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# The Politics of Georgia

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## Introduction

Georgia stands at a critical crossroads in both geographic and political terms. Nestled at the intersection of Europe and Asia, the nation's striking cultural mosaic is the product of centuries of encounter, exchange, and conflict. This confluence of history, culture, and politics has rendered Georgia's political landscape uniquely complex, where ancient traditions and modern aspirations constantly intermingle. As a result, understanding the politics of Georgia requires an appreciation for the forces that have shaped, and continue to shape, this small but pivotal country.

Since regaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Georgia has embarked on an ambitious project to build a stable, democratic political system. The journey, however, has been far from linear. Early years of independence were fraught with ethnic strife, civil war, and political instability, as the new state struggled to assert its sovereignty while reconciling diverse interests within its borders. Over time, through constitutional reforms and political bargaining, Georgia strove to establish the institutions foundational to a parliamentary republic—while remaining deeply influenced by its turbulent past.

At the heart of modern Georgian politics is an evolving constitutional framework, rooted in the separation of powers and designed to protect democratic governance. The balance among the presidency, the government, the parliament, and the judiciary has shifted with constitutional amendments, reflecting the changing priorities, pressures, and aspirations of the Georgian people. Meanwhile, the political arena has been dominated by fierce competition between powerful parties, charismatic leaders, and influential elites, frequently resulting in polarization and public disillusionment.

Key challenges have tested Georgia's democratic credentials. Issues such as the lingering influence of oligarchs, questions over judicial independence, the state of media freedom, and disputes over electoral fairness have all periodically strained both the political system and the public's trust. At the same time, persistent conflicts in breakaway regions—Abkhazia and South Ossetia—have imposed profound constraints on Georgia's territorial integrity and national unity, underscoring the importance of geopolitics in domestic affairs.

Georgia's foreign policy continues to be shaped by its aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration and the ever-present reality of its relationship with Russia. The pursuit of closer ties with the European Union and NATO has served both as a beacon for reform and as a source of internal and external contention. As the country navigates its place in an increasingly polarized and uncertain region, the choices made by its political leaders—and the resilience of its institutions—will be critical in determining Georgia's

future as an independent, democratic nation.

This book seeks to provide a comprehensive guide to the politics and political system of Georgia, examining the interplay of historical legacies, institutional arrangements, prominent actors, and contemporary challenges. By tracing Georgia's journey from medieval kingdom to modern parliamentary state, and by exploring the forces animating its public life today, it aims to offer readers both context and clarity on one of the region's most fascinating and consequential polities.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: The Land and People of Georgia: Geography and Society**

Georgia, or Sakartvelo as it is known to its inhabitants, is a country of remarkable geographical diversity packed into a relatively small area of 69,700 square kilometers. Situated in the Caucasus region, at the eastern end of the Black Sea, it serves as a natural bridge between Eastern Europe and Western Asia. This strategic location has profoundly influenced its history, culture, and, inevitably, its politics, making it a historical crossroads for empires and a meeting point for diverse civilizations.

The country's landscape is dramatically shaped by mountains, which cover a significant portion of its territory. To the north lies the formidable Greater Caucasus Mountain Range, forming a natural barrier with Russia. These mountains boast some of the highest peaks in Europe, including Mount Shkhara, the highest point in Georgia at 5,193 meters, Mount Janga, and Mount Kazbek. Their imposing presence has historically provided both protection and isolation for the communities nestled in their valleys.

To the south, the Lesser Caucasus range runs parallel to the borders with Turkey and Armenia. These mountain ranges, connected by the Likhi (Surami) Range in the center of the country, create natural divisions that have contributed to distinct regional identities and even linguistic variations. Traveling through Georgia, one quickly observes how the terrain dictates settlement patterns and influences the rhythm of life. Population density is generally higher in the lower elevations and along the coast.

