

Anatomy and Chronology of a State Capture in Georgia (Part 1)

By the Spring of 2024, Georgia had decisively shifted away from a democratic system of governance. Bidzina Ivanishvili and his Georgian Dream party officially renounced Western integration as a foreign policy objective, adopting the law “on the transparency of foreign influence” and effectively announcing that the implementation of EU-required reforms was no longer a priority. This trajectory had been evident for the past three years and, more broadly, during the twelve-year tenure of the Georgian Dream. Unfortunately, Western allies disregarded this deterioration, as detailed by Vano Chkhikvadze in another article within this volume.

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thoritarianism, or even dictatorship, eliminating any space for civil society, political opposition, or dissent. The recently enacted law on the “transparency of foreign influence” is merely the initial step, with forthcoming already announced laws on “anti-LGBT propaganda,” “libel,” and possibly “family values” and “blasphemy.” Moreover, Bidzina Ivanishvili’s ominous [declaration](#) of 29 April 2024 that all opposition parties will be held legally and politically accountable after the October 2024 elections further diminishes Georgia’s democratic prospects.

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These developments should not be surprising. Ivanishvili and his Georgian Dream party have extensively invested resources, time, and political capital in consolidating their power and capturing state institutions. State capture is nearly



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complete, with only a few months separating the Georgian Dream from establishing a fully autocratic one-party state.

Capturing the Party

Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream has undergone several stages of party consolidation. Initially, between 2012 and 2016, the coalition included pro-Western political parties, notably the [Republicans](#), the oldest Georgian party, and the newly formed [Free Democrats](#), composed of former diplomats. Both left the coalition before the 2016 Parliamentary elections due to disagreements over the authoritarian tendencies of the Georgian Dream. Another coalition partner, the [National Forum](#), also exited before the 2016 elections, as Ivanishvili did not intend to retain partners with questionable loyalty. The party chairman, Armaz Akhvlediani, [resigned](#) in May 2016, citing the party's authoritarian drift and inability to win elections without vote-rigging, which led to his denunciation and demonization by the Georgian Dream political council, a recurring pattern for dissenting members.

Following the 2016 Parliamentary victory, Georgian Dream lost more constituent members and coalition partners, replacing them with loyal politicians. The Conservative Party [exited](#) after the 2019 Georgian protests and the [Social Democrats](#) split off over pension and judiciary issues. By the end of 2019, most potential internal dissenters were removed and replaced by individuals financially dependent on Ivanishvili or politically ambitious but lacking political capital.

Between 2016 and 2020, Georgian Dream purged various party leaders who were notable for defending human rights and adhering to principles. Vice-speaker Tamar Chugoshvili and five other MPs [left](#) after the party reneged on its promise to hold the 2020 elections with a proportional elec-

toral system. Senior MP Eka Beselia [departed](#) following a feud over judicial reform. The Georgian Dream opted for a clan-controlled judiciary instead of opening the system and removing corrupt judges, a topic explored in greater detail below.

In 2023, after the draft law on “foreign agents” was withdrawn due to public resistance, [four](#) Georgian Dream MPs who did not support the bill were purged. Senior MP David Sergeenko, a former health minister, left Parliament, and the others were allegedly forced to relinquish their mandates, swiftly replaced by the next on the party list. The parliamentary speakers have also been replaced at will. Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze was forced to step down as speaker after the 2019 protests; his successors, Archil Talakvadze and Kakha Kuchava, lacked political clout, with parliamentary business still being overseen by Kobakhidze. The current speaker, Shalva Papuashvili, has no political capital and is a loyalist to Kobakhidze, who, in turn, has become Ivanishvili's most loyal political operative.

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By 2024, the Georgian Dream had become a monolithic party, allowing no room for internal dissent or debate. In these circumstances, Ivanishvili can impose authoritarian measures with impunity, as there are virtually no internal or external forces within the party or institutional governance capable of countering his dictatorial and pro-Russian inclinations.

