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The role of narratives in Georgia's anti-corruption reforms

1. Introduction

In a couple of years after the Rose Revolution of 2003, Georgia has managed to turn itself from the prototype of a post-Soviet corrupt and failed state to an example for successful anti-corruption reforms. A recent publication by the World Bank with the title "Fighting corruption in public services: chronicling Georgia's reforms" emphasises Georgia's success and its potential to be used as a model by other countries, in particular post-revolutionary states such as Tunisia and Egypt after the Arab Spring.¹

The paper analyses the specificities of Georgia's anti-corruption reforms not by trying to assess the country's actual success in eradicating corruption, but by examining the strategy of the Georgian elite to integrate the element of *perceptions* into their anti-corruption measures and produce an image of success. It will also analyse the challenges posed by Georgia's approach.

The actual success of anti-corruption measures is terms of *impact* and *goal achievement* or in the sense of their concrete impact on the reduction of corruption cannot be measured objectively. Thus, the Georgian government needs not only to implement reforms, but more essentially to take into account what *image* these reforms produce, the way they are translated into a narrative of success to an international and domestic audience as well as the effects of this narrative. The major characteristic of Georgia's fight against corruption is the destruction of a certain image of Georgia and of certain assumptions on corruption in the country

¹ World Bank: Fighting corruption in public services: chronicling Georgia's reforms, Washington, 2012.

combined with the production of a new narrative of success. The Georgian government has sought to invest the field of anti-corruption with a particular narrative, while prioritising measures that could be easily translated into “success stories” and with the potential to achieve a lasting impact on the country’s external image.

I use a notion of success as *interpretation* and not as *goal achievement and impact* to analyse Georgia’s reforms. I understand Georgia’s efforts at aiming at establishing a particular representation of success and a particular frame of interpretation to understand its reforms. The government’s narrative is sustained by certain actors, but also challenged by other actors that seek to question Georgia’s “success” and propose another reading of the government’s anti-corruption actions.

2. Building a narrative of success in anti-corruption reforms

As already observed, a major characteristic of Georgia’s fight against corruption is that it appears to take into account the role of *perceptions* in corruption practices. The reforms implemented by the government under President Mikheil Saakashvili after the revolution of November 2003 are not only geared towards effectively reducing corruption, but most importantly they are aimed at challenging perceptions of the problem of corruption in Georgia and creating a new narrative. The mainstream anti-corruption discourse represented by international anti-corruption organisations tends to view the fight against corruption as an expertise-driven and rational activity working towards the goal of tackling corruption. Anti-corruption measures are rational instruments implemented in a neutral context that inevitably fulfil their goals of reducing corruption. A failure of these instruments to achieve their goals is usually attributed to a lack of political will in a specific country or a lack of capacities for implementation that can be enhanced by expertise and advice. The fact that certain meanings are attached to anti-corruption practices in a particular context and that international anti-corruption practices can be re-interpreted in a local discourse is not considered in this vision of a neutral and mechanical anti-corruption activity.

However, the Georgian case reveals that anti-corruption reforms do not take place in a vacuum even if the ideal of anti-corruption organisations is of a *terra blanca* where instruments and models can be applied. The Georgian context prior to the revolution was charged with particular negative meanings attached to the field of anti-corruption as a legacy

of the previous government under President Eduard Shevardnadze as well as the Soviet period. The Saakashvili government needed to confront not only a legacy of corrupt practices, but also a legacy of anti-corruption practices. The Soviet and post-Soviet periods have witnessed a series of anti-corruption campaigns that inevitably failed to fulfil their promises. The anti-corruption rhetoric in Georgia was greeted with cynicism; it even nurtured the acceptance of corruption and tolerance of corrupt practices by instigating a certain passivity. The Georgian government after the revolution needed to confront this disillusionment associated with the official anti-corruption discourse by challenging this negative interpretation of the fight against corruption.

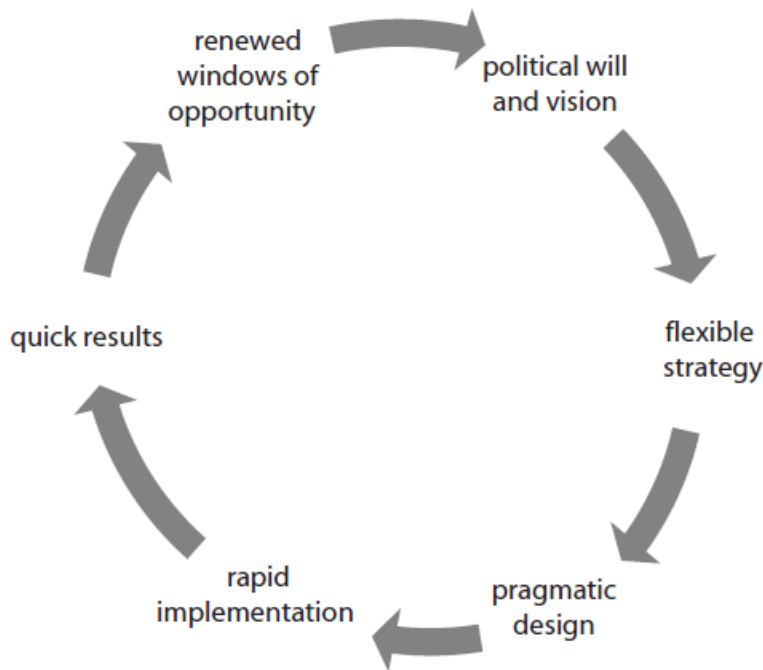
By viewing success as interpretation and not as goal achievement and impact, the government's anti-corruption strategy can be understood as aiming at producing an image of success, at translating concrete reforms into examples of success. Indeed, since the impact of an anti-corruption measure cannot be objectively measured, the government cannot derive its success from a tangible and quantitative reduction of corruption, one that would be universally accepted by other actors. It needs to *produce* success. This does not mean that Georgia's anti-corruption record is merely image-making, but that reform achievements need to be translated and interpreted in such a way that they acquire a reality by being acknowledged by other actors, in particular international organisations.