Beyond the mountains, Georgia's geography includes fertile lowlands and plateaus. The Kolkhida Lowland in the west, bordering the Black Sea, is characterized by a humid subtropical climate and is historically significant. Moving eastward, the climate becomes more continental, with the Kartli Plain and the Iori and Shirak plateaus dominating the landscape. This variation in topography and proximity to large bodies of water results in a diverse range of microclimates across the country.

Georgia is crisscrossed by numerous rivers, nearly 25,000 in total, fed by mountain snowmelt, glaciers, springs, and rainfall. These waterways are vital for agriculture, hydroelectric power generation, and even tourism, with some rivers popular for rafting. The two major river systems drain into either the Black Sea or the Caspian Sea. The Mtkvari (Kura) River is the longest, flowing from Turkey through eastern Georgia and into Azerbaijan before reaching the Caspian Sea. In the west, the Rioni River is a significant waterway flowing into the Black Sea.

The country's climate is influenced by its location, with the Greater Caucasus shielding it from cold northern air and the Black Sea providing warm, moist air to the west. This creates a humid subtropical climate in western Georgia, with high precipitation, particularly in autumn and winter. The eastern part of the country experiences a range from moderately humid to dry subtropical climates, with less rainfall. Altitude also plays a significant role, with distinct climatic zones ranging from subtropical lowlands to areas of permanent snow and ice in the highest mountains. This climatic variety supports a wide range of flora and fauna, contributing to Georgia's rich biodiversity.

While breathtakingly beautiful, Georgia's mountainous terrain also presents challenges. Earthquakes and landslides are natural hazards that can impact communities, particularly in mountainous regions. The ruggedness can also isolate mountain villages, especially during winter months, affecting infrastructure and transportation.

Georgia is blessed with a variety of natural resources. Its fertile soil and favorable climate are conducive to agriculture, supporting a diverse range of crops including grapes, citrus fruits, nuts, vegetables, and grains. Georgia is particularly renowned as one of the oldest wine-producing regions in the world. Beyond agriculture, the country has deposits of minerals such as manganese, copper, coal, and arsenic, as well as oil and natural gas resources. Water resources are also abundant, used for both drinking water and hydroelectric power.

The population of Georgia is estimated to be around 3.7 million. The majority of the population are ethnic Georgians, who identify themselves as Kartveli. The Georgian language is the official language and is a member of the unique Kartvelian language family, with its own ancient alphabet. While Georgian is the dominant language, various minority languages are spoken, reflecting the country's ethnic diversity.

Significant ethnic minority groups include Azerbaijanis, Armenians, and Russians. Other smaller communities include Ossetians, Greeks, Abkhazians, and others. This ethnic mosaic is a product of centuries of migration and interaction in the Caucasus region. While ethnic Georgians constitute the majority, these minority groups have their own distinct languages and cultural traditions, contributing to the overall richness of Georgian society.

The population is increasingly urbanized, with over half residing in cities. Tbilisi, the capital and largest city, is a vibrant hub located in eastern Georgia and is home to over a third of the country's population. Other major cities include Batumi, a key port city on the Black Sea, Kutaisi in the west, and Rustavi. These urban centers serve as economic, cultural, and political focal points.

Despite its rich resources and cultural heritage, Georgia faces demographic

challenges, including a declining birth rate and emigration, particularly among young people. The population is also aging. These trends have implications for the labor force and social structures.

The dominant religion in Georgia is Orthodox Christianity, with the Georgian Orthodox Church holding significant cultural and social influence. There are also Muslim, Armenian Apostolic, Catholic, and Jewish communities within the country. Religious freedom is generally respected, although the historical prominence of the Orthodox Church plays a visible role in public life.

In essence, Georgia's land and people are deeply intertwined. The mountainous terrain, fertile valleys, and vital waterways have shaped settlement patterns, economic activities, and even cultural identities. The diverse ethnic and linguistic makeup of the population adds layers of complexity to the social fabric. Understanding this geographical and societal foundation is crucial to appreciating the political dynamics that have unfolded and continue to evolve in Georgia.

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