Against all odds: aiding political parties in Georgia and Ukraine

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CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Among the small number of those who have written about the subject, there is a realization that party assistance rarely produces lasting and tangible effects. This is confirmed in the cases of Georgia and Ukraine: the state of party development in these two former Soviet republics suggests that party assistance over the course of roughly fifteen years of uninterrupted work has outright failed to achieve its primary objective of contributing to the development of a set of more stable and more democratic parties. The degree of effectiveness of party assistance is a function of the adequacy of the input of assistance plus the permissiveness of conditions on the recipient-side of assistance, ie. a combination of the international and the domestic sides to the assistance. The failure to generate desired effects in party assistance, accordingly, is explained from a combination of shortcomings in the input of assistance and domestic constraints on the reception of assistance. This thesis has not only pointed to the reasons why party assistance has been ineffective in Georgia and Ukraine; the account that is offered also carries distinct implications for other cases. The thesis has proposed a new way of viewing party assistance - as a type of norm promotion - and demonstrated that insights on party assistance can be gained by drawing from literature on norm diffusion. The thesis has besides emphasized the weight of domestic factors for the effectiveness of party assistance, and has explicated how these factors invalidate assistance. By doing so, the thesis presents the most comprehensive and theoretically informed account of the problems with political party assistance in particular cases to date. It has added substantial new insights, summarized below, for our understanding of why party assistance so often fails to deliver.

Regarding the supply-side of party assistance, it has been found beneficial to view the assistance as a type of norm promotion. From a range of standard-setting documents issued by the funding and implementing institutions of party assistance, three elements can be deduced that constitute the core of the ‘party assistance norm’: parties should have stable and broad-based organizational structures; parties should advocate coherent and recognizable programs; and power within parties should be dispersed so that parties themselves are democratically governed organizations. The party assistance norm informs the design of most party assistance programs by the major providers of assistance. One reason to lower expectations about the effectiveness of party assistance is that conditions that are generally seen as conducive to the diffusion of norms are largely absent in relation
to party assistance. First, the party assistance norm lacks robustness because there are few explicit references to the norm, because its promotion falls short of intensity and consistency, and because it does not contain an obvious ethical dimension. Second, the relationship between providers and recipients of assistance is relatively loose and distant, while the misfit between the international party assistance norm and local norms tends to be excessively large. Third, recipients have insufficient incentives to comply with the norm against, in many cases, concrete incentives not to comply. Besides, the degree of success of party assistance is negatively affected by the requirement for providers of assistance to adhere to ‘standards of good practice’ which oblige them, whether individually or in conjunction with other providers from the same country, to work with an inclusive, representative set of democratic and at the same time viable parties. While providers of assistance have sometimes opted to work with only a very limited number of parties, more often the requirement of inclusiveness in party selection has led them to work with a relatively large number of parties. As a consequence, the amount of assistance for individual parties was decreased, and, for want of a range of more suitable parties, insignificant, unsustainable, or undemocratic parties were invited to participate in programs.

Since party assistance across the world is to a considerable degree characterized by a ‘standard method’, the arguments about the shortcomings of the input of party assistance - especially those regarding the party assistance norm - can be expected to apply to many cases. In other words, the arguments may provide hints as to the general ineffectiveness of party assistance that has been observed in scholarly literature. With respect to the particular ineffectiveness of party assistance in the cases of Georgia and Ukraine, however, the presence of domestic constraints on the development of stable and democratic parties constitutes a sufficient explanation of why assistance failed. Largely irrespective of the form or quality of the input of assistance, party assistance in these two states has been a priori invalidated due to existing domestic constraints on party development. The simplest reason for this is that most of the relevant parties that have been assisted during the decade that has been investigated here, have either disappeared or lost relevance. The remarkable degree of turnover of relevant political parties has in part been fed by the excessively powerful position of party leaders who tended to dispose of their parties at will and without giving much notice to other possible stakeholders within their parties. Often, these leaders proved most reluctant to reform. A second explanation for the weak institutionalization of parties - and relatedly, their often rapid and casual disintegration - hinges on the limited leverage that parties had over political
decision-making. The limited leverage resulted in large measure from institutional arrangements, particularly regarding executive-legislative relations and electoral legislation. Since parties were relatively inconsequential organizations, political party ‘entrepreneurs’ had insufficient incentives to invest in the creation and subsequent development of parties.

