

Rear (Overton) Window

If you have been a Georgian liberal observing the 26 October 2024 election, you may be excused for sympathizing with a character from Hitchcock's classic thriller, "The Rear Window": much like James Stewart's affable but increasingly paranoid persona, you may feel bedridden, left to contemplate the developments passively, peering over the neighborhood, wondering if the bad-tempered husband (the oligarch) has killed his little-loved wife (democracy) and buried it in the backyard, or have you just imagined it.

Just as the protests unfold and the results are challenged, Georgian democracy is simultaneously more vibrant than ever, with the promise of new branches burgeoning on its almost dissected and moribund trunk, and also has its institutions gangrened by the oligarchic state capture.

So what do we see, peering through that rear window from the hotel of missed opportunities? And how do we know if what we see is a fact or a mere figment of our inflamed imagination?

Forging the Cultural Hegemony

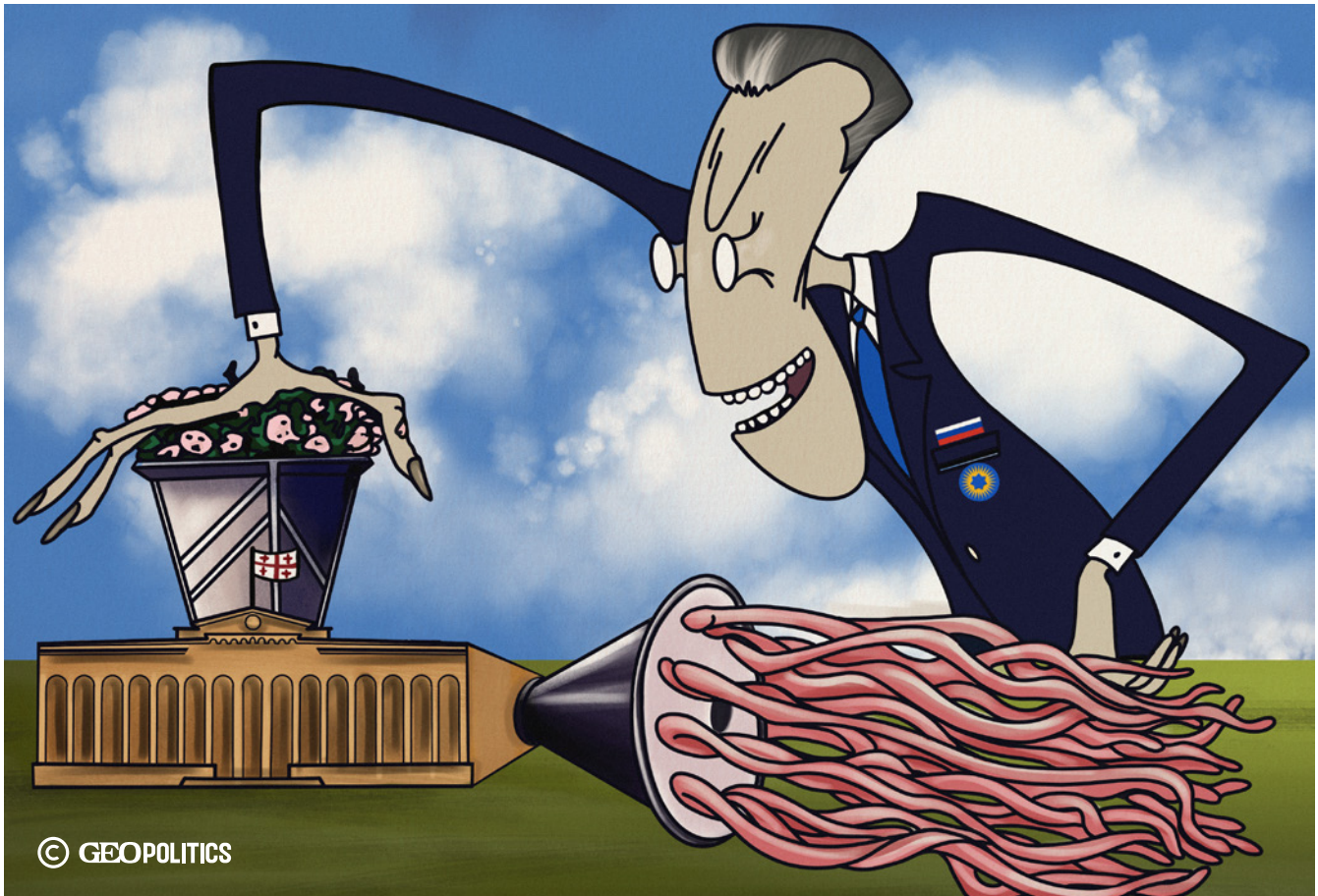
"The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born; now is the time of monsters" - in times of upheaval, it is always helpful to take up the words of Antonio Gramsci. Apart from presaging the "time of the monsters" coming during the inter-regnum of political formations, it was also he who formulated some key concepts that intuitively respond to such times while remaining sufficiently flexible for adapting to politics in a state of flux.