After the revolution, the fight against corruption in Georgia was focused on seizing opportunities to build this new narrative of success in a short period of time. The new elite wanted to challenge expectations about the country by realising rapid and radical reforms. The emphasis was put on implementing reforms with a potential to achieve immediate results in order to build support for further reforms. The element of rapidity and visible results are regularly stressed in the recent World Bank publication on Georgia's anti-corruption reforms.² Ten factors are listed to explain Georgia's success. The importance of rapid successes is mentioned under the factor "establish credibility early": "early successes build support for further action, in a virtuous cycle of reforms".³ Successes allowed extending the window of opportunity gained immediately after the revolution through the strong popular mandate for the reformers' government by gaining credibility and legitimacy. The importance of renewing the window of opportunity and giving a new impetus for reforms is underlined in the following figure.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, p. 10.

Figure 1: The virtuous cycle of anti-corruption reforms



Source: World Bank (2012)⁴

The insistence on achieving quick results thus contradicted the mainstream anti-corruption discourse that views anti-corruption as an expertise-driven activity following a certain sequence. The different stages of this sequence include the identification of the problem and its causes, the identification and assessment of alternative courses of action, the policy formulation and the implementation of programmes and their evaluation. Indeed, the World Bank publication remarks under the factor “launch a front assault” that “rather than spending precious time strategizing, worrying about sequencing, or consulting on action plans, the government launched a rapid and direct assault on corruption in a broad array of public services. It acted quickly to keep vested interests at bay.”⁵

The major characteristics of Georgia’s fight against corruption are thus visibility, quick results and the symbolism of a break with the Soviet and Shevardnadze’s period. The new government wanted to demarcate itself from the previous legacy of failed anti-corruption measures by emphasising political will and the immediacy of results over the setting up of anti-corruption bodies and the adoption of legislation with no political will to implement them.

⁴ Ibid, p. 92.

⁵ Ibid, p. 10.

The importance of visibility and results can further be seen in the type of reforms prioritised by the government after the revolution. It chose to focus on sectors where daily encounters between public officials and citizens take place. This choice of focus can be explained by the need to cut the bureaucratic red tape and opportunities for corruption. It also allowed targeting sectors where corruption is the most visible and can be experienced by citizens on a daily basis. The disappearance of corruption from these sectors had the effect of rapidly changing citizens' perceptions of corruption and rebuilding the credibility of the state.⁶

Radical reforms in flagship sectors also allowed building "success stories" that could be publicised to a domestic and international audience and whose effects could be immediately felt by citizens. Incremental reforms would not have the same impact in terms of changing perceptions. This change of perceptions also has an effect on corrupt behaviours by discouraging them in contrast to long-term reforms whose results are not so tangible. An example of the building of a "success story" through anti-corruption measures is the reform of the notoriously corrupt traffic police that was transformed into a brand-new patrol police after the revolution. About 16.000 police officers were fired overnight and replaced with 2.300 new road patrollers. The number of staff of the law enforcement agencies was reduced from 63.000 in 2003 to 27.000 in 2011.⁷ The firing of officers was favoured over the restructuring of the agency and the retraining of staff. It signalled strong political will to reform the institution and the belief that the eradication of corrupt practices necessitates a change of generations and a new mentality. The pyramid schemes in which police officers would extract bribes from citizens and share a part of this illegal income with their superiors were dismantled.

The reform of the traffic police shows the importance of image and reputation and the role of perceptions in reducing corrupt behaviours. Citizens' distrust towards the police was high before the revolution. The police's new image was created through new uniforms, cars and

⁶ Attitudes towards the police in Georgia provide an example of rapidly changing perceptions. In an August 2003 survey, 70% of respondents stated that police officers are "most or almost all involved in corruption" (the figure was 73% in 2001 and 70% in 2002). Police officers came second to customs officers. In Georgian Opinion Research Business International (GORBI): Corruption survey in Georgia: Third wave, Tbilisi, August 2003. By contrast, a February 2007 survey of voters reveals that 66% had a favourable opinion on the police in February 2007 (70% in April 2006) and the police were the fourth most trusted institution after the church, the army and the Georgian media. In International Republican Institute, Baltic Surveys Ltd. / The Gallup Organization, The Institute of Polling and Marketing (IRI et al): Georgian National Voters Study, Tbilisi, February 2007. The government has targeted those sectors that were perceived as the most corrupt before the revolution including the police and the tax and customs services.

⁷ World Bank (2012), p. 8.

new recruits as well as a public relations campaign. This image change resulted in police officers being proud to perform their jobs and increased trust in the institution.