The second reason why party assistance has been invalidated by domestic constraints is that a large share of the more relevant parties that received assistance were not interested in reforming in accordance with the proposals of the providers of assistance. The operation of these parties was driven by incentives that were incompatible with the values that party assistance sought to infuse into party politics in Georgia and Ukraine. Put differently, these parties were not inclined to transform into the type of stable and democratic forces that were envisaged to constitute the core of a future stable party system in a democratic political system. This conclusion most obviously concerns parties that were created at the instigation of the Kuchma regime and consecutive semi-authoritarian regimes in Georgia. Besides secondary purposes such as deterring contenders and binding elites, the ultimate purpose of these parties was to contribute to ensure regime survival. In addition to the regime-initiated parties, a number of parties, especially in Ukraine, were primarily interested in gaining office or proximity to office and then reaping the (economic) benefits associated with holding office. Even if parties were not purely vote-seeking or office-seeking vehicles, did they often resist meaningful reform. Especially if party reform would imply the dispersion of power within the party, dominant party leaders had a clear interest in blocking reform. Taken together, in both countries the number of relevant parties which were credibly ready to reform into stable and democratic forces was very limited.

Defining outcomes of party politics in Georgia and Ukraine for most of the post-communist period were a large degree of volatility and the impact on party politics of a less-than-democratic political regime setting. Party assistance by virtue of its mandate was not in the position to counter two of the key enabling conditions of these outcomes - institutional arrangements and the less-than-democratic political regime setting. At the same time, assistance could in theory have worked toward countering the weak institutionalization of parties, the excessively strong position of leaders, and, by withholding assistance from ‘undemocratic’ parties, the impact of semi-authoritarianism on party politics. The extent of these domestic constraints on party development, however, invalidated party assistance in the form in which it was implemented. Consequently, the domestic constraints have continued to single-
handedly spoil the chances of the development of stable and democratic parties. Party assistance was unable to intervene.

One can think of two ways in which party assistance could have achieved more. First, party assistance could have broken free from the standard of good practice to provide assistance to a representative, inclusive set of parties and, instead, have concentrated efforts on one or a few parties. In a similar vein, providers of assistance could have decided to work in a more limited number of countries in order to increase the amount of assistance per country. Second, party assistance may have had more effect if it would have been coupled with types of democracy assistance aimed at eliminating (some of) the domestic constraints on the development of stable and democratic parties. Specifically, it could have been attempted to convince decision-makers to adopt forms of executive-legislative relations and electoral legislation, when these were not in place, that generally go together with relatively strong party development - in particular, a political system with no or weak presidential power, and some variant of a PR electoral system.

