

License to Steal

At the beginning of the 19th century, Prussian general and military theorist Carl von Clausewitz famously declared that “war is the continuation of politics by other means.” Looking at electoral processes around the world, it seems that purely political processes—elections—are morphing into warfare, mainly as an essential tool in so-called “hybrid warfare.”

Advancing technologies penetrate all aspects of our lives, including politics and elections. Data aggregation, programmatic marketing, social media campaigns, and electronic voting systems have become essential to modern elections. At the same time, more “traditional” methods of physical ballots, election monitoring, voter marking, etc., continue to live alongside technological advances. While supporters of free and fair elections are heavily focused on technologies to avoid a “human factor,” election riggers are becoming increasingly innovative in finding loopholes and exploiting them, relying on well-known fraudulent methods on pre- and post-electoral days and election day. Usage of administrative resources, voter intimidat-

tion, ballot stuffing, and other traditional tools are still around and widely used.

Incumbent political forces always have an advantage, especially in places with weaker democracies and questionable checks and balances. On top of that, we can see a relatively new phenomenon of election interference by external players, especially countries, willing to tilt results in favor of their interest, but this time not only by financial or political support of favored candidates but by manufacturing and spreading false narratives, hacking electoral systems, hence manufacturing desired results of undermining the credibility of elections.

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ed by Russia. Opposition parties and independent observers have [identified](#) the methods and tactics used to manipulate Georgia's 26 October 2024 parliamentary elections, [describing](#) them as not just "unfree and unfair" but outright "stolen." The tactics employed likely deserve dedicated analysis and multiple articles, which this volume addresses in other sections. This article, however, will focus on the aftermath of the stolen elections and explore potential responses from the United States and the Western democracies more broadly.

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An important disclaimer – previous elections in Georgia were never ideal but mainly reflected the wish of the Georgian people, except for the last two parliamentary and presidential elections. During the 2020 parliamentary elections, the opposition [refused](#) to recognize falsified election results and refused to enter the parliament. Only active intervention of the West, spearheaded by the EU, [convinced](#) the opposition to change its mind while the government undertook a number of obligations to address the opposition's concerns. Not surprisingly, the government disregarded all obligations and continued business as usual as if nothing had happened. It is hard to imagine what or who may persuade the current Georgian opposition, jointly or separately, to step into the same trap. Nevertheless, it is still worth exploring what tools or mechanisms the West possesses for addressing a new political crisis in Georgia.

An American Toolbox

All election results finally come to one crucial junction—legitimacy. Obviously, the primary concern is domestic legitimacy, where autocratic regimes have many options to “normalize” *fait accompli*. Another question is external legitimacy where multiple actors may have diverging attitudes. Questionable international legitimacy profoundly limits the area of maneuver for a not-fully-legitimate government, resulting in serious international isolation, triggering negative economic and financial implications, and causing intense discontent inside the country.

In international relations, the non-recognition of election results is not a novelty. Such statements are often made by countries that challenge the legitimacy of electoral processes they see as flawed, undemocratic, or manipulated. The United States has been active in its stance of non-recognition toward specific election outcomes, especially in cases where it perceives violations of democratic standards, human rights abuses, or attempts by authoritarian leaders to cling to power.

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The US typically does not recognize election results when it determines that severe irregularities, manipulation, or coercion marred elections. Key factors in these decisions include transparency, freedom for candidates to campaign, independence of election commissions, the participation of international observers, and access to an independent judiciary. When these elements are significantly compromised, the US may declare the

election invalid, supporting this stance with diplomatic measures. The Georgian case indicates the need to extend that list of “punishable” violations since new methodologies of election rigging were discovered and employed. It surely necessitates new approaches for response as well.

A classical US response to “stolen” elections can be seen in several previous instances such as Belarus, Venezuela, and Nicaragua. After widespread allegations of vote-rigging and violent crackdowns on peaceful protesters by President Alexander Lukashenko’s government in the 2020 Belarusian presidential elections, the US [refused](#) to recognize the legitimacy of the results. Similarly, following the 2018 Venezuelan presidential election, in which President Nicolás Maduro claimed victory, the US [rejected](#) the results, citing a lack of transparency, political repression, and the exclusion of opposition candidates from the process. In the 2024 elections, the US [recognized](#) the victory of an opposition candidate, Edmundo Gonzales, who was forced to flee to Spain because of the persecution from the Maduro regime.

