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# Cleavages, electoral geography, and the territorialization of political parties in the Republic of Georgia

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the territorialization of party support in the Republic of Georgia as political parties in Georgia try to territorialize by aligning themselves to existing societal cleavages. The article specifically focuses on the case of the United National Movement (UNM), which from its inception in 2001 was led by Georgia's former president, Mikheil Saakashvili, and was the country's governing party from 2004 to 2012. While in power, the UNM enjoyed nationwide support. After being unseated, instead of nationalizing countrywide, the UNM has based its support in national elections on specific areas populated by ethno-linguistic and religious minorities. By analyzing the results of the most recent five national elections and the 2014 national census, the article shows that continuing support for the UNM and the subsequent territorialization of the party is dictated by these existing societal cleavages.

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## Introduction

In this paper, I explore the territorialization of political parties in the Republic of Georgia. Territorialization of party systems refers to the strategy of a political party to concentrate its support in a particular geographic area. To the contrary, the *nationalization* of political parties describes a situation when voters of a particular political party are spread evenly across a country (Agnew 1987). As Daniele Caramani argued (2004), the gradual disappearance of territorial patterns of party support in Western European societies is associated with the proliferation of the left–right divide in politics. Still, omnipresent regional disparities can be attributed to existing contextual factors, such as the presence of territorially concentrated linguistic, religious, and ethnic minorities (also see Bochsler 2006).

Apart from ideological constraints, different factors push political parties to nationalize. There have been several analyses of this issue, and party nationalization

has been linked to the electoral regime (Morgenstern, Swindle, and Castagnola 2009; Golosov 2016b) and economic and social factors (de Miguel 2011), as well as the peculiarities of territorial organization of the polity (Chhibber and Kollman 2004). Additionally, as one stream of research argues, chances of party nationalization are higher if there are limited incentives for participation in regional politics; that is, regional autonomy is absent or malfunctioning (Simón 2013). Party nationalization strategies could be context-dependent, as shown by Agnew (1997).

The intrinsic nature of interrelations between electoral cleavages and party territorialization has been recently explored by de Miguel (2016), who links existing sociocultural cleavages, regional diversity, and the territorialization of political parties. Indeed, as the formation of these cleavages is context- and space-bound (Johnston 2009), voting decision-making is linked to the particular place and its contextual peculiarities (Cox 1969; Agnew 1987, 1996). Though often overlooked (such as by Golosov 2016b), the political geography perspective on voting has been recently invigorated with the highly polarizing results of US presidential elections (Johnston, Jones, and Manley 2016; Johnston, Manley, and Jones 2016; Johnston et al. 2017; Scala and Johnson 2017). However, the study of the spatial patterns of voting beyond the Anglo-American realm has been scarce (Leib, Quinton, and Warf 2011; Shin 2015), especially those investigating the patterns of voting in the post-Communist polities and so-called new democracies (e.g. O'Loughlin, Shin, and Talbot 1996; O'Loughlin, Kolossov, and Vendina 1997; Perepechko, Kolossov, and ZumBrunnen 2007; Maškarinec 2017).

When it comes to Georgia, the relative omission of the country from both specific and comparative studies on Eastern European politics and geography could be attributed to its relatively short history of free and fair elections. However, elections themselves in the country have systematically been labeled as “free and fair” by international elections observer organizations at least since 2008 (e.g. OSCE ODIHR 2008a, 2008b, 2012, 2013). The country is positioned moderately high in global democracy indices and is considered to be an “electoral democracy” by Freedom House (2016). As Tavits (2005) argues, in post-Communist polities, a short exposure to democracy would definitely prevent political parties operating there to align themselves along cleavages and policy-based politics. Therefore, the emergence of spatial cleavages could be attributed to the socio-demographic and cultural composition of the subnational territorial units (Bochsler 2006; Clem and Craumer 2008; O'Loughlin 2001). In the same vein, the most pronounced electoral cleavages in Georgia mirror the territorial cleavages between ethnic Georgians and other ethnicities in the country, as well as politically and economically engaged urban areas versus rural settlements (Sichinava 2015).

In this paper, I investigate a specific case of party support in Georgia by examining the temporal and spatial shifts in support of the United National Movement (UNM), a major political party that governed the country from 2004 until losing legislative elections in 2012. Despite subsequent losses in popularity and the emergence of splinter parties, the UNM still maintains its relatively stable party support.

In the analysis, I proceed as follows. The subsequent section explores the literature on party nationalization/territorialization and the electoral geography research relevant to this study of Georgia. In the data analysis section, I present global and local measures of spatial autocorrelation in order to describe the geography of party support for the UNM. I also present a fixed-effects regression model that predicts the district-level vote share for the UNM through proxy measures of various societal cleavages. I hypothesize that the spatial concentration of party support of the UNM has been aligned to existing societal cleavages. As the pattern has been maintained after the party lost power, it could indicate a territorialization strategy of the UNM instead of adopting a nationalizing strategy.

## Literature review

Although it has long been argued that the emergence of nationalized political parties indicates the maturity of political systems (Caramani 2004), as Golosov (2016a, 2016b) attests, this fact is no longer relevant for many contemporary polities. The question of how political parties attempt to stabilize their support nationwide has been a key question for several significant contributions to the political science literature (e.g. by Caramani 2004; Chhibber and Kollman 2004; Jones and Mainwaring 2003; Golosov 2016a).