The conclusion about the weight of domestic factors in the failure of party assistance in Georgia and Ukraine begs the question whether party assistance in its conventional form should at all be pursued in conditions of fluid party politics and a less-than-democratic political regime context. The question is particularly pertinent in relation to FSU states where one or both of these two conditions are typically present and which in addition share with Georgia and Ukraine a great degree of political and cultural legacy. Two decades after the monopoly of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was lifted, the party 'systems' in FSU states can hardly still be thought of as 'transitional', or the parties that are available in these countries as 'proto-parties', which in time will transform into or replaced by stronger and more durable democratic forces: by now, as multi-party politics enters its third decade, the party systems in the FSU should be taken for what they are. In the FSU, donors and providers of assistance are aware of the difficulties that complicate party assistance. No assistance is provided in the closed autocracies of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. In Kazakhstan and Russia, party assistance to a large degree has in recent years been quietly suspended in light of adverse (political) conditions for the implementation of party assistance. Over the course of the decade during which party assistance programs were implemented in Russia, the programs ‘produced no major positive effects’ (Carothers 2006a: 168). As in Georgia and Ukraine, ‘structural factors overwhelmed and undermined the Western party aid’, with the foremost of these structural factors being ‘the profoundly unfavorable context for party development’ (idem: 170). Party assistance by NDI in Tajikistan was halted in
2008 after the government refused registration to NDI and harassed its staff members (NDI 2008c: 2). To avoid suppression by the government, most program components of assistance to Belarusian parties are carried out in neighboring Ukraine and Poland. Assessments of party assistance in Armenia, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan note the absence of serious impact from assistance programs. With respect to party assistance in Armenia, it has been plainly commented that ‘the political environment in Armenia is not conducive to political party building assistance’ (Nelson and Katulis 2005: 27) and that ‘[t]he assessment found little impact from donor assistance to political parties. Parties characterized USAID-funded assistance as well-meaning but better suited for a more democratic context. The assessment team agrees and believes that more of the same type of assistance is unlikely to provide meaningful results’ (idem: vii). It has been advised to scale back party assistance in Georgia primarily because ‘limited interest exists within the major political parties to transform themselves into well-structured democratic organizations presenting the public with credible, differentiated policy platforms’ (Black et al. 2001: iii). An evaluation of U.S. party assistance in Kyrgyzstan points out that institutional arrangements and the political context have long blocked opportunities for successful party assistance (USAID 2007: x). An earlier evaluation of party assistance by NDI in Kyrgyzstan equally saw little effect from the assistance and proposed that NDI scale back its party assistance program for two years (Roberts 2001: 30). Apparently disregarding the evaluations, party assistance in Armenia, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan has not been suspended, while the reasons to suspend party assistance in Kazakhstan and Russia have arguably been no less applicable to these countries. The skepticism about the purpose of party assistance in Armenia particularly may with good reason have been extended to most other former Soviet republics. It is, in brief, not evident that there has been a sufficient justification to continue party assistance in the region.

When party assistance was launched in the post-communist states, an implicit assumption was that there was a genuine interest in those countries in democratization, and a genuine interest among recipient parties to transform into truly representative and democratic forces. Recipient parties were seen as constituents of a stable and democratic party system that would crystallize in the not too distant future as the transition to democracy would progress into consolidation. In much of the post-communist world as well as in many other countries outside the post-communist world where party assistance is still carried out, however, regimes are not in a state of transition toward democracy, and it is doubtful that most parties which receive assistance are really interested in internal
reform. As the third wave of democratization has ground to a halt, most previously third wave states are stuck in a political gray zone: they are neither liberal democracies nor closed autocracies (Diamond 2002; Howard and Roessler 2006), and most are neither becoming significantly more democratic nor are they moving backward (Carothers 2009). Whether in Africa (Basedau and Stroh 2008), South East Asia (Ufen 2007), or Latin America (Sanchez 2008b), political parties in these countries are characterized by weak institutionalization, as parties have been in Georgia and Ukraine. In the majority of ‘gray zone’ countries with weakly institutionalized parties, international actors are involved in providing assistance to parties. They have in recent years moved out of Central and Eastern Europe, the region with most of the successful transitions to liberal democracy in the past two decades. Now that those ‘easy’ cases of transition have been completed, providers overwhelmingly work in countries with less sanguine prospects for democratization and stable party development. The conditions which have made party assistance in Georgia and Ukraine so difficult are therefore mutatis mutandis present in many other places where party assistance is carried out. The immediate prospects of political party assistance, consequently, are not bright. Confronted with adverse conditions for party assistance in so many recipient countries, the purpose and methods of assistance are due for reconsideration.