

## DECENTRALIZATION OR CENTRALIZATION - THE ASYMMETRY OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT IN GEORGIA

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### ABSTRACT

The effective implementation of state governance is directly proportional to the proper and efficient functioning of local self-government. The territorial division of a state is usually based on historical and geographical foundations, although under contemporary conditions other factors may also influence the alteration of administrative borders. Georgia is a small country, constitutionally a unitary state, yet with three autonomous entities which, on several occasions, have posed threats to the unity of Georgian statehood. Moreover, today Georgia's temporarily lost territories - the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia and the Autonomous Region of Ossetia - continue to present serious challenges for the country. Against this backdrop, Georgia constantly faces a critical question: should it lean toward full decentralization, which implies granting extensive powers to local self-governments, or toward strict centralization, since a small, unitary country may not require wide distribution of power among local units?

The article "Decentralization or Centralization - The Asymmetry of Local Self-Government in Georgia" focuses on this fundamental dilemma confronting the system of public administration in modern Georgia: whether to advance decentralization mechanisms or to maintain a strong centralized governance model that could help overcome the asymmetry currently evident in local self-governments. The research draws on both historical- political experience and the existing legislative framework and institutional practice. Special emphasis is placed on the problem of asymmetry, expressed in the unequal capacities of local self- governments in terms of financial, administrative, and political resources. It is evident that the capabilities of self-governing units vary significantly across Georgian regions: in some cases municipalities remain heavily dependent on the central government, while in others they are able to make relatively autonomous decisions. This asymmetry complicates the establishment of a unified and equitable development strategy.

**KEYWORDS:** decentralization, centralization, local self-government, governance asymmetry, regional development, public administration

### Introduction

The governance of a state is a complex and multifaceted political process that influences, on the one hand, both domestic and foreign policy and, on the other, societal development and the well-being of its citizens. The complexity of governance implies the interdependent functioning of systemic and hierarchical levels, along with the regulation and management of external processes. Therefore, establishing a viable model of public governance is of utmost importance, as it enables the effective functioning of complex administrative systems, ultimately providing the foundation for a strong state. One of the main defining features of a state is its territory. Territory determines much for a state: it is, above all, an indispensable parameter since every state exists within a certain geographical dimension where its legal jurisdiction applies. Equally important is the rational and functional territorial division, which should simplify and render more flexible the processes of governance.

According to territorial organization, states can be unitary (simple) or federal (complex). In both types, a hierarchical relationship exists between central and local authorities. Even in unitary states, local self-government plays a significant role. The origins of local self-government can be traced back to ancient Greece (the polis system) and Rome (municipal units), where citizens played a central role in managing

local affairs. In medieval Europe, urban self-governance emerged (e.g., the Hanseatic League, Italian city-states such as Florence and Venice). Town councils and guilds administered local governance alongside feudal authority. The idea of self-government was further reinforced during the Enlightenment. Thinkers such as Johannes Althusius and Montesquieu considered local freedoms as the necessary foundation of state-level freedom. In Europe, local self-government became institutionalized in the 19th century. Following the French Revolution, communes and departments were organized on self-government principles. In Germany, the Prussian Municipal Law of 1808 became one of the first modern models of local self-government. In England, the system of local councils and town halls, which had developed since the Middle Ages, achieved full juridical- political institutionalization in the 19th century. In the United States, the system of local self-government (town meetings, county governments) was strengthened after independence through the 1787 Constitution, although its roots reach back to the colonial era. In the 20th century, self-government became a fundamental principle of democratic states. The 1949 Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany granted local self- government constitutional status. More broadly, after World War II, European countries witnessed a growing trend toward strengthening local democracy. The 1985 European Charter of Local Self-Government (Council of Europe) became an unprecedented international standard for the functioning of modern local self-governments.