One such concept is "cultural hegemony" - the idea that a worldview captures and dominates the imagination of a particular country or a concrete social class at a particular time, only to be dethroned by the other. Such ideas are articulated by the intellectuals and they frame and shape the debate. Through cultural hegemony, says Gramsci, the elites control us, and to regain lost control, the aspiring classes must re-capture this cultural hegemony - or the narrative, in modern parlance - too.



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It is impossible to deny that the narrative linking the liberal and pro-European path to progress has been dominant in Georgia since the mid-19th century, when the young aristocratic elite emancipated itself from the vassal mentality of their fathers and dared to imagine Georgia as a nation free from Russia's internal oppression and external imperial hegemony.

This was quite common for the national liberation movements of Central and Eastern Europe at the time, which resulted in the emancipation of the “captive nations” from the multi-ethnic empires—Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, and Russian—at the turn of the 20th century.

Georgia, too, saw its first modern republic emerge in 1918, only to be promptly submerged by the rising Soviet empire in 1921. Yet, almost paradoxically, the hegemonic idea carried onwards, refracted through the prism of Soviet propaganda and adulterated with ideology to the extent of sometimes becoming unrecognizable.

Moreover, the ideas of the late 19th century authors and fathers of the modern Georgian nation, like Ilia Chavchavadze, gradually became frozen into a dogma - a trend that continued in post-Soviet times, when Chavchavadze was sanctified by the Georgian Orthodox Church as St. Ilia the Truthful. This appropriation became possible because the 19th-century movement was both trying to establish and secure national identity (through references to shared history, language, and demands for the re-emancipation of the Georgian Church from the Russian Orthodox Patriarchate) and instilling the ideas of solidarity, individual rights, and modern (European) education. In this sense, it was both conservative and progressive.

The progressive strand found its political expression in the Social Democratic Party that dominated the Georgian Democratic Republic in 1918-1921. Somewhat paradoxically, the conservative, identitarian, and anti-imperialist narrative was recuperated by the Communist rulers, then by parts of the national movement in the 1990s and the Georgian

Orthodox Church.

And, thus, while the cultural hegemony of the revered authors held on the surface, their political message got diluted, adulterated, and split into multiple, often ideologically disparate threads. Iliia Chavchavadze and St. Iliia the Truthful are the same person, but whether an official or politician is hanging his portrait or his religious icon in the office carries an entirely different message.

Apart from a brief period of Zviad Gamsakhurdia's rule, when he proposed a pan-Caucasian solidarity agenda, a consensus where the integration with the West was considered synonymous with Georgia's independence held. This narrative remained politically dominant, famously expressing itself in the phrase pronounced by Zurab Zhvania in Strasbourg as the country joined the Council of Europe – "I am Georgian, therefore, I am European."