Further notable reforms took place in the education sector, in particular the university entrance exams, and the civil service registry. Contacts between citizens and public officials were reduced to a minimum in public agencies to eliminate opportunities for bribes. As a further example of the importance of the visibility of reforms and their results, 24-hour power supply was established in the country. Daily energy cuts were a strong symbol of the corruption system of the previous government.

The government's anti-corruption reforms had the effect of rendering corruption invisible by removing it from the public eye, while making anti-corruption actions and their results immediately visible. Anti-corruption activities did not take the shape of strategy documents "taking dust on the shelves", but of concrete steps such as the restoration of energy supply.

The government also publicised its fight against corruption through the arrests of high officials in the previous administration immediately after the revolution. These arrests were shown on television with the aim of communicating the message of a zero-tolerance policy towards corruption. Among those officials arrested were the minister of energy, the minister of transport and communication, the Chairman of the Chamber of Control and the chief of the state-owned railway company. These high officials were allowed to pay large sums of money to the state treasury in order to escape prison in a plea bargain arrangement. The televised arrests signalled a break with the "syndrome of impunity" that had characterised the Shevardnadze's period.

Finally, the government sought to sever the ties between the state and criminals, in particular the "thieves-in-law" or professional Soviet criminals. A new anti-mafia legislation was passed to allow confiscating property and money of illicit origin. The government's attack on the criminal world was a significant step to change attitudes towards the state and re-establish a notion of law and order by destroying the reputation that "thieves-in-law" had enjoyed in the Shevardnadze's years.

As a driving force behind the government's reforms, the libertarian agenda promoted by the new Georgian elite further fitted into its goal of achieving concrete results and marking a break with the Soviet-type bureaucracy. The belief behind libertarian reforms was that the state intervention should be limited to a minimum to avoid bureaucratic red tape. The number

of permits and licences were reduced from 909 in 2003 to 137 in 2011.⁸ The World Bank publication refers to the term “guillotine” to describe the shutting down of agencies that were seen as being more effective in extracting bribes than delivering services.⁹ For example, the Antimonopoly Service, the Food Quality and Control Service and the agency responsible for motor vehicle inspections were abolished. Similarly to the firing of staff in the traffic police, the abolition of agencies was favoured over their restructuring. The tax agencies and the customs services were also cleaned up. A new tax and labour legislation were introduced. The aim of all these reforms was also to boost Georgia’s image as an attractive investment destination for international firms.

The symbolism of a break with the Soviet past is also present in a state-building discourse that emphasises the beginning of a new era for the country after the revolution. Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili often stresses the “irreversibility” of Georgia’s break with its dysfunctional past, in particular through the coming to power of a new generation. For example, corruption is portrayed as a non-patriotic act. This particular discourse stands in contrast to the perception of corruption as an act of legitimate resistance against an outside power in Soviet times. The World Bank publication also highlights how Georgia’s example challenges perceptions that corruption is a cultural phenomenon and as such difficult to tackle.¹⁰

3. Image-making and the promotion of Georgia as an anti-corruption model

As already observed, the main characteristic of Georgia’s reforms is their potential to challenge perceptions of the country and transform its image. As a result of these reforms, Georgia saw its scores quickly improve in governance rankings. For example, Georgia quickly rose in the World Bank’s Ease of Doing Business Index from a score of 112th in 2005 to a recent score of 16th in 2012. Further, Georgia ranks 64th out of 183 countries in the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index of 2011 with perceived corruption being lower than in several EU member states including Slovakia, Italy, Greece, Romania and Bulgaria. By contrast, it ranked 85th out of 102 countries in 2002.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid, p. 54.

¹⁰ The report remarks: “Georgia’s success destroys the myth that corruption is cultural and gives hope to reformers everywhere who aspire to clean up their public services.” Ibid, p. 104.

Georgia thus succeeded in translating reform achievements into a tangible recognition at an international level with the effect of creating a new image. Georgia's narrative of success was acknowledged and sustained through these improved scores.

A particular case in point in this effort to progress on international rankings to achieve recognition is Georgia's use of the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business Index. The Index helped the country successfully market its reforms to an international audience. Improved scores on the Doing Business Index represented a welcome opportunity for Georgia to create an image of success that could be marketed through the use of public relations firms. Georgia's active use of public relations and lobbying firms in Washington to promote this new image can be seen as an example of nation branding.¹¹ Schueth describes the concerted effort of the Georgian government and USAID to achieve a rapid ascension of the country on the Index.¹² The Doing Business Index is particular in that the World Bank not only measures the competitiveness and regulatory quality of states, but the Index is intended to facilitate reforms.¹³ The project's website offers a "user's guide" and details on the Index methodology that can be useful to calculate what reforms will produce the greatest ascension in the ranking.¹⁴ By learning from others what reforms produce the greatest results, states might be able to "catch up" quickly with more advanced economies. Indeed, the Index has the effect of setting an optimal development model that can be achieved by adopting "best practices". It presumes that states are equally positioned when entering the playing field.¹⁵ The Index thus stands for rapid progress in contrast to incremental and long-term reforms. The Index's particularities fit with the government's strategy after the revolution of achieving rapid success and advertising it in order to gain international and domestic support for more reforms. Progress in the Doing Business Index allows publicising achievements, while efficiently masking more problematic areas. Indeed, the Index, similarly to other auditing practices, reveals what it is intended to reveal, thereby concealing areas that cannot be grasped with its methodology.¹⁶ It renders certain chunks of reality measurable, quantifiable and visible, while concealing what it cannot measure. For example, the Index does not shed

