in the November 2003 protests.²⁷

Media Freedom

Georgian journalists face many of the same problems as their colleagues in Azerbaijan. Individual journalists and media outlets have been frequent targets of police raids. In July 2000, police officers beat a reporter from the newspaper *Eko Digest* who had recently published an article alleging corruption among high-ranking law enforcement officers.²⁸ In June 2002, the mayor of Balnisi physically assaulted a female journalist who had attempted to expose local electoral fraud. In September of that same year, police officers raided a local television in Zugdidi that had cooperated with the popular Rustavi-2 network on report alleging police corruption (Nodia, p. 273-74). The incident that garnered the most publicity and opposition was the aforementioned government attempt to shut down Rustavi-2 in 2001 on charges of tax evasion. In addition, Georgian newspapers face many of the same financial burdens as those in Azerbaijan, and circulation is quite low outside Tbilisi (Nodia, p. 274).

However, the content of print media is free from state control, and journalists have been quite active (and, at times, loose with the facts) in their efforts to uncover government corruption. Probably the biggest factor separating Georgia from Azerbaijan is the absence of a state monopoly of the television airwaves in Georgia, particularly important given that television is the primary source of political information in both countries. This became especially crucial in Georgia towards the end of the Shevardnadze tenure. Due to the regime's incessant criticism of

²⁶ "Shevardnadze tries to sit out storm," *BBC News*, online at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/1632193.stm>.

²⁷ Leigh Phillips, "Sugar daddies and revolutions: Georgia's revolution was something to celebrate. Does it matter that it was funded by a billionaire?", *New Statesman*, December 8, 2003.

²⁸ *Media Sustainability Index 2003: The Development of Sustainable Media in Europe and Eurasia*, published by the International Research and Exchanges Board.

Rustavi-2 (as well as the attack on it in 2001), and particularly the investigative program, “60 Minutes,” the station shifted its support to Saakashvili’s National Movement during the election campaign in 2003 and reported consistently on opposition rallies.²⁹ During the standoff between the announcement of the forged election results and Shevardnadze’s resignation, the network broadcast a message from the Kmara student movement and interviews with opposition figures.³⁰

Resources/Networks

Compared to the situation in Azerbaijan, the social movement sector has been able to rely upon relatively dense social networks and significant resources. To be sure, social networks are not equally prevalent across all sectors of society. For example, Georgian workers are still relatively unorganized, and the major workers’ association, the Association for Georgian Trade Unions, has neither led nor coordinated a strike (Jones, p. 61). However, Georgia’s relatively vigorous NGO-sector seems to have played an important role in spearheading numerous incidents of political contention. As Jones points out, several of the “young reformers” within the Shevardnadze administration cultivated close links with Georgian NGOs (p. 71). Among these was Zurab Zhvania, who played an instrumental role in several incidents of political contention. It is also well known that Saakashvili has close ties with the Kmara student movement, which was able to mobilize numerous collective actors throughout 2003.³¹ Another organization with close links to Saakashvili was the Liberty Institute, a human rights monitoring organization that was instrumental in mobilizing contention following the 2003 elections and that is funded by George Soros and USAID.³² The Young Lawyers Association provided free legal advice to Georgians and was instrumental in raising political consciousness throughout most of the post-Soviet period (Jones, p. 69). Thus, a diverse array of structures developed in Georgia from the late 1990’s onward that could be called upon to mobilize collective action.

²⁹ International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, “Georgia IHF Focus,” at http://www.ihf-hr.org/viewbinary/viewdocument.php?doc_id=5518.

³⁰ Reporters without Frontiers/IFEX, “Election Commission cancels accreditation of main independent television station,” November 14, 2003, at <http://www.ifex.org/en/content/view/full55035>.

³¹ Giorgi Lomsadze, “Amid Controversy, Georgian Student Protest Movement Grows,” June 6, 2003, at <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/rights/articles/eav061003.shtml>.

³² Ken Stier, “NGO Staffers Believe Attack in Georgia Linked to Government Corruption,” July 16, 2003, at <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/rights/articles/eav071602.shtml>.

**Discussion of Findings and Implications
for the Political Opportunities Framework**

The following truth table summarizes each country's ranking on the independent and dependent variables based on the foregoing case studies.

Variables	Azerbaijan	Georgia
Scope of Political Contention	High number of contentious actions	Few contentious actions
Success of Political Contention	Little to no success	High level of success
Repression	High	Medium
Media Freedom	Medium	High
Elite Fractionalization	Low	High
Influential Allies	Largely absent	Present
Resources/Networks	Poorly developed	Well developed
Grievances	Present	Present
Past History of Political Contention	Present	Present

As the findings indicate, Azerbaijan ranks lower than Georgia on each of the independent variables that the literature has identified as positively correlated with the outbreak of political contention, and higher on the one variable (repression) that is theorized to be negatively correlated with the outbreak of contention. The findings on the independent variable would lead one to predict that Azerbaijan had experienced more incidents of political contention than Georgia, but this is not the case. Azerbaijan witnessed a high level of contention despite the seemingly unfavorable circumstances. In Georgia, by contrast, the seemingly favorable structure of political opportunities facing potential challenges did not translate into a high level of political contention. In conclusion, the political opportunities approach does not seem to explain the scope of political contention in the two cases examined here.

Part of the puzzle may lie with the repression variable. Of all the independent variables specified by political opportunity theorists, the findings with regard to repression's impact on the outbreak of contention have been the most ambiguous. The findings here seem to validate findings by previous scholars of a curvilinear relationship between repression and political contention. Perhaps the level of repression in Azerbaijan had dipped below the threshold at which repression prevents political contention. Likewise, the relatively low level of repression in Georgia may have preempted political contention by making it feasible to address political demands through more institutionalized means, such as parliamentary debate.

On the other hand, the political opportunities framework holds up pretty well in terms of its ability to predict the *outcomes* of political contention. In Georgia, the independent variables seem to have influenced the outcomes of political contention according to the causal mechanisms specified in the theoretical literature. In Azerbaijan, the unfavorable structure of political opportunities, while not impeding the outbreak of political contention, militated against successful outcomes. In addition, the Georgian findings indicate that social networks may serve as more than an intermediate variable between the opening of political opportunities and political contention. To be sure, social networks responded to the opening of political opportunities, but they also created new opportunities by actively cultivating links with elites such as Saakashvili and Zhvania.

Another implication for the political opportunities framework that became apparent during the discussion of the cases is that more work needs to be done to tease out the causal impact of each of the explanatory variables. Particularly in the Georgian case, a great deal of interdependence seems to exist among several of the independent variables. For example, the "influential allies" variable interacted with the elite fractionalization variable, as several prominent disaffected elites served as allies to societal challengers. Similarly, the "influential allies" variable interacted with the "resources/networks" variable, as allies such as George Soros contributed resources to Georgian organizations, and networks developed linking elites such as Saakashvili to groups like Kmara. Unfortunately, this study was not able to draw any concrete conclusions regarding this matter, as the number of independent variables exceeds the number of cases (see King, Keohane, and Verba for a discussion of the limitations of this approach). Future studies need to be done in which certain of the independent variables posited here were present, while others were absent. Only then will we be able to predict with any certainty the particular combinations of political opportunities that lead to successful political contention.

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