

# Lessons from the Evolving Tactics of Protest Control in Authoritarian Regimes

**W**hat do the recently killed Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah and Georgia's informal leader, the oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, have in common? Both consider the Georgian Rose Revolution and all so-called color revolutions as fomented from the outside and implemented locally by "agents" of the West. On 8 March 2005, at a monster demonstration organized by Hezbollah and other pro-Syrian groups in Beirut to counter what was then called the "Cedar Revolution" triggered by the assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, Nasrallah fulminated: "Lebanon is not Ukraine. Lebanon is not Georgia. Lebanon is Lebanon (...) If some think that they can bring this country down, with its regime, its stability, its security, and its strategic choices, with their connections, their positions, and sponsors, with some demonstrations, some scarves, some slogans, and

some media, then they are wrong... I address the following to America, President Bush, and Ms. Condoleezza Rice...".

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In Lebanon in 2005 and Georgia in 2003, widespread and primarily peaceful revolutions achieved victories: the Syrian regime withdrew its troops from Lebanese territory, and the corrupt post-Soviet Shevardnadze regime fell. It was also a decade marked by the Orange Revolution in Ukraine and the fall of the dictatorial regimes of Ben Ali in Tunisia, Mubarak in Egypt, and Gaddafi in Libya. The hope appeared that many other cruel and repressive regimes would follow.



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But ten years on, the trend has reversed: Bashar El-Assad in Syria, the Mullahs in Iran, Maduro in Venezuela, the military regime in Algeria, Lukashenko in Belarus, and Ortega in Nicaragua, long after mass upheavals and mobilizations remain in power. Worse still, the “restorations” of authoritarian power in Egypt and Tunisia and the maintenance of the ethno-confessional predatory political system in Lebanon have left optimists disillusioned. It seems that in a decade or two, authoritarian regimes have learned a great deal and appear to be better equipped to manage social unrest. In the last ten years, only two examples of successful popular revolutions have come to mind: Armenia in 2018 and Bangladesh in 2024.

The resistance of authoritarian regimes to street protests and the consolidation of authoritarian regimes is interesting to observe in light of increasing authoritarianism in Georgia and crucial elections on 26 October. A few weeks before the

election, the opposition seems ahead of the Georgian Dream (GD). Still, there are great fears about the possibility of an outright falsification of the results by the ruling regime, which can publish the result it wishes, as happened in Venezuela this August. In this case, demonstrations and street actions are to be expected. Notably, the Rose Revolution in November 2003 occurred following elections falsified by Shevardnadze’s Citizen’s Union. How will the GD react to the outcome of the 2024 elections? What has changed since 2003? Is the current government better prepared and better armed? What internal and external factors favor authoritarian regimes?

## Declining Fear of the West

In the past decades, many authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes tried to control their non-democratic actions - electoral manipulation, opposition repression, media pressure - and keep

them within certain limits so as not to provoke strong Western reactions. The GD itself attached great importance to what Europe and the US had to say and went to great lengths to avoid overt repression and gross falsification. In 2020, for example, the GD took “only” 47% of the vote, whereas Lukashenko won nearly 80%. In 2024, the regime seems to be wholly emancipated and free of such considerations: the West is evil; it wants to destroy “Georgian traditions” and involve the country in the war against Russia. Western criticism is described as biased and intended to help the opposition parties, their “agents.”

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Authoritarian regimes capitalize on the divisions and weaknesses of the Western bloc. Hungary’s peculiar position within the EU makes any sanction policy difficult, not to mention the bureaucratic red tape. Divisions can also be observed within Western countries with the rise of isolationist or extremist political forces on the right or left, which often sympathize with authoritarian regimes and want to limit support for democracy. There is also an inevitable Western fatigue about fighting for values, despite declarations to this effect at the start of the Biden presidency.

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Western countries are often slow to act, responding to crises rather than taking preventive measures. By the time they impose economic sanctions, regimes have usually already crossed critical

thresholds. These sanctions are then used by authoritarian governments in their nationalist rhetoric, portraying them as foreign interference, which fuels conspiracy theories. We’ve frequently heard Western diplomats argue that it would be premature to take decisive action against the Georgian government because Georgia is not yet like Belarus. However, considering how effective measures against Belarus were only after the dictatorship had been fully established, this approach is questionable. The European bureaucracy—speaking in a neutral sense—is, by its very nature, unable to operate differently. Authoritarian regimes are aware of this and use it to their advantage to stay ahead of the curve.