As for Georgia, its territorial division reflects historical developments. Looking back at early state formations (Diaokhi, Colchis, Egrisi, Iberia), different forms of territorial division can be observed depending on the political status of the state at the time. In periods of independence, territorial organization was determined by the monarch's unilateral decisions, while in times of conquest, foreign rulers introduced their own systems (e.g., satrapies). A classical form of Georgian territorial division was the Eristavi (duchy), which in modern terms can be regarded as a local self-governing unit. At various stages in Georgian history, duchies posed a threat of fragmentation to statehood, as some dukes proclaimed themselves petty kings within their domains. These historical lessons suggest that Georgia has experienced severe challenges with decentralization, which under current conditions encourages a cautious and balanced approach. Modern research confirms that local self-government is one of the essential conditions for the existence of democratic order. It is the institution through which residents of a particular territorial unit independently regulate matters of local importance, within the framework of the law and without infringing upon state interests. On the one hand, it brings governance closer to citizens and enables them to protect their rights and freedoms; on the other, it provides practical governance experience and fosters civic responsibility. Thus, the essence of local self-government is linked to citizens' right to participate in solving issues that directly affect their daily lives, such as infrastructure development, social services, education, and local budgeting. Local self-government rests on several principles: self-organization and self-determination of the population, independent management of local resources, and democratic participation - that is, direct citizen involvement in decision-making. Equally important is maintaining a balance of accountability to the central government. In the context of globalization and decentralization, local self-government is often viewed as a "school of democracy," where citizens directly learn and practice participation, responsibility, and cooperation, becoming active subjects of these processes. Today, in both developed and developing countries, local governance is considered not only an administrative mechanism but also a social and political value.

#### 1. Local Self-Government in Georgia

Local self-government in Georgia is one of the key components of the country's democratic system. It is defined as a constitutional and legal mechanism that ensures citizens' participation in the resolution of public affairs of local significance. However, given Georgia's political and historical experience, the development of the institution of local self-government has been characterized by gradualism, systemic difficulties, and a growing tendency toward centralization. [13]

The first administrative division of a unified Georgian kingdom began at the turn of the 4th-3rd centuries BC. The first king of Iberia, Pharnavaz, divided the country into a central royal seat (Mtskheta) and eight

duchies, appointing dukes (Eristavis) as governors. This structure was maintained later, and in the 6th-8th centuries the number of duchies increased. In later periods, as in many European countries, forms of urban self-government also emerged in Georgia, though in somewhat different ways. For example, during the Arab emirate's rule in the 8th-11th centuries, the self-government of merchants and craftsmen developed in Tbilisi, headed by the "Elders of Tbilisi." Their functions included guarding the city gates, providing food supplies, and administering justice.

After 1051, for several decades, Tbilisi effectively functioned as a "city-republic," governed by a council of twelve men, each of whom took turns ruling the city for one month. Such a temporary governor was called "Prince of the City." In 1122, when King David the Builder reconquered Tbilisi, all Georgian cities came under the king's rule. However, even within the centralized feudal monarchy, the capital retained a degree of autonomy and self-government-large cities were governed by "Amirt-Amirs," while smaller ones were governed by "Amirs." [1]

Thus, in medieval Georgia we can observe trends similar to Europe, moving toward the establishment of classical forms of local self-government. Unfortunately, in the following centuries, repeated foreign invasions, the collapse of the unified Georgian state, and socio-political decline halted these processes. [8]

In the 19th century, with Georgian kingdoms and principalities incorporated into the Russian Empire, the Russian administrative model was introduced to Georgia. In 1840, the Caucasus was divided into governorates, further subdivided into eleven districts (Uyezds). Within the Tbilisi, Gori, and Telavi districts, special regions were created for Tush, Pshav-Khevsur, Highland, and Ossetian populations.

City governance was handled by the police, but in Tbilisi, under the 1840 charter, the embryo of municipal self-government was created-a council consisting of the mayor (elected by all residents) and six assessors (two each elected by landowners, merchants, and craftsmen according to estate-based representation). However, this body had only limited authority.