¹¹ The Georgian government is alleged to have spent at least 1,5 million dollars on the services of Washington-based lobbying firms in 2012 to assist it with building contacts to decision-makers and reaching out to the US media. See Kucera, Joshua: "Caucasus, Central Asia: Look who's doing the K street shuffle", Eurasianet, 10 February 2011, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/62871> (accessed July 2011)

¹² Schueth, Sam: Assembling International Competitiveness: the Republic of Georgia, USAID, and the Doing Business project, *Economic Geography*, Vol. 87, Issue 1 (January 2011), pp. 51–77.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

light on insecure property rights and the lack of judicial independence even if these factors affect the quality of the business environment in Georgia. The Index is a valuable tool for the Georgian government in its strategy to change the country's image. Improved scores on governance rankings translate in increased investments and development assistance. The government widely used the label "world's top reformer" that it earned in 2007 as a result of its progress in a worldwide promotional campaign to attract investments. Advertised success translated in effective increasing investment: Georgia tripled its volume of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) inflows between 2004 and 2007. By 2007, Georgia attracted 1.6 billion US dollars with FDI exceeding foreign aid as a source of external finance.¹⁷ Schueth notes how a favourable rating from Standard and Poor's and the country's indexing as a "frontier market" in 2007 marked "Georgia's transformation from a failed state to a neoliberal vanguard state at the leading edge of capital market expansion into the periphery of the global economy".¹⁸ Georgia spent 7.8 million US dollars on its investment promotion campaign and secured the services of the international advertising firm M&C Saatchi.¹⁹ The promotional campaign used Georgia's scores in the Index to draw favourable comparisons with advanced economies such as Germany and Australia using the slogan "And the winner is: Georgia".²⁰ The campaign can be seen as a means to produce success by positioning Georgia as an attractive investment destination against advanced economies. The process of simplification used by the Index to assess a state's competitiveness allows creating criteria by which success can be measured and made tangible as well as creating a space where Georgia is able to compete with other leading economies.

The publication by the World Bank of a report on Georgia's anti-corruption reforms is part itself of this effort to publicise the country's achievements and upgrade it to the rank of a "model", for example for post-revolutionary states in the Middle East, instead of a simple recipient of external knowledge. The publication was released to coincide with the meeting between US President Barack Obama and President Mikheil Saakashvili in Washington in January 2012. The work of public relations and lobbying firms in Washington can be suspected behind the timing of the book's release and its coverage in major newspapers. The book does not claim to provide an objective assessment of the "success" of Georgia's

¹⁷ See UNCTAD Country Fact Sheet Georgia (2008), http://www.unctad.org/sections/dite_dir/docs/wir08_fs_ge_en.pdf (accessed July 2010). With the war and the global financial crisis of 2008, FDI dropped, while the country has again become more dependent on external aid.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 62.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 68.

²⁰ Ibid.

reforms, but it still has the effect of validating and consolidating the country's claims to success by chronicling its results and presenting Georgia as a model for other countries.²¹

The example of the strategic use of the Doing Business Index as a promotional resource to attract investments and change the country's image shows the importance accorded to perceptions by the government in the fight against corruption. It further shows how assessments of success are inevitably subjective and can be manipulated by actors. Success can be understood as interpretation with the challenge being to assert a particular interpretation of a reform's outcomes or target those reform sectors that produce desirable outcomes as in the example of Georgia's use of the Doing Business Index. Failure in reforms is not an objective assessment of the reforms' outcomes in terms of attaining a certain goal; it is rather a political problem, a "failure of interpretation" and a narrative that can be concealed or challenged by another narrative of success.

With the status of "reformer", Georgia was able to draw a demarcation line both in geographical and historical terms. This image of success is a means to demarcate the country from a post-Soviet legacy of failure and also from the post-Soviet space itself where neighbouring countries continue to be characterised by significant corruption levels. For example, Georgian officials regularly boast of the experience of visitors to the country who do not need to pay bribes to police officers like in neighbouring states. They make regularly references to the country's "success stories", primarily the police reform and Georgia's label as a "world's top reformer", to advertise the country's progress in international forums.

Furthermore, a country such as Russia cannot easily challenge Georgia's narrative of success based on its improved scores in corruption fighting as Russia itself is still characterised by widespread corruption. On the contrary, Georgia's democratic record is more open to criticism. The Georgian elite's choice of priorities and its choice to privilege state-building and modernisation and rapid results over democratisation may be seen as a strategy to earn quick success. A democracy narrative appears easier to challenge as shown in the November 2007 events when the dispersal of protesters by the Georgian police was met with international criticism. The narrative on reform serves to balance Georgia's weaker democratic record.

²¹ The World Bank's vice president Philippe H. Le Houerou says in the book's foreword on the publication: "it does *not* seek to evaluate Georgia's approach to reducing corruption, but to identify the key political economy factors that contributed to the anti-corruption reforms in Georgia.", in World Bank (2012).

Nevertheless, Georgia's anti-corruption record is also subject to alternative readings and contestation.

3. Challenging narratives and alternative readings of the government's anti-corruption reforms

There is a consensus on the fact that Georgia has been successful in eradicating street-level corruption. At the same time, certain observers point to the persistence of elite corruption as well as problems of accountability resulting from a weak checks-and-balances system.