## Authoritarian Solidarity

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One of the reasons why authoritarians are more self-confident and assertive is that there is an apparent solidarity between them and the formation of a so-called “authoritarian international.” China and Russia issued a remarkable joint [statement](#) on 4 February 2022, aimed at denouncing the US focus on reviving democracy and supporting media independence and freedom of speech and assembly. It also proposed an alternative political model tailored to the two countries’ political systems that fit all autocratic leaders’ agendas worldwide.

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Weaker authoritarian regimes receive assistance from other, more entrenched, and consolidated authoritarian governments, such as China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea. Authoritarian regimes share their know-how in the surveillance and repression of dissent. It is a question of both methodology and technology. The discrediting of opposition, independent media, civil society, the sharing of illiberal and anti-democratic narratives, and the means of financial, media, and even physical pressure are imitated, imported, and adapted from one country to another. Internet control technology, monitoring of communications, and wiretapping methods are readily transferred between countries. Georgia and its intelligence services are learning best practices from Russia and China. The widespread use of surveillance cameras and the creation of the legal basis for widespread wiretapping in Georgia have been imitated from Chinese and Russian practices.

When dictatorships falter under public pressure, others lend a helping hand, including using force. Iran and Russia are involved in the Syrian civil war, and China and Russia support all authoritarian regimes in Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America.

## Russia's Direct Backing

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Russia has been crucial in sustaining many authoritarian regimes, as it has emerged over the years as a leading revisionist and reactionary power. This role is not new—Tsarist Russia was already intervening across Europe in the 19th century to suppress democratic, liberal, and socialist movements. Today, Russia continues this legacy by supporting populist and anti-liberal governments around the

world. The Kremlin sees the West as its primary adversary and acts accordingly: in Africa, it backs so-called “anti-colonialist” regimes like those in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Zimbabwe; in Latin America, it aligns with socialist, “anti-imperialist” governments such as Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua; and in the Middle East, it props up military or military-religious autocracies, including those in Egypt, Algeria, Syria, and Iran. Whenever there is a civil war, Russia is quick to intervene, offering weapons, logistical support, or even mercenaries, such as the Wagner group, which operates in places like Libya, Syria, the Central African Republic, and Sudan.

Russia is particularly useful in repressing the opposition and its demonstrations. [According](#) to Mike Pompeo, then US Secretary of State, in 2019, when the Venezuelan opposition was about to overthrow Maduro, the latter, ready to board the plane to flee to Havana, was dissuaded by the Russians, who persuaded him to stay and fight while promising substantial aid. Today, more than a hundred Russian military advisors, along with Chinese and Cubans, are said to be working with Maduro.

Russian involvement is even more massive in Belarus. The country has de facto become Russia's dominion, especially after Lukashenko decided to falsify the August 2020 elections and faced mass protests. In the years preceding the crisis, the Belarusian regime had tried to maintain a degree of maneuverability vis-à-vis the Russians, notably by increasing its contacts with Europeans and Americans. Mass protests scared the dictator, who had no choice but to accept Russia's help in exchange for renouncing its sovereignty. According to many reports, Russian special forces have directly participated in the crackdown, and Putin promised economic and military assistance, effectively shielding Lukashenko from international sanctions. The [infusion](#) of USD 1.5 billion in loans and political backing allowed Belarus to avoid com-

plete financial collapse but turned Minsk into a Moscow puppet.

The control of Belarus played a crucial role in Putin's decision to attack Ukraine in February 2022. Lukashenko approved the invasion and offered the country's territory for that purpose, as Kyiv is only a few dozen kilometers from the Belarusian border. Since 2020, Belarus has become an international pariah and the home of Russian nuclear warheads.

Russia literally saved the regime of the Syrian dictator and war criminal Bashar al-Assad when the latter started to be contested by its people in the wave of the Arab Spring that reached Syria in 2011. The Syrian revolution began as a peaceful mass mobilization that was violently repressed by the regime. Consequently, the protest took the form of an armed rebellion dominated in the first phase by a pro-democracy Free Syrian Army. The Assad regime was about to collapse as it had lost control of 80% of the territory by 2014. Here again, Russia's support for the embattled regime was decisive: like Maduro and Lukashenko, Assad was dissuaded from giving up by Moscow. Russia encouraged the government to focus on all-out repression, including the use of chemical and biological weapons.