Students of the nationalization of political systems suggest different explanations for the territorialization and nationalization of voting and party support. The first strand of academic thought has been focused on the effects of institutional design on territorial support for political parties. For example, the devolution of power to regional entities through federal government and/or fiscal decentralization (Chhibber and Kollman 2004; Harbers 2010) has a reverse effect on party nationalization; however, as it has been recently put forward by Simón (2013), the influence of decentralization on the territorialization of political parties largely depends on the extent of incentives granted to the local political actors. A detailed analysis of the influence of electoral systems on party nationalization by Golosov (2016b) shows that systems that allow the “de-personalization” of party votes (e.g. party list proportional systems) strongly contribute to the nationalization of politics, whereas any other system involving single-member constituencies contributes to the territorialization of political parties, although the evidence for this is mixed (e.g. in Moser 1999).<sup>1</sup>

A second broad school of thought focuses on the peculiarities of various non-structural factors. Agents such as ethnic and religious diversity (Ordeshook and Shvetsova 1994; Golosov 2016b), regional economic inequalities (de Miguel 2011), and societal cleavages (Caramani 2004; Bochsler 2006; de Miguel 2016) contribute to the nationalization process, although these explanations could be proven to be complex and context-dependent. For example, in the case of African elections, Wahman (2017) showed that in spite of ethnic diversity that would technically incentivize territorialized voting, incumbent political parties in Africa

manage to nationalize effectively. Additionally, Tiemann (2012) convincingly links the nationalization of party systems in Eastern Europe with the characteristics of transformation, specifically the peculiarities of electoral institutional arrangements and local historical cleavages. The role of societal cleavages in the territorialization of politics has been recently advanced by (de Miguel 2016). In her comparative analysis of 382 elections across 60 polities, de Miguel argues that the spatial concentration of ethnic and religious diversity is associated with more territorialized party systems, as is the existence of societal cleavages. This argument sounds especially compelling for the study of electoral geography, where societal cleavages used to be one of the key ontologies explaining spatially distinct patterns of voting behavior (Shin 2015).

The societal cleavage model of Lipset and Rokkan (1967) has been a useful tool for understanding the mechanisms of party formation and voter alignment. Lipset and Rokkan, based on Parsons' model of social systems (Parsons, Bales, and Shils 1953), argued that in Western European societies, party formation has been associated with four key societal cleavages, namely: center–periphery, church–state, employer–employee, and urban–rural dichotomies. Each of these pairs has contributed to the formation of political parties with corresponding ideological strains that have played a major role in stabilizing party systems.

The societal cleavages model has been established based on the experiences of Western European societies and generally neglects the peculiarities of voting beyond Western Europe (Deegan-Krause 2007). On the other hand, the role and the nature of the very cleavages ascribed by Lipset and Rokkan have been criticized, as the ideological dichotomies in the West also change and are more aligned to the post-materialist values (Deegan-Krause 2007). Although as Lipset (2001) himself later recounted, the model describes the attachment to the particular side and its institutionalization into political parties, ensuring the adaptability of the model to new contexts and cleavages. Indeed, the flexibility of the cleavage model yielded contributions from differing contexts such as Tunisia (Van Hamme, Gana, and Rebbah 2014), Turkey (West 2005), and – importantly for the Georgia case – post-Communist polities of Eastern Europe (Kitschelt 1995; Evans and Whitefield 1998; Whitefield 2002; Evans 2006). Overall, voter alignments in post-Communist societies have been formed along “Leninist” (Kitschelt 1995) and pre-Communist sociocultural legacies, including the peculiarities of Communist rule and the transition to democracy (Whitefield and Evans 1999).

Political geographers have been successful in adapting the Lipset–Rokkan cleavage model to the explanation of territorial patterns of voting and party formation (Taylor and Johnston 1979). They also produced one of the pioneering works investigating the peculiarities of voting and territorial organization of party systems in the New Europe (O'Loughlin, Shin, and Talbot 1996; O'Loughlin, Kolossov, and Vendina 1997; O'Loughlin 2001). The political geography approach underlines the role of a particular local context in which voters socialize, become politically engaged, and align themselves to political parties (Cox 1969; Agnew 1987, 1996).

Similarly, local analysis of election data, putting aside the problem of ecological fallacy (Freedman 1999; Pearce 2000; Seligson 2002), allows the detection of local trends in voting data, which is sometimes impossible to do with global statistical analysis (O'Loughlin 2003).

### **Setting the scene: a political history of the UNM**

Contemporary Georgia's party system has been formed as the result of the compounding factors of personality and elite politics (Nodia and Scholtbach 2006) and the semi-authoritarian (Bader 2008), or competitive authoritarian (Wheatley and Zürcher 2008; George 2014), political environment where political parties have been operating since the inception of the independent post-soviet Georgian state. The initial years of the country's independence were dominated by nationalist political groups that emerged as champions in the country's independence movement (Jones 2013). However, political instability in the initial years of independence after 1991 brought civil war, violent ethnic conflicts, and economic downturns that resulted in the malfunctioning political system. For almost a decade, the former Communist leader Eduard Shevardnadze, who certainly contributed to the stabilization and institutional build-up, including the consolidation of the country's fractured party system, ruled the country. However, endemic corruption and overwhelming economic hardships (Jones 2000) soon triggered a peaceful "Rose Revolution" in 2003 that led to Shevardnadze's political demise.