As already observed, the Georgian government has sought to exert a monopoly in the field of anti-corruption by marginalising other anti-corruption actors such as NGOs and international organisations through its energetic reforms. It has sought to transform the country's image by emphasising the role of perceptions and the dimension of narrative in the fight against corruption. Reforms were prioritised that could produce visible results and whose outcomes could be translated into "success stories" on a domestic and international level. In spite of its efforts to promote a narrative of success, the government is confronted with alternative narratives that question this image.

It fails in some cases to impose a particular reading of its anti-corruption actions as the very use of the label "anti-corruption" to describe certain activities is contested by other actors. However, the fact that its actions are subjected to different readings represents at the same time a limit and an opportunity for the government.

A first hurdle in the government's attempt to establish an authoritative frame of interpretation to read its actions is represented by the Soviet and post-Soviet legacy. This legacy is characterised by the widespread distrust of an official rhetoric and the systematic suspicion of hidden motives behind government actions. Socialism was characterised by the failure to translate an official ideology into institutionalised structures.²² Neo-patrimonialism and a logic of clientelism became mechanisms to integrate individuals into the state structures.²³ A systematic disjuncture between discourse and practice and a divorce between words and deeds resulted from the use of clientelism to solve the problem of establishing functional

²² See Christophe, Barbara: Zwischen Fassaden der Anarchie und regulativer Allmacht - Metamorphosen des Leviathan in der georgischen Provinz, Habilitationsschrift zur Vorlage bei der Kulturwissenschaftlichen Fakultät der Europa-Universität Viadrina in Frankfurt Oder, 2003, p. 49.

²³ Ibid, p. 51.

institutions in socialism. The Shevardnadze's period also actively relied on neo-patrimonialistic structures contributing to the demise of a notion of public interest. As a result, it remains difficult for the post-revolutionary government to devise a new notion of public good and hidden motives are inevitably suspected behind its actions.

Further, different actors are participating in sustaining or challenging Georgia's narrative of success depending on whether the country's story coincides with their own efforts to produce success or not. The community of actors that have sought to promote Georgia's image includes, for example, conservative think-tanks in the United States such as the Heritage Foundation as well as the World Bank. Indeed, Georgia's image of success fits with their own narratives of success and their belief in the benefits of economic liberalisation. Georgia's record after the revolution is challenged instead by other actors that point to democratic shortcomings behind the country's reform achievements. These actors include international NGOs such as Freedom House and Amnesty International, but also domestic NGOs such as the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association.

Certain actors such as Transparency International both sustain and challenge Georgia's image. Transparency International acknowledges Georgia's progress, while also noting certain shortcomings. Indeed, Georgia's emphasis on political will and a strong leadership to fight corruption contradicts the organisation's belief in the necessity of institutionalising the fight against corruption and the centrality of checks-and-balances mechanisms to hold the government accountable. While the World Bank's publication on Georgia's reforms emphasises the importance of a strong executive in implementing reforms, the Transparency International Georgia Integrity report of 2010 criticises the pre-eminence of the executive over other branches of power as a factor favouring corruption.²⁴ These two narratives on Georgia, even if they converge in some aspects, show how success in anti-corruption is subject to different interpretations and how the government's narrative is adopted and sustained by certain actors and challenged by others.

In the case of the World Bank, the organisation had an interest in promoting the government's narrative as it validated its own approach to promote and stimulate reforms through the Doing Business Index. Further, the Bank had an interest in emphasising the country's liberalisation reforms and its efforts to limit state intervention. At the same time,

²⁴ See World Bank (2012) and Transparency International Georgia: National Integrity System Assessment Georgia 2010, Tbilisi 2011.

Georgia's reforms inevitably contradict the World Bank's own promotion of knowledge as a solution to the corruption problem. The Georgian example emphasises the need for political will over the need for knowledge as well as the primacy of decisive action over planning and strategizing on the basis of expertise. The publication does mention the use of international experience among the ten factors that explain the country's reform success - this point can be seen as a concession to the World Bank - but with the remark that this experience has been adapted to local circumstances.²⁵ The report refers to the adoption of US and Italian anti-mafia legislation and the fact that several members of the new government had received their education abroad as examples of a transfer of international experience.²⁶ It does not refer to the use of the anti-corruption knowledge produced by the World Bank itself and Transparency International neither to the advice of international anti-corruption organisations. Further, the report says: "Reformers drew on international experience. But, they are quick to point out, they adapted it to Georgia's unique circumstance and developed their own solutions."²⁷

The question of the role of knowledge in fighting corruption can explain Transparency International's more uneasy validation of Georgia's narrative. The integrity report does insist on the necessity to use knowledge and expertise based on the belief in the possibility of quantifying and measuring corruption.²⁸ For example, it notes the necessity for the government to conduct research aiming at qualifying and quantifying corruption as a means to inform and trigger new policies.²⁹ The idea is that better policies can be achieved through the knowledge of the forms, causes, manifestations and types of corruption, a research which is sponsored by Transparency International itself. Transparency International's partial validation of the government's record can be explained by its policy of cooperating with all stakeholders, in particular governments, in the fight against corruption instead of exposing specific cases of corruption.

The adoption of a national anti-corruption strategy in 2005 following recommendations by the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) can be analysed as a case where narratives of success do not appear to converge. The Georgian government appears averse to the setting up of special bodies and a special

²⁵ World Bank (2012), p. 11.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 98.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Transparency International Georgia (2011).