In 1846, the Caucasus was divided into five governorates, with Georgian lands falling under the Tbilisi and Kutaisi governorates. In areas with large national or religious minorities, instead of districts, "okrugs" were established, representing special subdivisions within governorates. Based on the 1870 City Charter (revised in 1892), a municipal system was introduced, whereby council members and mayors were elected. This system was gradually extended to ten cities.

Table 1: Introduction of Municipal Self-Government in Georgian Cities

City	Year of Introduction	City	Year of Introduction
Tbilisi	1874	Telavi	1892
Kutaisi	1875	Sighnaghi	1892
Gori	1876	Akhalkalaki	1892
Akhalsikhe	1876	Ozurgeti	1892
Poti	1882	Sokhumi	1892
Batumi	1888		

During the brief existence of the Democratic Republic of Georgia, the radical transformation of the Russian- imposed system of local government did not take place. The model in force continued to function under state supervision, combining elements of self-government with those of state administration.

Thus, the short overview of the historical development of local self-government in Georgia demonstrates that, unfortunately, there is no established, continuous national tradition in this sphere. The medieval

Georgian model might have been transformed and developed further, were it not for Russian occupation and seventy years of imperial and later Soviet rule. Therefore, this historical discontinuity is considered one of the main reasons for the asymmetry in Georgia's contemporary local self-government.

## 2. Legal Development of Local Self-Government Regulations from Independence to the Present - Problems and Challenges

The programmatic document intended to play a decisive role in the democratization of local self-government was the Constitution adopted by the Constituent Assembly on 21 February 1921. Its Chapter contained provisions concerning the institution of local self-government.

With the establishment of Soviet power, Georgia's territorial arrangement changed. Three autonomies were created: the Abkhazian and Adjara Autonomous Republics and the South Ossetian Autonomous District. In 1930, Georgia was further divided into smaller administrative units-districts (raions). By the time of the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, Georgia had 69 districts, while four additional towns (Chiatura, Tkibuli, Tskaltubo, and Gagra) were considered subordinate to the center but did not officially have district status. Separately, the cities of Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Sokhumi, Batumi, Gori, Poti, Zugdidi, and Tqvarcheli were recognized as distinct units.

The persistence of such a system for decades left its mark on the mentality of both the population and the political elite. After independence, this legacy significantly impeded the establishment of genuine local self- government. [4]

On 30 April 1991, direct elections were held for councils in almost all administrative-territorial units of Georgia, including villages, communities, towns, and cities subordinated to districts. These councils then elected district and republican-level city councils through a multi-tiered system. The vertical chain of authority remained: heads of district and republican-level executive bodies, the prefects, were appointed by the president of the republic. In 1992, the institution of prefects was abolished and replaced with district administrations (Gamageoba). In some cities, mayors were introduced, with powers exceeding those of district heads. In April 1994, when their legally defined mandates expired, local councils ceased functioning altogether, creating an institutional vacuum in local governance and paving the way for a temporary centralized management system.

Between 1994 and 1996, nine large regional groupings (Mkhare) were created, roughly corresponding to Georgia's historical and geographical provinces. However, these were not units of self-government. Each was overseen by a presidential envoy, whose activities were not legally regulated.

On 16 October 1997, Parliament adopted the Law "On Local Self-Government and Governance," drafted by a parliamentary inter-factional group. Based on this law, elections held in 1998 established a two-tier system: 1,004 self-governing units at the village, community, small town, and city levels (largely based on the old Soviet boundaries), represented at the district level by proportional councils. In reality, however, through centrally appointed governors and district heads, the vertical chain of command remained intact.

Significant changes to this Soviet-inherited territorial organization were not made until 2006.

On 9 January 2006, a new Organic Law "On Local Self-Government" entered into force. Based on it, following that year's local elections, the lower-level units (villages, communities, small towns, cities) were abolished, and former Soviet districts were reorganized into municipalities, which became the sole units of both territorial and self-governmental organization. [5]

The reform was justified on the grounds of inefficiency of the smaller units in providing public services, although they had never been given adequate financial resources. Instead of the declared goals of consolidation, financial sustainability, and improved services, the municipalities became entirely dependent on the central government-administratively, politically, and financially.