The UNM and its leader, Mikheil Saakashvili, were key actors in bringing Shevardnadze's rule to an end and managed to radically transform the country and its political system. First created as a splinter group of Shevardnadze's "big tent" Citizens' Union of Georgia in 2001 (Chiaberashvili and Tevzadze 2005), the UNM managed to lead this peaceful revolution against Shevardnadze and, after consolidating power in its hands, swept the 2004 parliamentary and presidential elections as well as the 2006 municipal elections. Electoral success energized the UNM to push its reform agenda further. However, these efforts were mostly dedicated to the improvement of administrative institutions (Aprasidze and Siroky 2010) and less focused on the transparency of decision-making (Gallina 2010), which led to the relative marginalization of other political groups (Siroky and Aprasidze 2011). The UNM would rather focus on the improvement of the state's enforcement capacity (Rekhviashvili and Polese 2017) and international ratings, such as the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business Index, in order to ensure quick growth (Schueth 2011). However, the party spectacularly failed to ensure inclusive economic institutions and subsequently excluded large swaths of the country's population from post-Rose revolutionary economic growth (De Waal 2011; Baumann 2012; Gugushvili 2016). Fast modernization and Westernization became a trending mantra for Georgia's ruling political class. The UNM managed to pose as the driving force behind the country's transformation from post-Soviet failed state to the "beacon of democracy," and the alternative to the Russian model of

development on the Eastern fringes of Europe (Kupatadze 2012). On top of that, Georgia was deemed as a role model for the democracy promotion project (Jawad 2005), which in turn helped the UNM secure large sums of international aid needed to stabilize the regime (Mitchell 2006).

The UNM's post-revolutionary institutional design hindered wider inclusion of other political forces to formal political institutions (Wertsch 2006; Miriam Lansky and Giorgi Areshidze 2008), who resorted to radicalization by staging street protests and refusing to enter the 2008 convocation of Georgian parliament. Political protests staged in the capital city of Tbilisi by opposition groups then led to the violent dispersion of a protest rally on 7 November 2007 and subsequent early presidential and parliamentary elections in the first half of 2008. In the new electoral cycle, the UNM managed to retain power by narrowly avoiding a runoff in early presidential elections, while easily carrying the subsequent parliamentary elections. Despite concerns about the fairness of the electoral campaign as well as the transparency of voting procedures during the election itself (OSCE ODIHR 2008a), both elections were deemed to be democratic (Nilsson and Cornell 2008). The devastating war with Russia in 2008 further contributed to the radicalization of politics (Cornell and Nilsson 2009), which climaxed in continued protest rallies and the occupation of the Tbilisi city center by opposition political groups in early 2009. However, contrary to the demands of the protesters who required an immediate resignation of Mikheil Saakashvili (Harding 2009), the UNM avoided early elections and maintained its power until 2012 parliamentary elections.

The eventual decline of the UNM from power may be explained on the one hand as the result of the emergence of a powerful political figure in the person of billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, and on the other hand, to the structural problems in the party's top-down governing style. Ivanishvili, a wealthy tycoon who earned his fortune in Russia in the early 1990s, championed the consolidation of fragmented opposition forces throughout the 2012 parliamentary election campaign. He also managed to compete successfully with the state apparatus in terms of financial and human resources, and when necessary, with compromising misinformation, or *kompromat* (Fairbanks and Gugushvili 2013; Roudakova 2017). The UNM itself failed to maintain a balance of stabilizing forces, such as resource superiority over other political groups and the legitimization of its own regime (Shubladze and Khundadze 2017). The post-2012 development of the UNM reflects the struggle of the party to maintain its support base and regional structure. Mikheil Saakashvili, a flamboyant charismatic founder and the leader of the party has been in exile since leaving his presidential office and of late has dedicated most of his time and effort to Ukrainian politics. Several former leaders such as Vano Merabishvili and Bacho Akhalaia have been jailed for misconduct during their tenure as government officials. Internally, although the party managed to maintain unity in the 2013 presidential and 2016 parliamentary elections, right after the last legislative elections "Movement for Liberty – European Georgia," a faction that splintered off of the UNM, managed to take over the majority of the UNM's seats in the parliament.



Despite the fragmentation and the internal and the external constraints, the party managed to maintain the core of its support base; in the elections, the party's poll numbers have been steady. In the 2013 presidential elections, about 354,000 voters, or about 22% of the total, endorsed the UNM candidate, Davit Bakradze. In the 2016 parliamentary elections, the party garnered 478 thousand votes, or 27% of all votes.