For most of the 1990s, Europe's "end of history" moment meant that an eventual integration into Europe became synonymous with the interlinked elements of free market and democratic governance. The European Union's Copenhagen Criteria essentially reiterate that a liberal system of government and the market economy is synonymous with becoming the European state and, thus, pre-conditions to anyone joining that select club. For decades, Georgia struggled but tried to demonstrate it was worthy of its intimately held (but not widely recognized) European identity. Fulfilling the culturally hegemonic domestic narrative self-evidently implied and included the adoption of these elements of the European hegemonic narrative.

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With the Georgian Dream's pre-election campaign in 2024, that hegemonic narrative was put in the meat grinder. For the first time, the ruling party, and not some fringe group, has argued that the model of liberal democracy was not acceptable for Georgia and that European integration under the Copenhagen criteria was not desirable either. What happened? How did the unthinkable idea "suddenly" lay claim to being the mainstream?

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In a concept that indirectly echoes the Gramscian concepts, Joseph P. Overton, a policy analyst, proposed that an idea's political viability depends mainly on whether it falls within this window of acceptability. The "[Overton window](#)" frames the range of policies a politician can recommend without appearing too extreme to gain or keep public office. Through political discourse, media control, and information manipulation, an idea that was considered unthinkable may become acceptable and even sensible. The Georgian Dream seems to have managed to throw open that window. But maybe this window was cracked open way before?

Forfeiting the Cultural Hegemony

The idea of a nation is aspirational. It does not represent the factual, current state of affairs but is projecting the number of conditions and characteristics for the imagined future community. This is especially true for the democratic system where the future of that community hinges on debate and deliberation - a time-consuming process managed by and through institutions - where the contours

of that future community are continuously being (re)defined.

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Between what is now and the desired outcome, there is an intervening time period during which we - the national community - have to adjust our daily lives to the reality of that process and its inevitable imperfections when compared to aspiration. That is why we say that democracy is being reformed daily. It means that the citizens and the body politic, in general, accept the necessity of a compromise with the reality that does not quite match their ideal: for example, human rights are not as universal and well-protected as we would have wished to, the institutions are not quite as efficient, representation is not quite universal, etc.. In other words, an imperfect democracy is not a bug; it is a feature.

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But what happens if a society, like the Georgian one, has to compromise its culturally hegemonic pro-European (subtext - pro-democratic) narrative with a fundamentally incompatible reality, for example, that of external occupation and 70-year life in a totalitarian state?

One can argue that this forced transfer to coping mode, the emergence of the “trench mentality,” transforms the hegemonic narrative from a living, dynamic program into a cabalistic incantation, a dogma. At the same time, many compromises occur in daily life that often contradict this dogmatic premise.

One of the sharpest commentators of Georgian mentality, novelist Giorgi Akhvlediani (writing under pen-name Aka Morchiladze), wrote in his book *Obole* that “Georgians’ thinking is not fit for the straight roads, it is always like a mountain serpentine.” In political life, that serpentine folding on itself often became the Orwellian “doublethink” - live in the Soviet Union but assert being Georgian, join the Communist party but baptize your children, be a Stalinist but wish for your country’s independence. In such conditions, the narrative may remain dominant, but the accumulated contradictory lived experience means the conviction is not.

In this journal, we have often quoted that figure of around 80% of Georgians are consistently for the country’s European and NATO integration, and a similarly large portion of the population proclaims that democracy is the best system of government for Georgia. Yet, the [cultural barometer surveys](#) have pointed out time and again that the core indicators of tolerance to different opinions and minority groups are not compatible with European liberal values.

During the 2024 election campaign, the opposition and civil society interpreted the polling to suggest that losing the European promise—now finally within grasp—would be unacceptable for the majority of Georgians. The ruling party gambled that Georgians would be too afraid to drop their “coping response” in uncertain international circumstances and would choose to remain “dogmatic nationalists”, that they would not risk running for the (uncertain and distant) European cover.

In doing so, they exposed the shallowness of the hegemonic narrative and prized open the Overton window.

Calibrating the Extent of the Problem

We are far from suggesting that the Georgian Dream developed a new hegemonic narrative. Their proposal has not won the majority over – even though the party claims 54% voted for it; it has been [convincingly argued](#) that this figure is grossly exaggerated.