To address the negative effects of distancing government from citizens, the institution of local representatives was introduced at the level of former communities within municipalities. However, it soon became clear that this mechanism failed to meet its declared objectives, as representatives were accountable to the district head (Gamagebeli) rather than to the population, and lacked real instruments (funds and human resources) to resolve local issues.



On 29 May 2002, Georgia signed the important international document, the European Charter of Local Self- Government, adopted by the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers in 1985. The Georgian Parliament ratified the Charter on 26 October 2004, and it entered into force on 1 April 2005. Of the 14 core provisions of the Charter, Georgia accepted 13, as well as 10 of the additional provisions. In effect, Georgia undertook to comply with most of the Charter's requirements. Despite some reservations, in light of the country's European integration process, the Charter remains a crucial guiding framework for the development of local self- government. [6]

When joining the Charter, the government made a reservation that until Georgia's full jurisdiction is restored, it would not assume responsibility for fulfilling the Charter's obligations in the occupied territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. [2]

### 3. The New 2014 Organic Law on Local Self-Government and the Current Reality

In recent years, the necessity of decentralization reform of state power in Georgia has been actively discussed. Moreover, on 1 March 2013, the Government of Georgia approved the document "Basic Principles of Decentralization and Development of Self-Government for 2013-2014", which established that "the fundamental principle of the reform is the maximum activation of citizens and their direct involvement in the management process."

On 5 February 2014, the Parliament of Georgia adopted a new Organic Law - the Local Self-Government Code. Taking into account the principles of decentralization, subsidiarity, and management efficiency, the Code created the legislative foundation for establishing an effective governance system. It fully reflects the spirit of the European Charter of Local Self-Government and incorporates all of its provisions, including those to which Georgia had not yet formally acceded.

The new law clearly delineated the competences between different levels of government. Heads of all municipalities - mayors and governors - became elected officials. Additionally, seven more cities were granted the status of self-governing cities. Through its transitional provisions, the Code also planned the further refinement of the reformed system in terms of institutional development, financial-economic sustainability, and managerial efficiency, including fiscal decentralization and regulation of property-related issues. [7]

In Georgia, a local self-governing unit is called a municipality, which is an independent legal entity of public law. The Code distinguishes between two types of municipalities:

- A self-governing city - a single settlement with administrative boundaries;
- A self-governing community (temi) - a combination of several settlements with defined administrative boundaries and an administrative center.

According to Article 2 of the Code, a self-governing unit must have elected representative and executive bodies of local self-government, as well as its own property, budget, and revenues.

Under the Constitution of Georgia, specifically Chapter Nine, which regulates local self-government, the powers of state authorities and local self-governing units are clearly separated:

"A self-governing unit shall be entitled, in compliance with legislation, to adopt decisions on its own initiative regarding all matters which are not assigned by law to the exclusive competence of the state authorities or an autonomous republic and which are not excluded from the competence of local self-government."

A self-governing unit exercises its competences independently and under its own responsibility, within the framework of Georgian legislation. The powers defined by organic law are complete and exclusive. Delegation of state powers to local self-governing units may be carried out on the basis of legislation or agreement, accompanied by the transfer of appropriate material and financial resources.

The state exercises legal supervision over the activities of local self-governing units. Supervision for the purpose of assessing the expediency of decisions is permitted only with respect to decisions adopted in the exercise of delegated powers. Such supervision must be carried out according to the procedure established by organic law and in line with the principle of proportionality. [Constitution, Article 75]

A self-governing unit possesses its own property and finances. It independently determines its organizational structure in accordance with the Organic Law and civil service legislation, and makes personnel decisions autonomously. To exercise its competences, a self-governing unit may, in

accordance with the Organic Law, cooperate with other municipalities and participate in associations of municipalities.