²⁹ Ibid, p. 25.

legislation and strategy to combat corruption. Anti-corruption bodies have acquired a negative meaning before the revolution as “façade institutions” with no real powers. They also do not fit well with the government’s libertarian agenda. To some extent these bodies can be seen as supporting the narrative of success of international anti-corruption organisations and the global anti-corruption field itself as they make visible the use of international instruments to combat corruption. They “embody” the belief in the existence of a universal knowledge to combat corruption and the possibility of using this knowledge to devise effective instruments. Further, they represent the belief in the inclusiveness of the fight against corruption and the necessity to involve different actors including civil society organisations into the design of anti-corruption policies. However, they rather contradict the government’s own narrative of success. Indeed, the adoption of a national anti-corruption strategy is an acknowledgement that the problem of corruption still exists in the country and the government needs external advice and a special strategy plan to tackle it. The strategy contradicts the government’s disbelief in the necessity of strategizing to combat corruption. The government still accepted to adopt the strategy and an anti-corruption legislation to the extent that this adoption could translate into improved scores in governance rankings. But the strategy appears less like a document guiding the government’s anti-corruption measures as as a document containing measures already approved. For example, the TI Integrity report 2010 on Georgia remarks on the 2010 Action Plan for implementation of the strategy that it appears that the AP “was compiled on the basis of general reforms that were already planned in different government agencies, rather than through an analysis of specific corruption-related issues”.³⁰ The strategy is used more as another means to translate the government’s anti-corruption record to an international audience than as a strategic means to produce this record. It produces success by offering a particular interpretation of the government’s measures in the language of international organisations rather than serving to achieve success. The strategy is not mentioned as a useful tool for the conduct of anti-corruption reforms in Georgia in the World Bank publication of 2012.³¹ The report rather insists on the importance of a “flexible strategy” and pragmatism in the implementation of reforms in contrast to a more formalised document that is difficult to adapt to ever-changing circumstances.³²

³⁰ Transparency International Georgia (2011), p. 28.

³¹ World Bank (2012).

³² Ibid.

As another example of the non-convergence of narratives of success, the reform of the state audit agency Chamber of Control can further be analysed as a case where the government faces difficulties to assert a particular reading of its anti-corruption reforms and where its narrative is being challenged by other actors. It reveals the potential for confusion and ambiguity resulting from the use of different anti-corruption narratives. Similarly to the anti-corruption strategy, the Georgian government did not consider the Chamber of Control as being a major tool in the fight against corruption. As already observed, the government has emphasised the central role of the executive and of a close-knit team to promote reforms. Following the revolution, the Chamber is not only seen as a marginal anti-corruption actor in contrast to agencies such as the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the prosecutor's office, but also as an integral part of the corruption system of the previous government. The government has also chosen to concentrate on the reform of agencies central to the state-building process such as the police and where corruption immediately affects the life of citizens rather than independent control agencies. Further, the police reform had the potential to become a visible "success story" of the fight against corruption. The Chamber's reform was not in tune with the government's libertarian agenda and its distrust in the ability of "independent" control agencies to provide valuable public goods and services. The Chamber was rather seen as a candidate for abolition than reform and restructuring by the government. The outsourcing of auditing functions to private companies was even regarded as a possible solution to the problem of the Chamber's reform.³³

The Chamber's role in the fight against corruption is problematic to the extent that it is a potential source of alternative corruption narratives and a potential challenger to the government's anti-corruption story. Indeed, the Chamber fulfilled the role of producer of compromising material ("*kompromaty*") in the corruption system of the Shevardnadze's years, thus providing an important resource in the control and subordination of officials. The Chamber did not expose already existing cases of corruption; it actively created these cases by obtaining bribes from public officials in exchange for not revealing compromising material. Further, the Chamber was used as a political tool and its exposure of corruption was arbitrary as it served the political purposes of different political factions. The Chamber was thus a producer of corruption narratives and an integral part of the political game between different factions that competed for influence in the Shevardnadze's years. The exposure of corruption for political ends in Shevardnadze's times was not overtly damaging for the

³³ Interviews with government officials and experts, Tbilisi, 2008.

government as it participated in an informal system that promoted corrupt behaviours. Corruption narratives are more problematic under the new government that has built its credibility on the integrity of public officials. The government appears concerned with the arbitrary use of the Chamber as a political tool to produce these narratives.

After the revolution, the Chamber's reform was not seen as a priority. A new law on the Chamber of Control was passed only in 2009 and reform steps were slow during the period 2004-2009. One can assume that the government favoured the existence of an inactive audit agency that would not challenge the anti-corruption narrative it sought to establish after the revolution. The agency could not be assigned any active role in anti-corruption reforms. However, the lack of reforms actually created problems as well, as a passive agency had the potential to produce challenging narratives on the official fight against corruption.

Indeed, the ambiguity of the Chamber's status creates confusion in the reading of the government's actions. The Chamber can be seen as having two different faces: one as a reforming audit institution with the potential to reduce corruption by holding the government accountable and one as a political tool and producer of corruption narratives.