Capturing the Executive

Bidzina Ivanishvili's control over Georgia's executive branch became evident immediately after the Georgian Dream coalition's victory in the 2012 elections. Ivanishvili served as Prime Minister until November 2013, when he appointed Interior

Minister Irakli Gharibashvili as his successor and nominated Giorgi Margvelashvili, a politically inexperienced academic, as President. Ivanishvili resigned in November 2013 but remained politically active, governing from the shadows.

Ivanishvili's influence extended beyond these appointments. He openly acknowledged that Gharibashvili periodically sought his advice, indicating ongoing influence over government decisions. Margvelashvili, however, found Ivanishvili's behind-the-scenes control "insulting" and "groundless." This shadow governance created tensions, as highlighted by Freedom House's 2019 [report](#), which noted that Prime Minister Kvirikashvili was pressured to resign due to economic policies that displeased Ivanishvili. The report emphasized that Ivanishvili's significant informal role impaired elected officials' ability to determine and implement government policies independently.

Bidzina Ivanishvili's state capture is most evident in the executive branch – the government. Former Prime Minister and currently party chairman Irakli Gharibashvili was previously the director-general of the Cartu Foundation, Ivanishvili's company, and before that, personal assistant to Mr. Ivanishvili. Former Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili, who also led the Ministries of Economy and Foreign Affairs, was the General Director of JSC Cartu Bank, also owned by Ivanishvili. Interior Minister Vakhtang Gomelauri headed Ivanishvili's personal security service. The current head of the State Security Service, Grigol Liluashvili, worked for Ivanishvili's various companies from 2004 to 2016 and served as General Director of the Cartu Group in 2015–2016 before becoming an MP and then head of the intelligence service. Various ministers and deputy ministers have also worked for Ivanishvili-affiliated companies. In 2015, Transparency International [compiled](#) a list of 69 individuals in key government and parliamentary positions connected to Ivanishvili's business empire.

Ivanishvili's capture of executive institutions extended to the President's office, which proved more problematic than the Government. His candidates, Giorgi Margvelashvili (2013–2018) and Salome Zourabichvili (2018–present), were less loyal than expected. Margvelashvili criticized the Georgian Dream shortly after his election, leading to strained relations. Zourabichvili's decisions to pardon political prisoners and support European integration led to her impeachment, upheld by the Constitutional Court but not finalized due to insufficient parliamentary votes.

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The executive capture also involved staffing independent regulatory bodies, such as the Central Election Commission (CEC), Georgian National Energy Regulatory Commission (GNERC), and Georgia's National Communication Commission (GNCC), with party loyalists. CEC head Giorgi Kalandarishvili, GNERC head David Narmania, and GNCC head Kakhi Bekauri exemplify this trend. Mr. Narmania was formerly a Georgian Dream party member and a former mayor of Tbilisi, while Mr. Bekauri was in charge of Mr. Ivanishvili's TV company.

Capturing the Parliament

The Georgian Parliament is entirely dominated by the ruling majority. All parliamentary leadership positions are held by Georgian Dream, with

vice-speaker and committee deputy chair roles allocated to the opposition merely symbolically. The opposition has no substantive power, as all committees and parliamentary work are monopolized by the majority, preventing minority parties from even delaying discussions or filibustering. Parliamentary delegations to international organizations, or bilateral “friendship groups,” are controlled by the ruling majority, and “fictional” minority parties like “European Socialists” and “People’s Power” further dilute the influence of genuine opposition parties by taking their speaking time and parliamentary quotas.

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Opposition parties can ask questions, but the government or ruling party representatives often ignore the most uncomfortable ones. For instance, the frequently asked question, why was the current law on “transparency of foreign influence” similar to Russian law by applying only foreign financing as a test for being an agent of foreign influence, was never answered by the ruling majority. Parliamentary debates are structured to avoid direct questions and answers, allowing the majority to respond after breaks. Debates are further diluted by the majority’s interruptions and verbal attacks during opposition questions. The Georgian Dream frequently switches off microphones for opposition MPs and ejects them from plenary and committee sessions, as seen during the committee hearing of the law on “transparency of foreign influence” when 14 opposition members were forcibly removed.