State authorities make decisions on issues related to local self-government only after consultations with the relevant municipalities, and the procedure for holding such consultations is defined by the Organic Law. Any decision adopted by a local self-government body within its competences is binding for execution within the territory of that municipality. [Constitution, Article 76]

Thus, it was only after Georgia's accession to the European Charter of Local Self-Government that it became possible to adopt a comprehensive legal framework - the Organic Law and its subordinate legislative acts. These acts enabled the state to operate in an organized manner in its relations with local self-governments and in the division of powers. It is particularly important that legislation concerning local self-government is adapted to a decentralized model of governance, where each competence and scope of action is clearly defined. However, due to the aforementioned historical dilemmas, asymmetry among municipalities still persists in practice. The precise formulation and identification of this asymmetry will be presented in the following section.

## 2. Findings and Recommendations

A thorough analysis of the legal acts allows us to state confidently that the existing legislative framework in Georgia largely corresponds to and derives from international standards. However, a number of issues create asymmetry in local self-government, which complicates and hinders the equal development of municipalities.

First, it is necessary to clarify the concept of asymmetry in governance. Governance asymmetry refers to a situation in which structures, regions, or units within a single system possess different competences, resources, or status. In other words, governance is not uniform but unequal and diverse. Asymmetrical governance is a model characterized by granting greater powers to some units than to others. This is reflected in the unequal distribution of resources and finances, which contradicts Article 75(4) of the Constitution. Asymmetry is also expressed in differing forms of relations with the central government.

Different types of asymmetry may be identified:

- Legal-political asymmetry - when units have differing legal status. For example, the capital city of Tbilisi is governed under a separate Organic Law, while all other municipalities are subject to the Local Self-Government Code;
- Institutional asymmetry - when administrative capacities vary. Large cities have strong mayoral offices and departments, while rural municipalities have weak local administrations;
- Financial-economic asymmetry - Tbilisi's budget constitutes almost half of the total municipal resources in Georgia, placing it in a significantly different position. The budget of the Autonomous Republic of Adjara also differs substantially from other municipalities due to its autonomous status and independent budget, thereby creating an additional asymmetry. Small and mountainous municipalities, in contrast, are almost entirely dependent on state transfers;
- Functional asymmetry - large cities (Tbilisi, Batumi, Kutaisi, Rustavi) enjoy broader competences (e.g., in transport and infrastructure management) compared to smaller municipalities, where functions are often limited to providing basic services;
- Political asymmetry - the central government interacts with municipalities differently, and the degree of support and quality of relations often depends on the political context.

Thus, local self-government asymmetry in Georgia means that despite a unified legal framework, municipalities operate under unequal conditions. The capital enjoys strong autonomy and resources, large cities have comparatively stronger administrations, while small and mountainous municipalities suffer from weak self- governance and dependence on central authorities. Under such circumstances, local self-government in Georgia functions within a formally unified system but, in reality, operates in an unequal environment. This has a significant impact on the degree of decentralization and the depth of democratic processes in the country.

Recommendations on Local Self-Government Reform in Georgia

Local self-government in Georgia formally operates within a unified legal framework; however, in

practice, there exists a pronounced asymmetry among municipalities, as outlined in our key findings above. Based on this, several recommendations have been developed. [3]

**Key Objectives:**

- Substantive goal: Transition from an asymmetrical local self-government model to a balanced system with equal minimum standards in financial resources, legal status, competences, and institutional capacity across all municipalities;
- Political goal: Ensure balanced development, strengthen municipalities financially and institutionally, guarantee political neutrality in resource distribution, and promote citizen participation.

**Recommended Measures:**

1. Fiscal Decentralization:
  - Broaden local revenue generation (local taxes, property management);
  - Apply transparent, formula-based distribution of central transfers;
  - Create special funds to support small and high-mountain municipalities.
2. Legal Framework Reform:
  - Extend Tbilisi's special status experience to other major cities (Kutaisi, Batumi, Rustavi);
  - Broaden high-mountain municipalities' status beyond fiscal incentives to include decision-making competences.
3. Functional Empowerment:
  - Grant small municipalities additional powers (infrastructure planning, transport, environmental protection);
  - Promote inter-municipal cooperation for shared service delivery.
4. Institutional Strengthening:
  - Implement long-term training and professional development programs for local officials;
  - Establish regional support centers for budget planning, legal advice, and project management.
5. Political Neutrality:
  - Depoliticize allocation of state resources;
  - Guarantee real independence of local governments, mayors, and councils.
6. Citizen Participation:
  - Expand participatory budgeting to all municipalities;
  - Introduce digital platforms enabling direct citizen involvement in decision-making.