This confusion creates ambiguity in the interpretation of the government's actions and represents a potential for challenging the government's anti-corruption narrative as revealed in a scandal that broke out in 2007. The Chamber released a report on the Ministry of Education accusing it of mismanagement of funds. The use of different narratives on corruption and the fight against corruption were revealed during the scandal. The Minister of Education Kakha Lomaia accused the Chamber's employees of incompetence, lack of professionalism and corruptness. It depicted the agency as an old Soviet-style institution working in an old-fashioned and inefficient way. Opposition parties used the scandal to question the anti-corruption reforms in the education sector. They based their allegations on the image of the audit agency as a modern institution working according to international auditing standards. By doing this, opposition parties aligned themselves with the international anti-corruption discourse that sees performing audit institutions as a key aspect in the prevention of corruption in government structures. However, in the context of post-Soviet Georgia, "independence" from political interests remains a difficult notion. The exposure of corruption cases inevitably becomes a basis for the circulation of corruption narratives and an institution such as the audit agency can be easily used for political purposes. Indeed, the scandal between the Chamber and the Ministry of Education was attributed to factions in the

team in power that wanted to side-line Lomaia as potential candidate for the position of Prime Minister.³⁴ Employees at the agency deny any political interests behind their report on the Ministry.³⁵

The scandal revealed that an unreformed Chamber was in fact damaging for the government's reputation to the extent that its actions could be read in a problematic way. For example, almost 600 employees were fired from the Chamber in 2007. The Chairmanship of the Chamber presented this reform move as an anti-corruption measure aimed at clearing the way for a new generation of professional auditors. However, the firing of staff was interpreted by the opposition as an attempt to "silence" the agency.³⁶ The opposition interpreted these actions as being directed at a modern audit institution, while the government presented the firing of staff as a necessary measure in the fight against corruption targeting an old-style Soviet agency that was still far away from international auditing standards.

Another narrative with the potential to challenge the government's actions was represented by international organisations. A number of donor organisations implement projects at the Chamber (World Bank, UNDP and the German Development Agency) that are targeted at the training of staff, the restructuring of the agency as well as the alignment of its auditing procedures with international standards. The slowness of reforms, the absence of a legal framework (a new law on the Chamber was passed only in 2009) and the firing of staff (some had been trained by donors) challenged the donors' activities. The government's commitment to the Chamber's reform and correspondingly to the fight against corruption was questioned. In the context of large amounts of international aid being disbursed to Georgia following the August 2008 war with Russia, the government was pressured by the European Union to undertake reforms.³⁷

In 2008-2009, a series of reforms were implemented with the passing of a new legislation, the naming of a new Chairman and new measures aimed at restructuring the agency, bringing its auditing procedures in line with international standards and training new auditors. This series of measures can be seen as following from the realization that an unreformed auditing agency is more damaging to the government's narrative than a more active and reformed one. Indeed, new reform steps brought some good scores to the government in external anti-corruption

³⁴ Interviews with opposition representatives, Tbilisi, 2008.

³⁵ Interviews with employees of the Chamber of Control, Tbilisi, 2008.

³⁶ Interviews with opposition representatives, Tbilisi, 2008.

³⁷ Interviews with donor representatives, Tbilisi, 2008.

evaluations. A new Chairman who had gained a reputation as an efficient and honest manager was named and brought a new team with him. Audit reports were published on certain officials in the government, but only at deputy level. Further, the acknowledgement that the new Chairmanship was in need of external expertise to improve the agency's performance allowed the audit institution to converge in a more coherent narrative of reform success with international organisations. Previous radical reform steps had rather created contradictions with the narrative of international organisations resulting in the questioning of the government's narrative and its actual commitment to anti-corruption.

However, a recent twist in the audit agency's reform shows a new problematic move. The Chamber has been accused of partiality and lack of independence in February 2012 after having fined a new opposition party for making illegal political donations. These recent steps show that there is potential for a new active agency not only to be used for showcasing the government's commitment to anti-corruption, but also to be used for political purposes. Reforms that were initiated to answer the demands of international organisations and create a more functioning audit agency finally find another use through the agency's revelation of inadequacies in the funding of opposition parties. However, this use poses again problems regarding the reading of the government's actions and the "genuineness" of its commitment to fight corruption.

The audit agency's reform thus shows how the government is faced with alternative anti-corruption narratives from other international and domestic actors and how it seeks to challenge or align these with its own narrative. It also shows how the government uses to its own advantage the inherent potential for different interpretations of its actions as it can play on different levels. A new active audit agency has earned him recently some negative headlines, but it has still improved its scores in external anti-corruption evaluations. A negative reading of its actions can always be balanced with another more positive assessment. This balancing act and the attempt to gain the approval of different actors at various levels are ultimately less costly than the elusive goal of establishing a single narrative.

The inherent subjectivity of assessments of success in the fight against corruption actually plays in the hands of the Georgian government as it can gain the validation of certain actors on certain assessments as a way to counterbalance other negative assessments. There cannot be any definite story on Georgia's status as an anti-corruption model in the post-Soviet space, but the story is at least circulating, developing its own dynamic and being reproduced by

different actors. By being challenged, “success stories” in anti-corruption may even become reinforced as they are widely referred to.

4. Conclusion: limits and opportunities of different narratives on Georgia’s reforms

The analysis of Georgia’s anti-corruption reforms after the revolution has shown the central dimension of narratives in these reforms. The government has paid attention to the role of perceptions by seeking to establish a particular anti-corruption narrative or a particular frame to interpret its actions. It has implemented measures with the potential to become “success stories” and it has used them to transform the country’s image by seeking the validation of other actors on its reform achievements.