Yet, the argument holds sway over at least one-third of voting Georgians who seem to genuinely vote for GD. Given the GD's massive use of propaganda, their alternative narrative—of the decadent West, the EU being culturally incompatible with Georgia, and liberal democracy being dangerous for the nation's survival—is gaining a competitive edge.

What is perhaps worse is that the previously dominant cultural narrative shows signs of becoming dangerously de-linked not only from people's lived experiences but also from their aspirations. To advance the hypothesis of how that might have happened, we need to use another concept of Gramsci – that of “organic intellectuals.” These people – who emerged from a specific social movement or class – formulate and articulate the cultural narrative proper to that class. They are “organic” in the sense that they are intrinsically linked to the lived experiences of their group, as opposed to “historic” intellectuals, who belong to the classes and groups whose cultural domination has passed or is passing.

In recent history, the culturally hegemonic narrative of pro-European, liberal, and democratic Georgia has been carried by the intellectuals emerging from the dominant political class (politicians and public administration), civil society movements, and urban youth. Many of these intellectuals, still active today, were formed in the mid to late 1990s when the liberal agenda seemed

to have triumphed once and for all. This intellectual group has internalized and promoted the idea that rejoining the European family of liberal nations was a historically justified accomplishment, a rational thing to do, but also that it was a choice without a viable alternative – the only other alternative being the “Asian barbarism,” if we use the term that the 1918-21 political class used to refer to Bolshevism.

Yet, two concomitant processes have been undermining this narrative.

One is internal to Georgia: the culturally dominant *intelligentsia* long ignored and dismissed the existence of “other Georgia,” more conservative, mostly outside the capital or big cities, or on the urban social fringe influenced by alternative, traditionalist narratives. There has been a body of printed press that these citizens consumed and that the liberal intellectuals dismissed. But these very papers were famously endorsed by the Georgian Dream's leader Bidzina Ivanishvili., crucially there is the influence of the largest non-state actor – the Georgian Orthodox Church, whose narrative has been pivoting steadily towards conspiracy theories and millennialism.

Throughout the past two decades, the social chasm between the “two Georgias” has been growing: the liberal elites send their children to private schools, to elitist faculties of the universities or abroad, and drive cars rather than take public transport. The peripheral Georgia goes to public schools where the quality of education is dismal, served by aging teachers, and penetrated by the reactionary elements of the Orthodox Church. They often live in financial and social precarity and (reasonably) fear change. The two “bubbles” meet perhaps only as parts of extended families – but even those links have been weakening as urban elites tend to become increasingly atomized.

Another process is external: in Europe and the

United States, illiberal leaders have been articulating their narratives and gaining traction at home. With the Orbans, Vucics, and Trumps of this world, the liberal West is no longer the only choice on the Western menu. Even Western liberal communities were late to realize that this challenge was gaining credibility, and the domestic liberal elite has operated on the assumption that “illiberal international” is a temporary, fringe phenomenon.

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There are no studies that would help us analyze the elite behavior, but we could intuitively argue that the liberal elite in Georgia, convinced of its hegemony at home (underpinned by classical Georgian authors) and its support from abroad (manifested through democracy support programs) has succumbed to hubris. The Georgian liberal elite also wrongly assumed its own homogeneity. Surely, the elite is interested in maintaining the hegemony, and thus, there are costs associated with breaking the ranks. The incentive structure favors talking liberally, even if you have doubts about walking the walk. The persistent authoritarian tendencies of Georgian leaders Eduard Shevardnadze and Mikheil Saakashvili were checked by their desire to continue belonging to the Western world – as both personal and national choices.

The emergence of Bidzina Ivanishvili and Vladimir Putin’s military challenge to the liberal West have upended this equilibrium. The current illiberal narrative of the GD links well with the global-conspiracy mindset that has long dominated the press and media eagerly consumed by the “other Georgia.” What is more, Ivanishvili’s humble personal background and his apparent personal belief

in shadowy forces that are deciding world affairs rhyme well with beliefs of this wider socio-political group.