**Expected Outcomes:**

- Reduction of financial and institutional disparities among municipalities;
- More balanced and stable development of local self-government;
- Greater citizen trust and participation;
- Strengthened decentralization and democratic governance. Expected outcomes

The implementation of the proposed recommendations in practice would reduce existing financial and institutional disparities among municipalities, foster balanced and stable development of local self-government, increase citizens' trust and participation, and deepen the process of decentralization. This, in turn, would serve as a guarantee for strengthening democratic governance. Georgia's territorial organization has developed against the backdrop of constant political transformations. Events of the first half of the 20th century determined the country's future statehood, unfolding under annexation, persistent pressure, and inequality. After regaining independence, Georgia faced modern challenges of democratic governance without adequate resources or experience, complicated further by internal civil conflict and the temporary loss of territories, which hindered the development of the territorial system. These factors shaped the asymmetry of Georgia's local self-government. One contributing element has been systemic instability of governance: the shifts between presidential and parliamentary systems alternately pushed the governance model toward centralization or decentralization.

While formally functioning within a single legal framework, local self-government in Georgia is in

reality highly asymmetrical. This asymmetry is reflected in legal status, financial resources, institutional capacities, functional competences, and political relations. The capital city of Tbilisi enjoys a special status and privileged resources, while small and high-mountain municipalities remain heavily dependent on the central government, reinforcing centralization and restricting real autonomy of local self-government.

Asymmetrical governance represents both a challenge and an opportunity for Georgia. On the one hand, it exposes heightened risks of centralization, which undermine democratic processes and weaken the functional role of local self-government. On the other hand, effective management of asymmetry and the pursuit of balance could serve as an instrument for advancing decentralization.

Deepening decentralization requires harmonization of legal, fiscal, and institutional frameworks, as well as the creation of equal conditions across municipalities. This would strengthen the system of local self-government, enhance citizen participation, and ultimately improve the quality of democratic governance in the country.

Despite the multitude of factors, our aim was to identify key findings and, based on them, propose recommendations that could assist Georgian policymaking in overcoming the asymmetry of self-government and in shaping a rational, well-balanced, and decentralized governance model.

## Conclusion

In summary, the evolution of local self-government in Georgia reflects both the country's historical challenges and its aspirations for democratic development. While the constitutional and legislative framework provides a unified basis for self-governance, in practice municipalities operate under highly asymmetric conditions. This asymmetry is visible in their legal status, financial resources, institutional capacity, functional competences, and political relations with central government. The capital city, Tbilisi, enjoys significant autonomy and resources, whereas smaller and mountainous municipalities remain heavily dependent on state transfers and central decision-making.

Such an imbalanced system limits the effectiveness of decentralization and hinders the full realization of democratic governance at the local level. At the same time, asymmetry should not be viewed solely as a weakness. If managed strategically, it may serve as an instrument for advancing decentralization by tailoring governance models to the specific needs of different municipalities.

Addressing these challenges requires harmonization of the legal, financial, and institutional frameworks, as well as ensuring greater equality among municipalities. Strengthening fiscal decentralization, enhancing functional competences, and building institutional capacity will contribute to more balanced development. Most importantly, ensuring political neutrality in resource distribution and expanding citizen participation will deepen democratic processes and reinforce public trust in local institutions.

Ultimately, overcoming asymmetry and building a stronger, more decentralized system of self-government is essential for Georgia's democratic consolidation. A balanced model of local governance, based on fairness, autonomy, and citizen engagement, will not only empower municipalities but also strengthen the overall democratic fabric of the state.

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