However, the government is still confronted with the existence of alternative readings of its anti-corruption actions and its anti-corruption record. These alternative narratives point to shortcomings in its reforms, in particular regarding the aspect of the weakness of checks-and-balances mechanisms and the lack of strong and independent control institutions. It needs to adopt certain measures that do not align well with its anti-corruption narrative such as the adoption of a national anti-corruption strategy and the reform of the state audit agency to demonstrate its commitment to the fight against corruption in the authorised language of the global anti-corruption field. Even if these measures create contradictions with its own narrative that emphasises the central role of a strong executive and the benefits of pragmatism and flexibility over strategizing in the fight against corruption, these steps still earn him good scores in external anti-corruption assessments.

The impossibility of establishing a definitive assessment of Georgia’s success in fighting corruption and the inherent subjectivity of assessments of success create both limits and opportunities for the government. The Georgian government faces alternative meanings and alternative interpretations to its anti-corruption measures. For example, its efforts to “clean up” the state audit agency by firing staff are inevitably interpreted as a move to curb the independence of the agency and establish a control from the centre on the controlling institution. At the same time, the existence of different narratives on Georgia’s reforms allows the government to mask or “attenuate” certain deficiencies by constantly referring to positive assessments. “Success stories” such as the police reform become authoritative assessments of Georgia’s reforms by being widely referred to in international evaluations.

The analysis of success as interpretation allows shedding light on how actors seek to establish certain authoritative assessments that become “obligatory passage points” in narratives on the fight against corruption. The adoption of an anti-corruption strategy and a functioning audit agency are necessary steps to gain recognition from international anti-corruption organisations. At the same time, acknowledging Georgia’s “success stories” in anti-corruption, for example the police reform and its status as reformer, constitutes also a necessary reference in any assessment of Georgia’s reforms. The World Bank publication actively contributes to the creation of these particular referentials. Anti-corruption actors thus devise “labels” and “stories” that constitute automatic reference points for other actors.

Contradictions in the Georgian government’s anti-corruption narrative that arise from its need to obtain the validation of different actors on its representation are not necessarily a hindrance. The government adapts its narrative to these different needs and emphasises those aspects of its own story that allow a convergence with the narrative of success of other actors.

In particular, two main narratives co-exist regarding the story of Georgia’s post-revolutionary reforms: a “democracy” and a “reformer and modernisation” narrative. Even if actors point to democratic shortcomings, they will need to refer to the “reformer” narrative, thus automatically giving credit to the government’s achievements. For example, an article on “the Georgian paradox” emphasises these two sides of Georgia’s story, but make wide reference to the country’s achievements listed in the World Bank publication.³⁸ The existence of two discourses on Georgia’s post-revolutionary reforms is not necessarily to the government’s disadvantage, as actors commenting on Georgia even with a critical eye still need to make reference to its official story of success.

The World Bank publication and the TI Integrity report can be read as two sides of a same coin each putting more emphasis on particular aspects and a particular narrative, but still contributing to consolidate Georgia’s image as a central actor in the fight against corruption. Similarly to the Georgian government, both actors are also willing to allow room for a certain ambiguity and adapt their narratives to different situations for the benefit of gaining the validation of the Georgian government on their assessments even if they both attribute a different value to this approval.

³⁸ Caryl, Christian: The Georgian paradox, Foreign Policy, 31 January 2012.

Georgia's effort to produce a narrative of success shall be understood against the background of the rise of international examination practices. Indeed, countries are increasingly subjected to the application of external labels such as "failed state", "hybrid democracy" or "reformer" through the use of examination practices represented by governance rankings. Countries such as Georgia need to open a space of investigation and subject themselves to this examination or they risk attracting a doubt of failure on them. Löwenheim applies Foucault's notion of discourse as power to study how these examination practices open a particular discursive field.³⁹ A country such as Georgia seeks to actively invest the field of production of governance assessments by fabricating its own labels. While it must abide to the narratives of international organisations by adapting its reforms to their needs, it also induces external actors to reference its own story. In a world where increasingly more actors are becoming producers of narratives including think-tanks, public relations firms, NGOs and the experts' communities, the Georgian government seeks to use and select appropriate "channels of communication and validation" such as the Doing Business Index to advertise an image of success against uneasy odds. It is pro-active in setting the terms in which its reforms can be read and interpreted by circulating certain "labels" and "stories" instead of being the passive subject of external labelling practices. These ready-made narratives devised with the help of public relations firms can be adopted by other actors with little efforts as shown in the media coverage following the release of the World Bank's book on Georgia's reforms. Indeed, there is an increasing demand for ready-made narratives in a world of fast communication.

The inherent subjectivity of assessments of success in anti-corruption invites the researcher on corruption and anti-corruption to reflect on its own position in the field. It invites him/her to consider studies on corruption published by organisations such as Transparency International and the World Bank as well as governance rankings not as authoritative assessments and an authoritative evaluation of the object of study – Georgia's anti-corruption reforms –, but as an object of study in themselves in the form of interpretations contributing to the constitution of a particular image of the country. Researchers on corruption and anti-corruption are challenged to consider their role in the constitution of these assessments and not become themselves the indirect (re)producers of these narratives, but rather engage in the study of the production, use and effects of these very discourses.

³⁹ See Löwenheim, Oded: Examining the state: a Foucauldian perspective on international "governance indicators", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2008), pp. 255-74.