In 2015, Russia initiated military operations in Syria, focusing on heavy aerial bombardments and airstrikes targeting civilian populations in areas held by opposition forces. The near-total destruction of cities like Homs, Aleppo, Deraa, and Al-Ghuta, with Iranian units and Lebanese Hezbollah supporting ground operations, allowed Bashar al-Assad to regain the upper hand. As a result, Assad now controls most of Syria, with the exception of the Idlib region and areas held by Kurdish forces.

Since launching its anti-liberal, anti-Western campaign, the GD has found a reliable ally in Moscow. Russia has praised Tbilisi for its "courage" and "determination" in resisting the pressures of what

Moscow calls the "Global War Party." The GD's election narrative hinges on the argument that a war with Russia is inevitable if the opposition wins. In contrast, if the GD stays in power, they claim peace will be preserved as Russia would not intervene. Essentially, the GD is leveraging the threat of Russian aggression to its advantage, aiming to maintain power by indirectly relying on Russian military strength.

In the event of mass protests sparked by electoral fraud, Russia could step in to support the Ivanishvili regime. While a full-scale invasion is unlikely, though not entirely off the table, the use of threats will likely intensify. Destabilization could take many forms, including the movement of Russian troops from the occupied regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia, advancing further into unoccupied Georgian territory, potentially cutting off the country's main highway, which lies only a few hundred meters from the closest Russian positions. Other possibilities include sabotage of critical infrastructure, the involvement of figures like Ramzan Kadyrov, or reigniting separatist sentiment in Javakheti, a region with a significant Armenian population. The GD would not oppose such actions, and the Georgian opposition, along with the army, which has so far remained politically neutral, lacks the resources to resist. Any such crisis would also have significant implications for Europe and the international community. It is in the West's interest to act preventively to avoid larger consequences.

## State and Paralegal Violence

Every authoritarian government's typical first response to protests is violence. This can be carried out by state law enforcement agencies or by violent paramilitary groups operating with covert government backing.

In Belarus, Lukashenko's response saw a sharp increase in violence. More than 35,000 protesters

were [detained](#) in the months following the election. According to Amnesty International, the use of torture and physical abuse by security forces was widespread and systematic, intended to instill fear and suppress the protests. Even peaceful demonstrators were met with excessive force, as seen during large gatherings in Minsk in August and September 2020.

In Venezuela, Maduro's government has regularly deployed security forces, including the National Guard, to suppress protests, often resorting to live ammunition and tear gas. The regime accused the opposition of plotting a coup and initiated mass arrests. A special operation, known as "[Tun Tun](#)" (meaning knock-knock in English), involved the Bolivarian Intelligence Service conducting door-to-door raids, typically at night and without warrants, to detain those linked to the protests. Thousands of protesters and opposition supporters were arrested, leading Maduro to order the refurbishment of two prisons to accommodate them. The goal was to instill fear among opponents and create a climate of terror. Additionally, the government set up a phone line, an app, and a website to collect reports on "traitors," with Maduro personally urging citizens to report individuals participating in the protests.

The brutal use of force by the state is a key tactic in quelling mass protests, though the level of violence varies. In Nicaragua's 2018 protests, for example, security forces [killed](#) over 300 opposition activists, students, and civil society leaders, showing no hesitation in using live ammunition. In contrast, the violence used against the Algerian Hirak (revolution) in 2019-2021 and the Lebanese mass protests was more dispersed. Generally, the less legitimacy a regime has, the more violently it responds. Looking at the trajectory of Iranian protests, from the Green Movement in 2009 to the fuel price protests of 2019 (known as Bloody November) and the 2022-2023 Masha Amini protests, we see a clear increase in state brutality. In

2009, around 60 people were murdered during the largest demonstrations since the Islamic Revolution. In subsequent movements, hundreds of Iranians have been killed, and during the most recent "Woman, Life, Freedom" protests, even 68 minors lost their lives.

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A particularly troubling aspect of suppressing mass protests is the use of pro-government militias to intimidate and terrorize dissenters. These armed groups, operating with impunity, allow governments to avoid direct international scrutiny. Their actions, which often include the assassination of activists and journalists, create an alternative system of control, particularly in areas where formal state security forces may be reluctant to intervene openly.

In Venezuela, militias known as "[colectivos](#)" are recruited from the poorest neighborhoods, receiving between \$1,000 and \$1,500, and often ride motorcycles to violently attack protesters. In Iran, beyond the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, which is the state's core security apparatus, the Basijis—an informal paramilitary group made up of millions of regime loyalists—have played a key role in repressing protests, operating without uniforms. In Lebanon, Hezbollah has helped preserve the government by mobilizing its supporters to suppress opposition. Black-clad supporters of Hezbollah and the Amal movement frequently attacked protesters, destroying their tents, assaulting journalists and TV crews, and riding motorcycles to provoke unrest, even opening fire on occasion.