Sanctions

In addition to verbal condemnation and non-recognition of the election results, the US imposed sanctions on key figures within Lukashenko’s government in Belarus following the 2020 elections. These sanctions froze the regime’s assets and prohibited Americans from conducting business with them, forming part of a broader effort to restrict the government’s international operations and demonstrate support for the Belarusian opposition. Similarly, in Venezuela, the US [imposed](#) economic sanctions on the state oil company PDVSA, a significant revenue source for the government, aiming to weaken Maduro’s grip on power by disrupting critical funding streams.

Another example is Myanmar, where the military annulled the results of the 2020 general election

and staged a coup in early 2021. The US [responded](#) by imposing sanctions on Myanmar's military leaders and state-owned enterprises. By restricting access to international markets and financial institutions, the sanctions aimed to pressure the military government to restore democratic governance.

Diplomatic Isolation

The US used diplomatic isolation to respond to the 2021 Nicaraguan presidential election in which Daniel Ortega was re-elected after sidelining opposition candidates and cracking down on dissent. By declaring the elections illegitimate and limiting diplomatic interactions, the US distanced itself from Ortega's government and supported calls for genuine democratic reforms. Similarly, the US refused to recognize the legitimacy of Nicolás Maduro's presidency in Venezuela and instead recognized opposition leader Juan Guaidó as the interim president. This was a significant diplomatic step, positioning the US in alignment with the Venezuelan opposition.

Simultaneously, the US often leverages multilateral forums such as the United Nations, the Organization of American States (OAS), and the European Union to build a coalition of countries that share its position on election legitimacy. By forming alliances and garnering international support, the US amplifies the effect of diplomatic isolation. However, such isolation is sometimes only partial. Countries like China, Russia, Iran, Türkiye, and others frequently breach imposed isolation by successfully providing viable alternatives to American support.

Support for Opposition and Civil Society

In addition to imposing sanctions and diplomatic measures, the US supports opposition groups and civil society organizations that advocate for

democracy and human rights. This support takes various forms, including financial aid, training programs, and public endorsement of opposition leaders. The goal is to strengthen the capacity of these groups to advocate for democratic reforms, document abuses, and engage with the public.

For instance, in Belarus, the US has assisted opposition leaders such as Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who ran against Lukashenko in the 2020 election. Tsikhanouskaya and her supporters continue to [receive](#) diplomatic backing and resources to organize their campaign for democratic change. Similarly, the US has provided funding and logistical support to Venezuelan opposition parties and civil society groups.

Another case is Hong Kong, where the US [supported](#) pro-democracy movements in the face of China's increasing control. While the US could not directly influence Hong Kong's elections, it condemned Beijing's interference, introduced sanctions against Chinese and Hong Kong officials responsible for suppressing democracy, and provided a haven to activists facing persecution. This reflects the US commitment to democratic values even in complex geopolitical situations.

Effectiveness of the US Approach

In some cases, sanctions have hurt authoritarian regimes economically, reducing their ability to finance repression. However, in other cases, sanctioned governments have shifted their economic partnerships, trading with countries that are less critical of their actions, such as China, Russia, Iran, Cuba, and others.

While US measures of non-recognition, sanctions, and support for opposition movements have shown

effectiveness in signaling disapproval, they have had varying levels of success in achieving concrete political change. In some cases, sanctions have hurt authoritarian regimes economically, reducing their ability to finance repression. However, in other cases, sanctioned governments have shifted their economic partnerships, trading with countries that are less critical of their actions, such as China, Russia, Iran, Cuba, and others.

Critics argue that US non-recognition policies can sometimes worsen humanitarian conditions by exacerbating economic difficulties. In Venezuela, for example, sanctions on the oil industry severely impacted the economy, affecting ordinary citizens and the government. Additionally, some observers contend that US non-recognition policies lack consistency as broader geopolitical interests sometimes influence them.

There is also criticism that non-recognition policies, while morally justified, may be insufficient to counteract authoritarian regimes. These regimes often have entrenched power structures and control over state institutions, making it difficult for external pressure to spur democratic transitions. In these cases, sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and support for opposition movements may not be enough to bring about immediate change, leading to a protracted struggle between authoritarian rulers and opposition groups.

New Realities Require New Tools

As the global political landscape becomes increasingly complex, the effectiveness of these non-recognition policies will depend on multilateral cooperation, consistency, and adaptability to new challenges. The non-recognition of election results reflects a commitment not only to specific democratic principles but also to the broader values of human rights and the rule of law that are fundamental to international relations.