Before 2017, the opposition could summon the Prime Minister and ministers to faction meetings, but the 2018 procedural changes removed

this power. Ministers can now only be invited to committees or plenary sessions through interpellation, limiting real debates for the reasons described above.

The opposition has the constitutional power to create investigative commissions, but Georgian Dream misuses procedural rules to block them. Despite the constitution allowing 30 opposition MPs to create a commission, the majority controls the plenary agenda, blocking several commissions in 2023.

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Capturing the Courts

After the 2012 elections, Georgian Dream pledged to establish a fair judiciary. However, Ivanishvili had a contentious relationship with the judiciary, openly criticizing judges ruling against Georgian Dream representatives. Efforts to reform the judiciary, including 2013 amendments to involve judges more in the High Council of Justice, were undermined by influential judges linked to Mikheil Chinchaladze and Levan Murusidze, who consolidated control by promising immunity to colleagues. Initial attempts to counter the judicial clan, led by Justice Minister Thea Tsulukiani, were unsuccessful.

Ivanishvili then personally established [direct contact](#) with Murusidze and the clan, cementing their

political subservience to the Georgian Dream. Judges remained vulnerable to influence due to trial period appointments. High-profile meetings and legislative changes favored the judicial clan, and the government avoided adopting transparent appointment processes, allowing the High Council of Justice to maintain biased control.

From 2015, the Georgian Dream's control over the judiciary intensified. The 2015 [appointment](#) of Vano Zardiashvili's wife to a significant High Council of Justice position exemplified the intertwining of political and judicial interests. Controversial appointments, such as Levan Murusidze, who was linked to high-profile cases like the Girgvliani murder, further entrenched control. Despite public opposition, Murusidze received a three-year trial period in 2015 and a lifetime [appointment](#) in 2017.

Post-2017, judicial control strengthened through secretive Supreme Court judge appointments. Key figures manipulated reforms to benefit specific judges, extending the judicial clan's influence. The 2018 constitutional amendments centralized judicial appointments within the High Council of Justice, dominated by ruling party loyalists. This opaque process excluded the public and legal professionals, resulting in lifetime [appointments](#) for judges like Dimitri Gvritishvili and Giorgi Mikautadze, further entrenching control.

Public protests and resignations, like senior MP Eka Beselia's (former chairwoman of the legal and human rights committees), highlighted struggles against entrenched judicial powers. After the legislative changes, the judiciary remained under the clan's firm influence, serving specific interests rather than ensuring the courts' independence.

By 2019, the judiciary's political subjugation was fully evident. The [resignation](#) of Supreme Court Chairwoman Nino Gvenetadze and the secretive nomination process for judges showcased political

interference. The "fourth wave" of judicial reform, led by then-speaker Irakli Kobakhidze, further entrenched the judicial clan's power. Non-governmental organizations and opposition criticized the opaque processes, while public protests were marginalized, with Georgian Dream's political council supporting controversial judicial figures. This period marked the Georgian Dream's establishment of a judiciary controlled by the ruling party, ensuring dominance.

Shalva Tadumadze's appointment as head of the judiciary exemplifies the Georgian Dream's control. Tadumadze, Ivanishvili's former lawyer, was nominated for general prosecutor in 2018 and later for a lifetime judicial [appointment](#). His rapid ascent, questionable credentials, and close ties to the ruling party showed how Mr. Ivanishvili maintained control over the judiciary.

Similar processes ensued in the Constitutional Court. Through the nomination of the party loyalists to the open court vacancies, the current composition of the constitutional court is fully under political control. Every single case of political importance, including the impeachment of President Zourabichvili, was ruled in favor of the ruling party. Constitutional Court's chairperson, Merab Turava, was appointed to the court in 2015 and was [promoted](#) to the chairmanship in 2020, raising objections from the NGOs and opposition. However, the Georgian Dream nominated court members supported his candidacy, further consolidating the party's judiciary control.