## Data and methods

Methods of studying party nationalization generally utilize regression-based approaches, measurements of inequality (e.g. Gini-based indices), and even simple descriptive statistics. (For a comprehensive survey see Bochsler [2010].) Political scientists rarely resort to spatial methods; however, the rationale behind the usage of spatial measures for this purpose of identifying geographic concentrations lies in the very definition of the territorialization/ nationalization thesis. Based on this logic, Tapiador and Mezo (2009) utilize global spatial autocorrelation measures, namely Moran's I, to account for the geographic (de)concentration of party votes in Spain. More recent contributions to the party territorialization/nationalization literature (e.g. Harbers 2016; Ozen and Kalkan 2016) effectively employ spatial and spatio-temporal methods to explore regional patterns of party territorialization in Mexico and Turkey, respectively.

I use both spatial and non-spatial methods in order to explore the peculiarities of electoral support for the UNM.<sup>2</sup> As my variable of interest is the overall performance of the party, I analyze the vote share for the UNM and its presidential candidates. I look at the vote share of the UNM in 2008, 2012, and 2016 parliamentary elections and the vote share of Mikheil Saakashvili and Davit Bakradze, respectively, in the 2008 and 2013 presidential elections.

First, I present exploratory spatial data analysis of precinct-level election results; namely, I calculate local and global spatial autocorrelation.<sup>3</sup> Moran's global spatial autocorrelation (Moran 1950) assesses the overall degree of spatial concentration of a phenomenon and has been already utilized as a measure of the geographic concentration of votes (e.g. in O'Loughlin, Shin, and Talbot 1996). The measure fluctuates between  $-1$  and  $1$ , where positive numbers are associated with geographic concentration of a phenomenon while negative numbers refer to dispersed geographic patterns. As the result, I present the correlogram of spatial lag and Moran's I values which describe the association among spatial concentration and the distance between spatial units. In order to identify statistically significant areas of concentration of high and low votes share for the UNM, I refer to the local indicators of spatial autocorrelation, namely Anselin's local Moran's I (Anselin 1995). As the result, I present a set of maps for each of the five national elections and identify geographic areas of high and low support for the UNM.

In addition to the exploratory spatial data analysis, I also model district-level vote share for the UNM and its presidential candidates in the last five national



elections.<sup>4</sup> In order to control for the district and election-specific effects, I utilize a fixed effects model for both electoral districts and the separate elections. Conceptually, the independent variables control for existing societal cleavages (urban/rural, center–periphery), voter mobilization, district magnitude, and a variety of geographic characteristics. Descriptive statistics of these variables are summarized in Table 1.

Measures of nationalization of party systems are often based on the effective number of parties nationally or locally in the electoral unit (e.g. in Jones and Mainwaring 2003; Bochsler 2010; de Miguel 2016; Wahman 2017; Ozen and Kalkan 2016). However, in this analysis, I focus on the strategies of a particular political party; following Harbers (2016), I utilize district-level election outcomes to assess the territorialization process. For societal cleavages, I control for the urban–rural and center–periphery divide in the Georgian electorate, which has significant impact in almost all post-Communist polities (Evans 2006). Lipset and Rokkan (1967) define the center–periphery cleavage as the tension between the nationalizing culture of the political center with ethnically or religiously different peripheries, while the emergence of the urban–rural divide is associated with rising alienation between the city and the countryside in terms of development and the quality of life. From the theoretical perspective on Georgia as a post-Communist polity, these two cleavages are likely to be most relevant, as they often mirror more recent developments, such as the type of the Communist regime and the peculiarities of transition to the democracy and consequently, represent a stable basis for party formation and voter affiliation (Whitefield 2002; Evans 2006).

I operationalize the center–periphery divide using the proportion of Orthodox population in the district and the proportion of native Georgian speakers. The rationale behind introducing the religious dimension of electoral cleavages lies in the peculiarities of Georgian nation building. As Pelkmans (2002, 2005) has argued, the construction of the national identity during the last years of the Soviet Union was largely associated with Orthodox Christianity. Therefore, Muslim populations, especially in their communities in Adjara and Guria regions, have been under constant pressure for religious conversion or are treated as lower class citizens. More broadly for ethnic minorities, their representation in Georgian politics is still limited (Zollinger and Bochsler 2012). However, in the aftermath of the Rose Revolution, the Saakashvili government pushed for better integration of Muslims and more access to resources (George 2008), and in turn, this has been associated with higher support of ethnic minorities in the UNM (George 2014).

The urban–rural cleavage is operationalized with the proportion of urban population in the electoral district, conventionally known as the level of urbanization, and the proportion of those with higher education. A stark urban–rural divide in development has been an endemic characteristic for Georgia. Georgian rural areas were especially affected with the transition to the market economy and since then have been systematically overlooked politically (Jones 2013). Moreover, the neoliberal characteristics of Georgia's economic development led to the increase

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics of the variables.