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The Georgian case differs significantly from the examples mentioned. Unlike Venezuela, Georgia lacks strategic resources like oil that could sustain an autocratic regime, and it does not present immigration challenges for the US as some Latin American countries do. Additionally, Georgia's relationship with Russia is less economically, militarily, and politically extensive than Belarus, and it has advanced significantly in aligning its institutions and legal frameworks with those of the EU. The current Georgian ruling regime largely depends on a single individual, Bidzina Ivanishvili, who differs considerably from figures like Lukashenko, Maduro, or Ortega. Moreover, the majority of Georgians remain committed to EU and NATO integration. As a result, approach to Georgia should be more nuanced to have a higher likelihood of success.

While the “traditional” methodology still applies to the Georgian case, several extra actions can benefit the country and increase the chances of it returning to the Euro-Atlantic orbit.

An External Investigation of the Electoral Fraud

Western governments' [calls](#) to investigate election fraud claims are reasonable initial steps. Still, they will yield no results if the investigation is solely left in the hands of the current government. In a best-case scenario, this could lead to an oxymoronic catch-22, resulting in masquerade and mockery of “investigation” with predictable assessments that no significant fraud has been committed. Therefore, an external investi-

gation is essential. Currently, there is no proper international body that can be assigned to this job. Still, with appropriate political goodwill, an ad hoc coalition of election monitoring organizations, such as the OSCE/ODIHR, plus professional non-for-profit institutions, such as the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), the Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors of the NDI and other members of the Global Network for Securing Electoral Integrity should be invited. The USAID should finance the group's activity and be limited in time to avoid a lengthy bureaucratic process. That group can examine claims and results of the election monitoring missions, as well as claims and evidence from the opposition parties, and determine if the evidence of falsification is valid and if new snap elections are merited. If the answer is YES, the following steps should be invoked.

Sanctions

The primary target for personal sanctions should be Bidzina Ivanishvili and his immediate family and political entourage, even if they do not hold an official position in any governmental institution. Sanctions should also be extended to officials, especially those responsible for falsifying elections.

Besides “visa bans,” sanctions should include enforcement of financial restrictions, including the banking abilities of sanctioned individuals.

As defiance of the opposition will continue, most likely, the current government will resort to more oppressive measures. The same applies to civil society actors, who are declared as “foreign agents” due to the recently adopted Russian-style law on “transparency of foreign influence.” In such cases, immediate sanctions should be extended to initiators and executors of the

oppressive orders. Unlike in previous sanctioning cases, the names of targeted individuals should be made public upon imposition of sanctions. Besides “visa bans,” sanctions should include enforcement of financial restrictions, including the banking abilities of sanctioned individuals (all of them enjoy Visa and Master Card services in Georgian or European banks). Those banks should receive a clear signal that such services are consequential.

Diplomatic Isolation

In addition to traditional diplomatic isolation and cutting off bilateral government-to-government programs, it is imperative to limit the government's access to international financial institutions such as the World Bank, the EBRD, the IFC, etc. While isolation will not be hermetic, it will clearly signal to the population of Georgia that the current government does not reflect the people's wish for Euro-Atlantic integration enshrined in the constitution, further undermining its domestic legitimacy.

Support to the Opposition and Civil Society

While the measures mentioned can empower opposition and civil society to challenge the autocratic Georgian Dream regime better, there is no doubt that the current government will attempt to stifle these groups financially and cut off their resources.

This policy is currently well-established but it must be explicitly stated by the returning Trump administration that support will focus on local actors and not involve financing institutions in exile, as seen in the cases of Venezuela and Belarus. Georgia continues to have an active, albeit

fragmented, civil society capable of opposition, even if some of its leaders face imprisonment. While the measures mentioned can empower opposition and civil society to challenge the autocratic Georgian Dream regime better, there is no doubt that the current government will attempt to stifle these groups financially and cut off their resources. Simultaneously, calls for the release of imprisoned former President Mikheil Saakashvili and other political prisoners (including the potential new ones) should be renewed as part of a comprehensive pressure strategy. Otherwise, it is likely that the current president, Salome Zourabichvili, could join the third president in jail, possibly followed by former President Giorgi Margvelashvili, as both regard the recent elections as illegitimate.

Weaponization of the Elections

There is more than a Georgian case to determine that malicious actors see democratic elections as an opportunity to weaponize them against democracies. The most recent election in Moldova showcases how determined and sophisticated adversaries of democracy can be.

Unfortunately, the same can be observed in a number of fragile Eastern European countries, some Western European countries, and the US, where evidence of various election interference attempts is discovered almost daily. Winning Georgia back will be essential for reverting such attempts. If not, the “license to steal” may indeed become a “license to kill,” leading to entrenched authoritarianism, human rights abuses, and erosion of trust in democracy’s core pillar – free and fair elections. With both “tough love” and tangible support, I believe Georgia and its people can prevail ■