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The Georgian Dream's manipulation of the justice system is incomplete without considering its control over the Prosecution Service. Direct in-

fluence from Ivanishvili and proxies like former Prosecutor General Otar Partskhaladze and successors Shalva Tadumadze and Irakli Shotadze, who resigned amid health issues during the 2024 protests, mark this control. Despite dismissals of allegations, Partskhaladze's informal influence persisted. His brief tenure ended due to public exposure of his criminal record and alleged diploma forgery. Shotadze, his ally, continued supporting the politicized infrastructure.

Shotadze's return as Prosecutor General in 2020, following a controversial resignation in 2018, highlights reactive loyalty in personalist regimes. Despite public disapproval, Georgian Dream defended Shotadze, framing his resignation as a mistake. Under Shotadze, Partskhaladze faced no convictions despite assault, extortion, and racketeering allegations. The 2017 charge against Partskhaladze for assaulting Auditor General Lasha Tordia, his subsequent acquittal in 2021, and Tordia's political asylum in the U.S. in 2022 underscore the judiciary's compromised state. Later, Partshalakdze was sanctioned by the US for serving the Russian FSB and influencing Georgian politics and public opinion. The US also [sanctioned](#) four judges believed to be essential to the Clan's power within the judiciary.

Capturing the Media

Oligarchic state capture also extended to the media, though not as successful as in other areas. The law on the "transparency of foreign influence" is viewed as the final blow to free media in Georgia.

Media capture followed three directions. First, Georgian Dream gained control over the Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB) through legislative changes that subordinated the GPB board to party control. Critical talk shows were [canceled](#), and party loyalists were [appointed](#) as GPB [lead-](#)

[ers](#). Legislative changes allowed GPB to [place](#) commercial ads, shrinking the ad market and impacting independent TV stations. GPB eliminated political debates and created a [blacklist](#) of critical political experts, becoming a propaganda tool for the Georgian Dream. GPB's budget is linked to the state budget and Georgia's GDP, which ensures its financial viability, even though at the outset of the capture process, Mr. Ivanishvili's commercial TV company handed over its assets to the GPB.

Second, the Georgian Dream Party strengthened loyal commercial media. Imedi TV, with the highest ratings due to regional viewers and expensive entertainment shows, is [financed](#) by Ivanishvili-affiliated groups outside Georgia. Its head, Irakli Rukhadze, recently acknowledged that the TV would register as a foreign influence agent. Rustavi2, taken over through a legal battle, remains among the top four TV stations despite dwindling ratings. PostTV, another government propaganda outlet, is owned by a Georgian Dream MP. In total, the viewership of these channels comprises close to 50% of the total population, with particular popularity in rural areas and smaller towns.

Third, the Georgian Dream dragged the critical TV stations into legal battles and often used physical assaults against the TV leaders, anchors, and journalists. Mtavari TV, TV Pirveli, and TV Formula, prominent opposition channels, endured lengthy legal battles, some of which are ongoing even today. Formula TV's owner has been sentenced and is wanted in Georgia, while Mtavari TV's founder, Nika Gvaramia, was imprisoned on absurd charges and later pardoned by the President. Physical assaults on opposition TV representatives, journalists, and leaders are common. Boycotts of critical TV stations by the Government and their non-participation in talk shows and debates devalued these channels, undermining their reporting capabilities.

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With the Parliamentary elections of October 2024 looming on the horizon, the Georgian Dream is poised to fully undermine free media, not only TV stations but also online outlets. The law on the “transparency of foreign funding” will do precisely that, as almost every online media outlet and critical TV station will be registered as entities “representing foreign interests,” which will further demonize them and make them targets of ruling party propaganda and continuous legal and phys-

ical assaults. This is understandable since no authoritarianism can tolerate critical voices.

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This article only outlines the capture of the essential state institutions by the ruling oligarch and his Georgian Dream party. However, to see the complete picture of control and magnitude of the problem, one also has to inspect how the oligarch fragmented the political spectrum, weakened the opposition parties, controlled the electoral process, demonized the NGO sector, used state security service for political purposes, instrumentalized the Georgian Orthodox Church and monopolized the economy and financial flows. These aspects of state capture will be described in the second part of the article in the next volume of GEOPOLITICS in July 2024 ■