Variable	Mean	Median	Standard deviation	Source
Dependent variable:				
Vote share for the United National Movement or its candidate	0.41	0.38	0.20	Central Elections Commission of Georgia (CEC)
Predictors				
Turnout	0.57	0.57	0.10	Central Elections Commission of Georgia (CEC)
Proportion of population with higher education	0.21	0.17	0.12	2014 National Census of Georgia
Proportion of white collar workers in the working-age population	0.20	0.14	0.15	2014 National Census of Georgia
Proportion of orthodox population	0.82	0.94	0.27	2014 National Census of Georgia
Proportion of native Georgian speakers	0.88	0.98	0.22	2014 National Census of Georgia
Proportion of urban population	0.39	0.26	0.31	2014 National Census of Georgia
Inverse of the district size	0.00004	0.00003	0.00003	Central Elections Commission of Georgia (CEC)
Distance from international roads (m)	11,510	3312	16,373.04	Department of Road Transportation of Georgia
Distance from national roads (m)	2024	501.4	4405.639	Department of Road Transportation of Georgia
Median altitude of the district from the sea level (m)	612	488.2	498.9	Extracted from ASTER digital elevation model using ArcGIS software
Covariates				
District size and median	48,212	36,103		
Number of observations	365			

of rural poverty (Gugushvili 2016), and that indeed contributed to the alienation of the rural population toward the UNM. Apart from cleavages, I also control for several other measures, such as voter turnout, which could serve as a proxy for voter mobilization and electoral fraud (as high turnout in similar contexts is sometimes associated with fraud, e.g. in Enikolopov et al. [2013]) and the inverse number of the electoral district size. The latter measure allows control for the large district magnitude inherent to Georgia's electoral system.

## Data analysis

### *Spatio-temporal patterns of UNM vote territorialization*

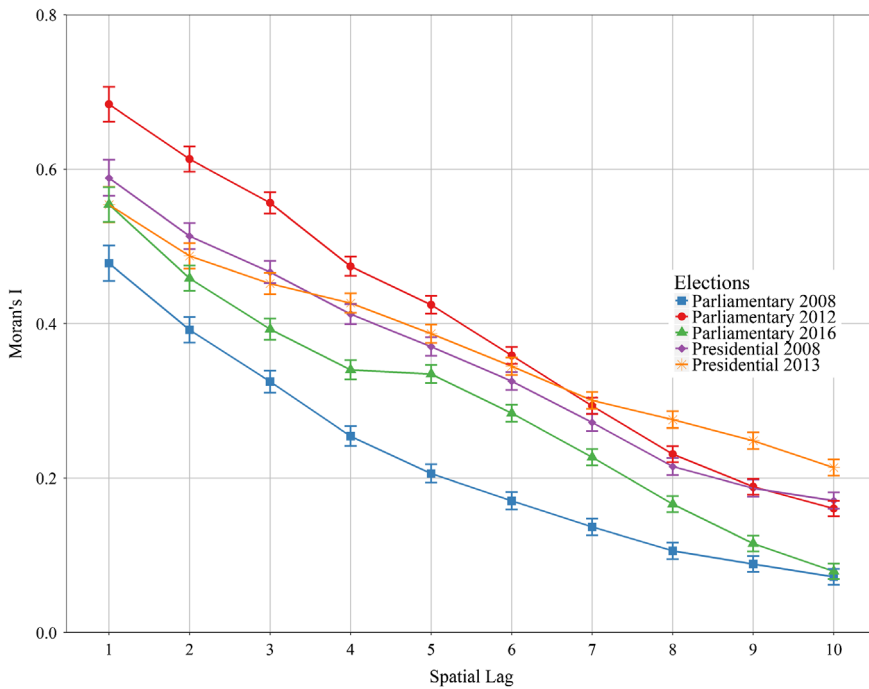
The first part of my analysis refers to the global and local patterns of spatial concentration of the UNM votes. I summarize in Table 2 the values of Moran's global spatial autocorrelation of the precinct-level election outcomes for the last five national elections. In the case of the strongly contested 2008 early presidential elections, the UNM votes can be characterized with territorial concentration, while it is less pronounced in the 2008 parliamentary elections. The 2012 parliamentary election was also highly contested, resulting in the UNM's loss of power. In the 2012 dataset, the value of the UNM votes' spatial autocorrelation again indicates the highest degree of the concentration. For the subsequent elections, the measures of UNM spatial autocorrelation stabilized and stayed at the level of 2008 parliamentary elections – in the 2013 presidential elections, the Moran's coefficient decreased to 0.421, and it reached the value of 0.450 in the case of 2016 parliamentary elections (both significant at  $p < 0.001$ ).

Figure 1 illustrates the dependence of Moran's autocorrelation measures on the spatial lag values (spatial lag is the weighted average of values in the neighboring spatial units). As expected, the dependence of the vote concentration on distance bands hints at the distance–decay nature of the concentration of the precincts with high values. Similar to the single coefficients of spatial autocorrelation described above, results of 2012 parliamentary elections have the most pronounced dependence of spatial autocorrelation values on the distance lags, while the 2008 and 2016 parliamentary elections are less prone to express spatial dependence.