Once Ivanishvili, whose personal wealth equaled 24.8% of Georgia’s GDP in 2023, threw his weight behind the illiberal choice, the incentive structure inside the Georgian elite changed, the costs of flipping the loyalties dropped. It is no accident that the current lineup of the Georgian Dream’s visible leadership is overwhelmingly composed of individuals who belonged to the liberal elite – working for international and foreign foundations, and even civil society groups. One of the Georgian Dream’s most ardent illiberal and nativist factions, People’s Power, has in its ranks the former Public Defender who championed the human rights of repressed minorities in the mid-2000s.

Their defection from the liberal hegemonic narrative is perhaps partly a matter of shared worldviews, but incentives posed by money and access to power surely help. The top lineup of the party supporters has benefited from contracts and kickbacks as elite corruption has been on the rise.

But it is not only the elite that was affected. For everyone, the price of disloyalty in the economy, increasingly controlled by few firms with ties to the power center, is also mounting. And importantly, “other Georgia” is also Georgia at the mercy of the Georgian Dream. Having captured the state, it politically weaponizes the social protection net it has expanded.

Existence Determines Consciousness?

The Georgian Dream’s rule has benefited those living in precarity. Mikheil Saakashvili’s rule was marked by a mad race for liberal modernization that has slowed to a muddy trudge. His adminis-

tration is blamed for accentuating inequalities, even though the level of inequality remained high and [essentially unchanged](#). But perceptions matter.

Under Georgian Dream's watch, social handouts have increased considerably: the volume of direct social assistance [grew](#) by 80% in 2019-2023 alone. The share of the population in absolute poverty dropped from 23% (2014) to 11.8% (2023). Especially after the pandemic, the number of social assistance users [skyrocketed](#), reaching 672 thousand in 2023. Public sector employment has also grown exponentially: by the end of 2022, 24% of Georgia's employment (308 thousand jobs) [was in the public sector](#) (civil servants plus other quasi-governmental agencies, local government, plus education system). Even though their salaries are lower than in private business, public employment is often the only employment available in rural areas.

Vast swathes of the Georgian population are imbibing the generous dollops of government propaganda (three pro-government channels consistently top the rating lists and are the ones with nationwide coverage), and are benefiting financially from GD rule. They are still living in precarity, which may surge at the whim of the ruling party which became intertwined with public administration. No wonder that these citizens are receptive and vulnerable to the message coming from the ruling party which tells them that the relatively good days may end in a catastrophe of war.

Sure, many of them may support Europe in principle, accounting for the part of that notorious 80% of pro-European Georgians; they may hear the CSO and opposition calls that the European future is better and more prosperous. But they also live in conditions where today's small but certain financial benefit is preferable to tomorrow's considerable but highly uncertain one.

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The liberal elite has lost its narrative hegemony because it lost its living ties with that “other Georgia” and consistently fails to generate solidarity. Ilia Chavchavadze and the 19th-century Georgian aristocratic elite invested heavily in educating the peasants and commoners. The Society for Spreading Literacy in Georgia, funded through voluntary contributions and impounding impoverished aristocrats' lands, has had an enormous impact. The political leaders in the early 20th century emerged from these classes – village teachers' children, petite bourgeoisie, and educated peasants. The 21st-century elites, driven by ideas of economic liberalism and instinctively trusting the market's invisible hand to set things right, may have been too slow to awaken to the need to forge similar linkages.

Is It Too Late?

Georgia's democratic dream is weakened by these elections and its pro-democratic elite can no longer count on the hegemony of its ideas.

The 2024 election results are hotly contested, and the battle for accurately reflecting the voters' will is raging as this article is being written. But one thing is sure: Georgia's democratic dream is weakened by these elections and its pro-democratic elite can no longer count on the hegemony of its ideas. Yet, the country still possesses one of the most vibrant civic cultures and organized civic movements in the region. The resilience of Georgia as a democratic state would depend on its ability to win the battle for the hearts and minds of ordinary Georgians – through solidarity and without counting too much on external help ■