In Georgia, the government has already confronted multiple waves of significant protests. These include the Gavrilov Night in June 2019, the post-election crises of 2020 and 2021, the demonstrations in July 2021, the pro-European rallies in June 2022, and the mass protests against the “agents of foreign influence” law in March 2023 and again in the spring of 2024. The government’s response has grown more brutal over time, mirroring its increasing rigidity. The police now act preemptively, often targeting political leaders. One such case involved a former chairman of the opposition party, UNM, who was [severely beaten](#) by police in April 2024. Riot police, known as “robocops,” supported by criminal investigation units, frequently use water cannons, tear gas, and, on rarer occasions, rubber bullets, which have left several young protesters blinded.

The Georgian Dream has been employing Zviad “Khareba” Kharazishvili, the head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs’ Special Tasks Department, to [target](#) political opponents with violence, especially during protests. Kharazishvili’s unit is notorious for its aggressive crackdowns, and he has publicly admitted to leading punitive actions against opposition figures. A striking example is the case of Davit Katsarava, a leader of the Anti-Occupation Movement, who was [severely beaten](#) during the 2024 protests against the “foreign agent” law. Katsarava sustained serious injuries, including a broken jaw and head trauma, following his detention by Kharazishvili’s team. As the 2024 elections draw near, the Ministry of Internal Affairs has established special task forces, with Kharazishvili’s involvement, likely aimed at suppressing anticipated opposition unrest. These forces are expected to play a key role in managing election-related protests, raising further concerns about escalating violence. It is no surprise that the US Department of Treasury recently [sanctioned](#) Kharazishvili and his deputy for serious human rights abuses.

In cases of extrajudicial violence, the authorities employ violent groups on their payroll. These groups fall into several categories. First, there are the religious and ultra-nationalist extremists, referred to as “orcs” by the protesters. Encouraged by a [speech](#) from Prime Minister Gharibashvili on July 5, 2021, these groups organized a violent pogrom against LGBT-supportive organizations and journalists, resulting in the death of a cameraman. The same groups had previously [attacked](#) an anti-homophobia demonstration in May 2013.

The second group comprises young individuals with criminal backgrounds or those connected to such circles. In return for payment, [amnesty](#), or reduced sentences, they carry out violent acts against the opposition. On the eve of the 2024 elections, an amnesty was granted to over 1,000 detainees, many of whom are likely to support the ruling party under the banner of “stability and peace” during potential post-election protests in case of electoral fraud.

In addition, the government controls various sports federations, mobilizing thousands of young athletes—primarily wrestlers, judokas, and boxers—who can be deployed against protesters. These athletes are given access to sports facilities and equipment funded by the state, which they could not otherwise afford. While they hope to succeed in their sports careers, they serve the ruling party’s interests by violently confronting demonstrators.

The connections between these violent groups and the state are well-known. Public opinion widely suspects Dimitri Samkharadze, a majority party deputy, of being tasked by the ruling party to organize [violence](#) with the support of these paid groups. Mr. Samkharadze is infamous for instigating violence within parliament and is known for issuing death threats on television and social media, often posting photos of firearms. In May 2024, sev-

eral dozen masked individuals armed with sticks stormed the headquarters of the main opposition party, UNM, [destroying](#) its offices and equipment. The police's inaction and the lack of investigation suggest the involvement of the state and the ruling party.

Another instance of the state's covert tactics to undermine protests took place during the May 2024 demonstrations. Hundreds of activists and opposition leaders [were bombarded](#) with threatening phone calls, day and night, from untraceable numbers. The callers hurled insults and issued death threats, targeting the most prominent protesters and their families. Moreover, private cars and the doors of homes were vandalized. The extensive access to personal information makes it clear that the state was involved in these intimidation efforts. Mr. Samkharadze frequently shared videos on his Facebook page, filmed by the vandals themselves, some of which were evidently sent directly to him.

## The Judiciary as a Tool of Oppression

State and parastate violence alone is not enough to suppress protests. Repression needs to appear legally justified, and the punishment must be drawn out over time. This is ensured through judicial measures, such as long prison sentences, hefty fines, criminal records, and never-ending investigations, all of which are powerful tools to combat dissent.