The empirical results show a moderate to high level of spatial autocorrelation of the UNM vote share in the analyzed elections. The values are especially high when it comes to the two most contested and polarized elections – the 2008

**Table 2.** Moran's global autocorrelation coefficient values for 2008–2016 national elections.

Elections	Moran's $I$	Monte Carlo simulated $p$ -values	Number of precincts	Average precinct size, voters
Parliamentary 2016	0.450	0.001	3624	966
Presidential 2013	0.421	0.001	3622	967
Parliamentary 2012	0.587	0.001	3602	988
Parliamentary 2008	0.433	0.001	3524	976
Presidential 2008	0.522	0.001	3435	1032

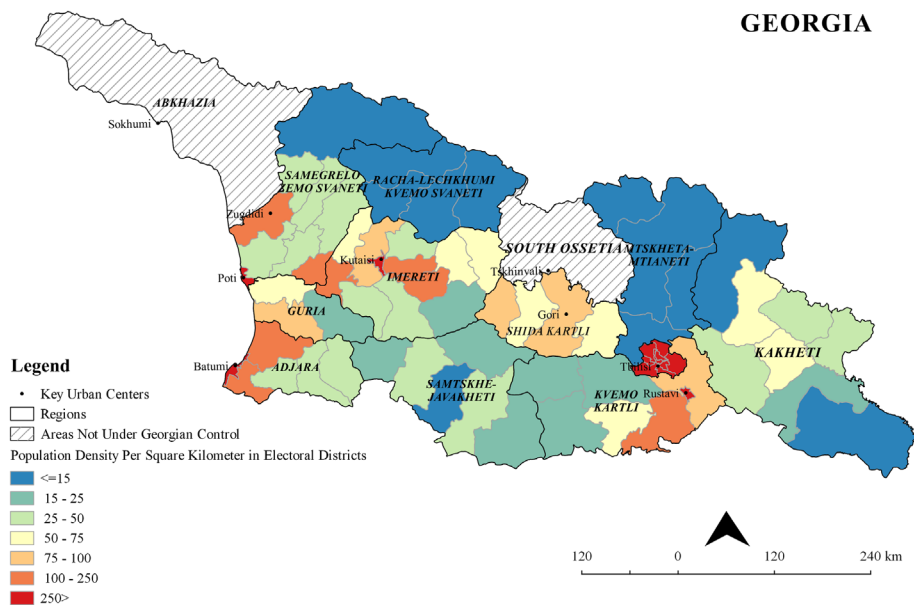


**Figure 1.** Spatial correlogram of UNM and its presidential candidate votes, 2008–2016.

presidential and the 2012 parliamentary elections. In the first case, the UNM's presidential candidate, Mikheil Saakashvili, narrowly avoided a runoff with Levan Gachechiladze, a candidate endorsed by the opposition. In the 2012 parliamentary elections, albeit the most contested in Georgia's recent political history, overall political polarization was also reflected in the territorial patterns of voting. The high territorial concentration of UNM votes indeed mirrors the party's strategy for territorializing its support in specific geographic areas. Finally, the continuing trend of the concentration of vote share for the UNM also hints to the continuation of the territorialization strategy (Figure 2).

### ***Cleavage dimension of UNM vote territorialization***

The second set of analyses explores the specific geographic areas of concentration of the UNM's votes. Anselin's local Moran measurement of spatial autocorrelation allows us to detect the areas of high and low concentration of a particular value as well as spatial outliers; for example, high values surrounded by spatial units holding a low value (Anselin 1995). In the 2008 presidential elections, the main areas of concentration of high votes for Mikheil Saakashvili were the westernmost Samegrelo province, the mountainous southwestern areas of Adjara, territories bordering South Ossetia (for the specific locations of these regions refer to Figure 2), and a wide belt of ethnically and religiously diverse southern Georgia (top leftmost



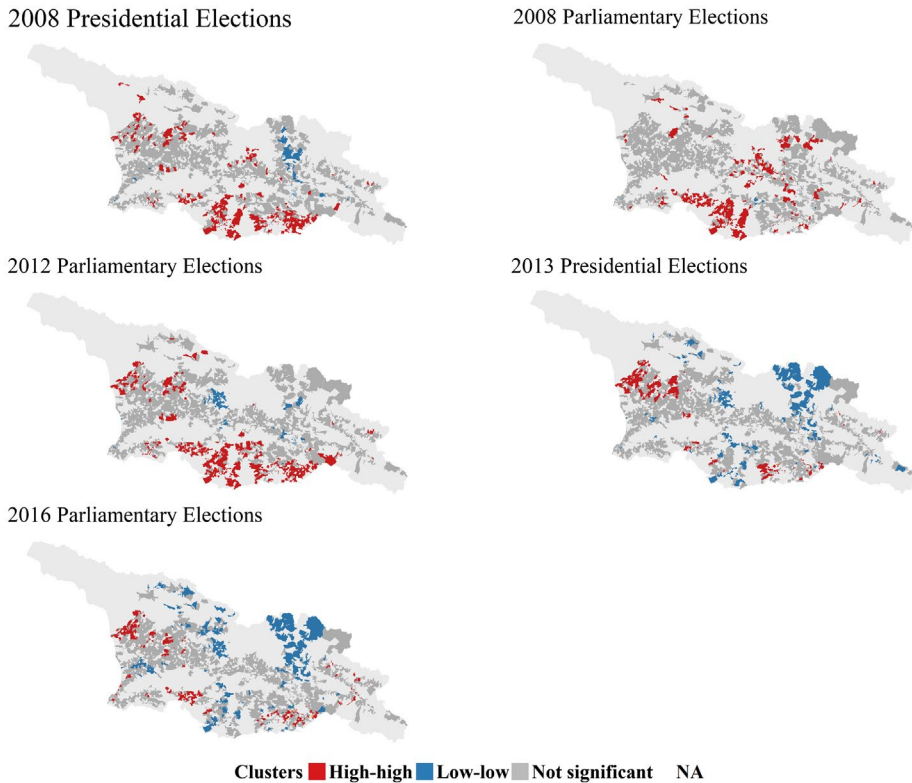
**Figure 2.** Population density and the indicator map of geographic locations mentioned in this paper. Source: FOI request from the National Statistics Office of Georgia; own work.

panel of Figure 3). The electoral map of UNM support in 2008 parliamentary elections displays fewer areas of concentration (top right panel of Figure 3); however, the party performed especially well in the territory bordering South Ossetia and in the southern fringes of the country with a predominantly Armenian or ethnically mixed population.

