

Anatomy and Chronology of a State Capture in Georgia (Part 2)

In the previous volume of *GEOpolitics*, I described how Bidzina Ivanishvili and his Georgian Dream (GD) party monopolized political power in the Parliament, captured executive and judiciary branches, and asserted control over essential media resources.

However, it is essential to note that the mere capture of state institutions does not provide a comprehensive understanding of the extent of the problem facing Georgia's democracy. To fully grasp the situation, we must also examine how state capture resulted in the fragmentation of the political spectrum, weakened opposition parties, manipulation of the electoral system, defamation of the NGO sector, misuse of the state security service for political gain, an alliance with the Georgian Orthodox Church, and control of the economy and financial flows.

Demonizing the Opposition

Since 2013, Bidzina Ivanishvili has positioned the Georgian Dream against the former government

by addressing the United National Movement's (UNM) significant "failures," such as improving human rights in prisons, issuing a controversial broad amnesty (including the release of convicted Russian spies), and implementing socially oriented policies like universal healthcare. However, the hallmark of the Georgian Dream-led government has been the monopolization of various government branches, including local government, and the deliberate portrayal of the UNM, particularly Mikheil Saakashvili and his party, as the public enemy. This strategy of demonizing the political opposition relied on three main tactics: physical assaults, negative PR campaigns, and arrests and persecutions of opposition figures.

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From its early days in power, the Georgian Dream party has encouraged and even financed groups



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to physically assault senior opposition figures, creating a perception that the public widely disliked these politicians. Notable incidents included public beatings of opposition politicians like [Nugzar Tsiklauri](#) and Zurab Tchiaberashvili, mass assaults in [Kortskheli](#), and attacks on [Nika Gvaramia](#). There were also planned [assaults](#) on Gigi Ugulava and Giorgi Gabashvili, as well as numerous lower-ranking opposition figures. In 2024 alone, several opposition politicians were severely beaten while protesting the foreign agents bill. The former UNM chairman, Levan Khabeishvili, [suffered](#) such severe injuries that he had to step down from the party leadership position. MP Aleko Elisashvili was [beaten](#) by police on camera, resulting in broken ribs, and prominent opposition activist David Katsarava was so severely [injured](#) that he required surgery on his eye socket.

The violence against opposition activists intensified in April-May 2024, with Georgian Dream supporters ambushing and severely beating opposition politicians near their homes on multiple occasions. Despite these assaults, none of the perpetrators or organizers have been arrested, even as a prominent Georgian Dream MP boasted on social media about being behind these attacks.

The Georgian Dream has prosecuted and imprisoned the former President, the former Prime Minister and the Minister of the Interior, the former Minister of Defense, and the former Mayor of Tbilisi at various times from 2013 to 2021. The pinnacle of arresting political opponents was when the former chairman of the UNM, Nika Melia, was detained in the party office as a result of a special operation. The promise of “restoration of justice,” a principal pre-electoral pledge of the Georgian Dream, would thus seem to have been kept. However, the Georgian Dream keeps the sword of Damocles of violence over the opposition parties, threatening their political and legal persecution even after the October 2024 elections. Bidzina

Ivanishvili [promised](#) precisely that during his ominous 29 April address to GD supporters.

The non-stop legal and propaganda pressure on the main opposition party, the UNM, led to its numerous break-ups in 2017-2024, splinter groups attempting to shake off the UNM label and branding themselves according to their ideologies and political positions, including because of fundamental disagreements with Saakashvili. However, the Georgian Dream’s strategy in all cases was to deny the party identity of these new political parties and brand them as a “collective UNM.” Even the parties that are highly critical of Saakashvili, such as European Georgia, Lelo, and For Georgia, are dubbed by the government as the “collective UNM.”

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Political polarization, which Georgia’s friends often decry as an ultimate problem for Georgian democracy, is a direct outcome of Ivanishvili’s demonization approach. Since violence feeds violence, the fear of reciprocity might be the major driver of Ivanishvili’s idée fixe to destroy political opponents. Indeed, if he were to lose power to Saakashvili, the oligarch probably expects similar treatment – politically motivated cases, using preliminary detention for political reasons, and the politicized court making biased decisions.

Using SUSI for Political Means

The State Security Service of Georgia (also known as the SSSG, or SUSI in Georgian) has become the major tool of political control for the Georgian Dream. SUSI is headed by a personal loyalist of Mr. Ivanishvili and it is believed that he is directly accountable to the oligarch. During recent years,

SUSI has been embroiled in a number of scandals, elucidating its influence on political processes and widespread surveillance operations over political opponents, the media, and civil society.

In 2021, a former security officer in Georgia allegedly [leaked](#) a massive cache of surveillance files detailing extensive spying on senior clergymen. The leaked documents, reportedly prepared for SUSI's Analytical Department, include information on the clergy's business activities, intimate relationships, sexual orientation, and alleged illegal drug use. Some directory titles in the files include "criminal [acts] and narcotics addiction," "threats," "lovers," and "bishops." The magnitude of the surveillance operation against the Church also provides a sneak peek into what sort of control SUSI has established on other important groups, mainly political opponents, civil society, and the mass media. The leaked files also showed that SUSI operatives were even listening to diplomatic corps representatives.