In authoritarian regimes, the judiciary is tightly controlled by the ruling party's allies, leaving no legal protection for protesters. Opposition leaders are often arrested, placed under house arrest, or stripped of their political power, limiting the capacity for organized resistance within formal political structures. This pattern was evident in Venezuela, where leaders like Leopoldo López, Juan

Guaidó, and María Corina Machado were targeted, and in Belarus, where Lukashenko systematically neutralized opposition leaders. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, a prominent opposition figure, fled to Lithuania under threat, while others like Maria Kalesnikava, Viktor Babaryka, and Valery Tsepalo were imprisoned. By isolating key leaders, Lukashenko weakened the protest movement's organizational strength, making coordinated resistance more difficult.

In most cases, arrested protesters face vague charges like attacking state security, attempting rebellion or a coup, contempt of law enforcement, or sedition. In countries like Algeria and Lebanon, such cases have sometimes been sent to military or special courts, where trials are swift and leave little room for a fair defense.

Repression of demonstrations often results in widespread convictions, not limited to protest leaders. By the summer of 2020, Belarus had nearly 1,300 political prisoners. The Algerian Hirak protests saw 260 people sentenced to varying terms of imprisonment. In Venezuela, following the rigged elections in August 2024, thousands were arrested, with 1,500 still in prison by the end of September.

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In Georgia, the judiciary has become notorious for handing down disproportionate sentences to activists. To suppress protests, judges impose the maximum penalties allowed under the Administrative Code. For example, during the March 2023 protests, a young man accused of throwing a Molo-



to cocktail was sentenced to nine years in prison, and in the following year, another youth received a four-year sentence for damaging a surveillance camera. The Georgian judiciary, controlled by a clan of influential judges who are now sanctioned by the U.S., acts as a loyal enforcer for the regime, and it is expected that they will continue to do so if mass protests break out in response to potential election fraud.

In addition to judicial repression of activists, the Georgian Dream has systematically neutralized political opponents through arrests and imprisonment. A prime example is the detention of former president Mikheil Saakashvili, who remains in prison under what many observers consider politically motivated charges. His imprisonment has drawn widespread international criticism, with human rights organizations calling for his release. Alongside Saakashvili, numerous former high-ranking officials from his administration have also been jailed, further weakening the political opposition.

Authoritarian governments also employ a range of other tactics, too numerous to list fully. These include propaganda and smear campaigns (Black PR) aimed at discrediting protest movements, as well as manipulating societal divisions, whether ethnic, religious, or regional. Such regimes commonly frame dissent as being orchestrated by foreign powers in order to delegitimize protesters and rally their supporters around the idea of defending the nation. In Iran, the regime frequently blames the “Great Satan” United States and its “mad dog” Israel. In Venezuela, Nicaragua, and other authoritarian states, the U.S. is also cast as the shadowy instigator. In Algeria, the former colonial power France is the ideal scapegoat. In Georgia, over recent years, the government has increasingly accused protesters and dissenters of being agents of the West, whether from civil society or pro-Western opposition parties. Ivanishvili and his allies have even invented the concept of a “Global War

Party,” an imaginary and powerful entity that they claim is responsible for the war in Ukraine and is pushing Georgia toward a second front with Russia.

## Anticipating Repressions

In conclusion, authoritarian regimes have become increasingly skilled at managing and suppressing mass protests, employing a range of internal and external strategies. Over the past two decades, many of these regimes have refined their methods, blending violence with legal tools to silence opposition. They often receive external support from authoritarian allies like Russia and China, which help strengthen their grip on power by providing both material aid and ideological justification. By arresting opposition leaders, using targeted violence, and manipulating the judiciary, these regimes have weakened organized resistance and diminished opposition leadership. Moreover, these regimes have grown less concerned with Western criticism, exploiting divisions among Western nations to avoid meaningful consequences. They use nationalist propaganda to frame protests as foreign plots, discrediting the movements and rallying loyalists. The rise of informal militias, violent gangs, and paramilitary groups acting as state proxies adds further complexity, allowing these governments to deny responsibility while still unleashing violence on protesters.

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What makes this trend particularly alarming is that, over time, sustained and extreme violence often wears down protest movements, enabling regimes to outlast them. As Georgia potentially faces its own political crisis due to suspected

election manipulation by the Georgian Dream, the experiences of other nations offer a sobering lesson: without a solid and unified opposition, protest movements may struggle to challenge

authoritarian rule effectively. However, strong and coordinated international pressure can empower these movements and potentially tip the balance in their favor ■