The situation was altered in and after the 2012 parliamentary elections. The UNM lost support in the territories adjoining South Ossetia that suffered the most from the 2008 armed conflict between Russia and Georgia. However, the key areas of the “Southern Belt,” densely populated northwestern areas of Samegrelo, and parts of mountainous Adjara remained as the cornerstones of support for the UNM. To the contrary, the blue areas of western Georgia denote the concentration of extremely low values for the UNM in the municipality of Sachkhere, birthplace of then-opposition leader, Bidzina Ivanishvili.

Since its fall from power, the UNM has concentrated its support to several key geographic areas. The party still maintains its power base in Samegrelo; areas of Samtskhe in Southern Georgia with mixed Georgian Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic, Catholic, and Muslim populations; and the Kvemo Kartli area in south-eastern Georgia, where the dominant ethnic group is Azerbaijani. The concentration of low values of UNM’s support are clustered in the Javakheti region populated by ethnic Armenians as well as in selected mountainous areas in western and eastern Georgia.

Overall, the UNM’s electoral maps show consistent patterns of party support concentration. The party’s key vote base has been located in the densely populated



**Figure 3.** Spatial patterns of UNM vote distribution in 2008–2016 national elections.

regions of Samegrelo and Kvemo Kartli, as well as in Samtskhe, while party support has been recurring in Javakheti and Upper Adjara areas. The ethnic Georgian population of Samegrelo is a linguistic minority speaking a distinct language of the Kartvelian language family. Although it has always been fully integrated into mainstream Georgian society and even considered a vanguard force of Georgian nation building, certain prejudices still exist against Mingrelian-speakers (as attested in an experimental study of Dragojevic, Berglund, and Blauvelt [2018]). Apart from that, in the early 1990s, the Samegrelo region was the epicenter of the civil war between the loyalists of the first president of independent Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia (who was Mingrelian), and the supporters of the military council who ousted him and invited Shevardnadze as the leader. The violence perpetuated by the military council armed groups against the local population has often been framed in terms of a distinct regional identity (Kolsto 1996; Broers 2001).

Two distinct patterns emerge with regard to the areas populated with ethnic Armenian and Azerbaijani minorities. First, in the 2012 watershed parliamentary elections, the areas predominantly populated with ethnic minorities supported the UNM. As George (2014) has attested, this support was consistent with the earlier patterns of voting for the incumbent, even controlling for possible electoral fraud. Indeed, apart from the usual circumstances, higher support of minorities

was articulated by the UNM's campaign and actual policies; for example, introducing special educational programs to encourage minority students to apply to Georgian universities (Office of the State Minister 2017). However, since 2013, the pattern has been altered – although it lost power the UNM managed to retain its support among Azerbaijani-populated constituencies, while the visible decline of its vote in Armenian-populated communities could be attributed to the distinct and long-attested patterns of cooptation of local power elites to the ruling political groups in the central government (Gotua 2011).

### ***Global statistical model of UNM vote territorialization***

The outcomes of the fixed effects model predicting the district-level vote share for the UNM and its presidential candidates in national elections between 2008 and 2016 are shown in Table 3. By employing the fixed effects model, I control for the district and election specificities that may influence the outcomes beyond the predicted effects that are indicated in Table 3. The results indicate a strong association of the district-level vote share for the UNM and the societal cleavages identified above. When it comes to the center–periphery dichotomy, the ethno-linguistic

**Table 3.** Results of regression analysis.

	Dependent variable					
	Vote share for the United National Movement or its candidate					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Total turnout	0.339*** (0.067)	0.318*** (0.067)	0.310*** (0.063)	0.383*** (0.067)	0.310*** (0.067)	0.295*** (0.074)
Proportion of orthodox popu- lation	–0.023 (0.03)	–0.028 (0.03)	–0.026 (0.029)	–0.072** (0.031)	–0.180*** (0.021)	
Proportion of native Georgian speakers	–0.163*** (0.036)	–0.166*** (0.036)	–0.168*** (0.035)	–0.179*** (0.038)		
Proportion of population with higher education	–0.375*** (0.081)	–0.395*** (0.08)	–0.372*** (0.048)			
Proportion of urban popula- tion	–0.008 (0.032)	0.011 (0.031)				
Inverse of the district size	–344.758** (170.219)					
Observations	365	365	365	365	365	365
R <sup>2</sup>	0.365	0.358	0.357	0.247	0.201	0.043
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.347	0.341	0.343	0.232	0.187	0.03
F statistic	33.904*** (df = 6; 354)	39.519*** (df = 5; 355)	49.487*** (df = 4; 356)	38.997*** (df = 3; 357)	44.907*** (df = 2; 358)	16.087*** (df = 1; 359)

Note: Standard errors reported in parenthesis.

\* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .



dimension of this electoral cleavage is statistically significant to the  $p < 0.01$  level in the initial model (model 1 in Table 3) after control for all covariates. Overall, the concentration of ethnic and religious minorities inside voting districts is associated with a positive change in the vote share of the UNM and its candidates. The proportion of Georgian-speakers in the electoral district is associated with a large negative change in the dependent variable. A percentage point increase in the proportion of Georgian speakers is associated with about a 16 percentage point decrease in the mean proportion of the UNM vote share. The pattern is persistent when we gradually remove covariates from the main model (columns 2–5 in Table 3). When it comes to another measure of the center–periphery cleavage, religious composition of the district becomes significant when the urban–rural divide is removed from the regression model (columns 4–5 in Table 3). Specifically, one percentage point change in the proportion of the Georgian Orthodox population in the electoral district is associated with a –7% point change in the mean proportion of UNM’s district-level election outcomes, when not controlling for the urban–rural cleavages. The fact that these two variables are associated with the same phenomenon is illustrated in the change of coefficient of the Georgian Orthodox population when the covariate measuring the proportion of Georgian speakers is dropped (columns 4 and 5).

With regard to the urban–rural cleavage, in the initial model only the characteristics of education are associated with the statistically significant change in the dependent variable. The proportion of higher education holders in the electoral district is associated with a large decrease in the proportion of UNM votes in the electoral districts. Namely, 1% point change in this covariate is associated with almost 38% decline in the mean value of UNM’s vote share. Interestingly, in the initial model the effect of urbanization does not exhibit a statistically significant association with the change in the dependent variable.

Turnout values have an overall positive effect in the vote share of the UNM. In the full model (column 1), 1% point change in the turnout is associated with about a 35% increase in the mean district-level vote share for the UNM, *ceteris paribus*. However, removal of other covariates from the regression model leads to a dramatic decrease in *R*-squared and adjusted *R*-squared values of the model, indicating that electoral turnout is not a substantial explanation of the variation in the dependent variable (vote of UNM).

## Discussion and conclusion

What are the pillars to which political parties in the post-Communist polities align themselves in order to recruit supporters? Although my analysis refers to a specific case of Georgia, the fate of the UNM shows that to a significant extent, cleavage politics in the post-Communist polities is still alive and well. Moreover, these cleavages also contribute to the territorialization of party systems. Overall, the presented analysis showed that the UNM’s support in the last national elections has

been aligning with urban–rural and center–periphery dichotomies in a consistent manner. The empirical materials also show that high territorial concentration of the UNM's support especially in the highly contested 2012 elections contributed to the demise of the party from power. Despite that fact, the party's support further territorialized along identified cleavages from earlier elections.

The empirical results presented in this paper resonate with findings from an exhaustive study by de Miguel (2016). Spatially concentrated diversity, in the Georgian case, means that ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities form a necessary context for the nationally oriented political party to territorialize its support. As is known from the political geography literature, ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities almost always have distinct voting behaviors, especially in the post-Soviet realm (O'Loughlin 2001). This statement holds for the Georgian case as well. The center–periphery cleavage in Georgia is seemingly a later development and is linked to the peculiarities of transition to democracy, as is attested in Whitefield and Evans (1999). Ethnic conflicts of the beginning of the 1990s as well as the characteristics of Georgia's nation building process and the policies toward minorities administered by the central government could be in play. Although the compounding effect of local elites, who successfully navigate the moribund waters of political transition and pledge allegiance to particular political groups, cannot be denied (Gotua 2011; George 2014).

To conclude, the consistency of global and local spatial autocorrelation measures indicate that the patterns are stable. The ethnically, linguistically, and religiously distinct areas of Georgia exhibit a clear pattern of voting behavior which goes beyond the relative simplistic explanation of elite, institutional, or personal politics. As John Agnew wrote in 1996, electoral geography perspectives on voting demonstrate the role of spatial complexity in defining voting patterns; therefore, reducing the analysis to a mere set of simple models would definitely “miss the multiscalar quality of social causation” (144). The Georgian example of the party territorialization process well illustrates how geographic analysis of voting contributes to the understanding of seemingly “global” strategies of the national political class and helps identify the contextual factors influencing voting decision-making process.

## Notes

1. The author would like to thank Ralph Clem for pointing out this issue.
2. The data that support the findings of this study are available in Open Science Framework at <http://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/CD475>.
3. The boundary data were compiled for the National Democratic Institute, an international democracy watchdog, by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers, and Tbilisi State University and was provided to the author free of charge. Precinct-level election results were obtained through the freedom of information request from Georgia's Central Elections Commission. Census materials were provided by the National Statistics Office of Georgia through the freedom of information request.

4. Areas that are under Ossetian and Abkhazian separatist control after the 2008 Russo-Georgian War (Akhalkgori, Liakhvi, Kodori electoral districts) are excluded from the analysis to maintain comparison across the elections.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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