In 2022, two major watchdog groups, the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) and Transparency International Georgia (TI), [accused](#) the Georgian government of orchestrating large-scale electoral fraud during the 2018 presidential and 2020 parliamentary elections, citing leaked documents from former Deputy Director of the State Security Service, Soso Gogashvili, who was arrested in 2021. The groups alleged that the government has illegally offered pardons, pressured public employees, and misused administrative resources to influence election outcomes. The verified documents, dating from 2018 to 2019, reportedly show thousands of individuals receiving benefits in exchange for electoral support for the Georgian Dream. These benefits included canceling conditional sentences, early prison releases, and restoring driving licenses. The report also points to politically motivated terminations of public employees and the use of law enforcement to aid in campaign efforts. The investigation fur-

ther implicates the Revenue Service in politically influenced decisions on tax debt restructuring.

SUSI is known to have formal liaison persons in various ministries where they monitor which employees are politically loyal to the ruling party. During the May 2024 protests, when the employees of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Ministry of Justice expressed their critical political views on social media, SUSI liaisons in the ministries made the case and pressured the ministers into firing or not continuing the contracts with the critically minded employees.

SUSI is also believed to be behind the violence and fear campaigns targeting opposition and civil society. An investigation by TV Formula has [revealed](#) that the Georgian State Security Service (SSG) allegedly organized and supervised an attack on Misha Mshvildadze, the station's co-founder and a prominent government critic. CCTV footage identified Giorgi Mumladze, an SSG investigator, as being involved in the attack with the operation reportedly overseen by his godfather, Levan Akhobadze, the deputy head of the SSG. TV Formula's investigation also linked Mumladze's father, a former employee of the Defense Ministry, to SUSI.

In April-June 2024, the planned night assaults on the opposition figures, as well as massive [abusive phoning](#) of the opposition and civil society representatives, is also highly likely to be linked with SUSI since no other organization can possess so much personal data, including the information on the live movement of the victims.

SUSI has been instrumental in upholding the narrative of the Georgian Dream that foreign powers, with local counterpart NGOs and political parties, are attempting to stage a coup d'état. This narrative has become an essential propaganda instrument of Ivanishvili's party, alleging that the West wants to overthrow the government and bring the UNM to power. In 2023, SUSI [accused](#) Giorgi Lort-

kipanidze, the deputy chief of Ukraine's military counterintelligence and former Georgian deputy Interior Minister, of plotting to overthrow the Georgian government by organizing mass unrest. The SSG claimed that Georgians fighting Russian forces in Ukraine, including a bodyguard of jailed ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili and a member of his inner circle, are among the conspirators being trained near Ukraine's border with Poland.

The Georgian State Security Service (SSG) also [summoned](#) Serbian citizens linked to the organization Kanvas as part of an ongoing investigation into an alleged coup d'état. The SSG alleged that Kanvas, rooted in the Serbian organization Otpor, is training youth groups as part of the government overthrow scheme.

The major problem with SUSI has been its unlimited power and total lack of accountability. As the DRI [reported](#), the State Security Service enjoyed "total power and full control" over the various processes in the country. The leaked files also showed how [easily](#) SUSI can put someone's phone on surveillance. A simple message in a WhatsApp chat suffices.

Manipulating the Electoral System

Thornike Gordadze [detailed](#) various strategies and tactics of pre-election manipulation by the Georgian Dream in the previous volume. Here, we will describe how the Georgian Dream manipulated the electoral system to increase its chances of staying in power.

One major instrument for state capture by the oligarch has been the effective manipulation of the electoral system. From 2012 to 2016, Georgia had a mixed proportional-majoritarian system, with 77 MPs entering Parliament through proportional lists and 73 through majoritarian districts. This

system heavily favored the ruling party since it allowed the selection of power-hungry local oligarchs and businessmen as majoritarian candidates who would finance their own campaigns and also contribute to party coffers. In 2014, when the Georgian Dream nearly lost the majority due to the split of the Free Democrats from the GD coalition, the UNM majoritarians switched sides and joined the Georgian Dream, safeguarding a political majority for Ivanishvili.

Talks about electoral reform began in 2014 when the opposition proposed switching to a regional-proportional system. However, after several rounds of consultations, the Georgian Dream declined the switch for the 2016 elections, and the opposition was not savvy enough to agree to the switch for the 2020 elections. Thus, the 2016 elections were held with the 77/73 system, which heavily benefited the Georgian Dream. Despite garnering 48.68% of the votes, the actual number of MPs they secured in Parliament was 115 out of 150, thus obtaining a constitutional majority.

Meanwhile, in 2018, the Georgian Dream passed constitutional changes that introduced a proportional electoral system from 2024 but made it impossible to create pre-election blocs, setting the electoral barrier at 5% to ensure that smaller political parties would not clear the barrier. Eventually, the equitable distribution of the "lost votes" was adopted, although, for a long period, the Georgian Dream insisted on the Mussolini-type solution, which would have given all lost votes to the first party.

The proposed electoral system, currently effective for the 2024 parliamentary elections, made it impossible for the opposition political parties, with close to a 5% political rating, to form pre-election blocs. Thus, the only way for these parties to unite is to form a new political party, sacrificing their identity, party colors, and electoral numbers. Moreover, according to new party financing rules,

only those parties that receive over 1% of support and enter Parliament receive funding from the state budget. Hence, for the opposition parties to coalesce, they must also sacrifice their finances. This system of disincentives is a significant reason why the opposition struggles to unite effectively today.

Following the 2019 political crisis, the Georgian Dream was forced to agree to the request of demonstrators and switch to proportional elections for the 2020 elections. However, realizing that party ratings did not provide for over 50% support, the Georgian Dream backtracked on its promise in late 2019. After a prolonged political crisis and negotiations, which included arrests of opposition leaders and large demonstrations in the center of Tbilisi, an agreement was finally reached to switch to the 120/30 system for the 2020 elections and a proportional system for the 2024 elections. The 120/30 system still allowed the Georgian Dream to have a bonus of 30 majoritarians. Despite numerous allegations of fraud, the outcome of the 2020 elections was largely determined by these 30 majoritarian MPs who contributed to another substantial majority of 85 MPs in the Parliament.

Linking State and Party Budgets

In the 2012–2016 Parliament, Bidzina Ivanishvili effectively recruited most of the majoritarian MPs from the UNM, thus not only securing his majority in the Parliament and strengthening his grip on the regions. As [reported](#) by Transparency International, most of the GD majoritarian MP candidates in 2020 were actively using the state budget to benefit their companies. Companies with links to the GD majoritarians received GEL 4,364,109 through tenders and simplified procurement. Their companies also received state co-financing on a total investment of GEL 12,646,900. Moreover, the GD-affiliated majoritarians and their business partners also donated to the Georgian Dream over GEL 4.5 million from 2012 to 2020.

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In addition to linking the major companies to the state budget and making them dependent on party favors, the Georgian Dream installed their loyalists in key business and financial positions. Irakli Rukhadze, the director of Imedi TV, also runs a major bank – Liberty Bank, which is the sole contractor of the state for dispersing pensions. Major businesses have been primary supporters of the Georgian Dream in the most critical political junctures. For instance, during the mass protest rallies

against the Georgian Dream and the law on foreign agents in 2024, large business representatives were asked to issue similar statements in support of the government, arguing that the “transparency” was good for the non-governmental sector.

Partnering With the Church

The full picture of the Georgian Dream’s state capture would not be complete without the analysis of the partnership with the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC). As Ivanishvili and his party moved towards Far-Right rhetoric, support from the Patriarchy and the GOC became instrumental in their quest to remain in power.

From its early days in power, the Georgian Church and particularly numerous bishops actively supported the Georgian Dream, even using their weekly sermons to advocate for their support. This advocacy certainly had an impact on the 2012 elections. In return, the Church actively received state property for a symbolic price, which was also a practice during the UNM administration.

According to the [study](#) by the Social Justice Center, from 2014 to 2018, the government gifted the Patriarchy over 1.7 million sq. m of land for a symbolic price. In return, the clergy attended almost every single GD party event, including the nomination of the majoritarian candidates in the run-up to the 2020 elections.

Moreover, the intertwining of the state and the Church before the elections became obvious in the run-up to the 2020 parliamentary elections when the issue of the David Garedji monastery was raised as the major pre-election topic. According to the narrative of the Georgian Orthodox Church and the Georgian Dream, part of an important place within the Garedji complex, which lies on the border with Azerbaijan, was treacherously given up to Baku by former government representa-

tives. “Garedji is Georgia” became a motto during the 2020 elections, advocated both by the Church and the government.

A similar symbiosis is also visible in 2024. The introduction of the package of laws, dubbed “anti-LGBT” laws but also known as the “family purity laws,” is supported by the clergy and the Patriarch. It appears that one of the strategies of the government will be to run on the anti-minority platform which would be music to the ears of an extremely conservative Church that enjoys deep ties with the Russian Orthodox Church.

Sowing Nihilism and Fear

Oligarchic rules thrive when the population is desperate, nihilism persists, and no immediate solutions are visible. The demonization of political opponents, the attack on NGOs and the free media, the total control of the courts, and the manipulation of elections leave many Georgians wondering whether or not their efforts to contribute to the democratization of the country are worth it, especially considering how easy it is to emigrate, legally or illegally, to the EU or the US.

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For the state capture to be fully cooked, this nihilism is an essential ingredient. There were fewer dissenters in the country and fewer threats to the oligarchic power. The case of Belarus in 2020 shows that Lukashenko gladly allowed the disgruntled middle class to leave the country after heavily cracking down on them. After all, if you dislike the government and are in a different country, there is not much you can do to challenge the state capturer’s power.

Georgia seems to be on the same track. If the oligarch manages to stay in power after October

2024, the state capture will be complete, and many Georgians will have to decide whether or not to

stay in the authoritarian state or seek a better future elsewhere ■