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Our Mission

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At the **Research Institute Gnomon Wise**, we believe that disseminating knowledge and analysis conducted with integrity and impartiality can advance national interests and strengthen democratic institutions. Our think tank fosters a culture of intellectual exchange, nurturing a communal space where each person can contribute meaningfully to the broader geopolitical discourse.

In alignment with our ethos, our journal is firmly committed to promoting the idea of Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration and democratization. *GEOPolitics* will echo the Georgian people's strategic orientation toward the Western world, democracy, and Europeanization. Our vision is that Georgia can and must contribute to disseminating universal democratic values and contribute to regional and international security. We aim to support these goals through our analytical and intellectual contributions.

We have assembled a team of experts and contributors with deep knowledge and policy experience who will enrich the conversation about Georgia's foreign and security policy, unveiling and scrutinizing Georgia's relations with the EU, NATO, Russia, and other important geopolitical actors and international institutions. We will also investigate the ramifications of internal developments for Georgia's geopolitical role and foreign relations. By doing so, we will facilitate informed and substantial dialogue from, about and in Georgia.



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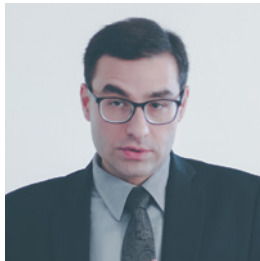
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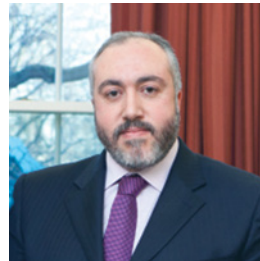
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Game Over?

State Capture in Georgia Almost Complete

The state capture in Georgia is now almost complete. On May 28, 2024 eighty-four subservient MPs totally ignored youth protests and armed with party message box, “titushki” and ruthless riot police, passed the Russian-type law “on the transparency of foreign influence,” effectively announcing Orwellian 1984. The adoption of this law puts Georgian NGOs and Media in mortal danger, undermining Georgia’s democracy and turning Georgia away from the European integration track. The April 29 Speech by Bidzina Ivanishvili declared all opponents of the regime as foreign agents and potential objects of legal persecution. The only step remaining for Georgia to become fully authoritarian is the October 26 Parliamentary elections, which will determine the country’s trajectory for years to come. However, as academics and policy experts, while looking forward to the democratic transition of power, we still dwell on the analysis of what went wrong and how the Georgian Dream managed to capture the state institutions and stay in power for twelve years.

Sergi Kapanadze opens the volume with the exploration of how Bidzina Ivanishvili, a billionaire and the founder of the Georgian Dream party, captured the state of Georgia, acquiring full control of various state institutions, whether the Government, Parliament, or Judiciary. The article details how Ivanishvili consolidated power by removing coalition partners and internal dissenters and establishing control over the executive branch, the parliament, and the judiciary. This consolidation included placing loyalists in key positions, manipulating judicial appointments, and suppressing opposition and independent regulatory bodies, as well as

media and civil society. The article concludes that Ivanishvili’s influence has resulted in an authoritarian regime with limited internal or external checks on his power, a situation that demands immediate attention from those concerned about geopolitics and democracy.

Temuri Yakobashvili continues by comparing Georgia’s state capture with that of Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Belarus. The article warns that Georgia’s trajectory under Bidzina Ivanishvili risks aligning its domestic and foreign policies with these authoritarian regimes. The increasing economic dependence on Russia, suppression of independent institutions, and introduction of laws mimicking Russian legislation highlight this shift and show that state capture usually leads to more susceptibility to Russian dominance. Such a shift has severe implications for Georgia’s sovereignty and democratic aspirations, necessitating a critical and well-thought response from the West.

Vano Chkhikvadze then steps in, arguing that despite the constitutional requirement of EU and NATO integration, Georgian Dream reversed the European integration course just months before the October 2024 general elections. The article details the Georgian Dream’s consolidation of power and alignment with pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives, all happening without due attention from the Western partners, allowing the Georgian Dream to ignore the EU requirements and prioritize power retention over genuine reforms. The upcoming elections are framed as a pivotal moment for Georgia’s future, determining whether it aligns with European values or further isolates itself under Russian influence.

Shota Ghvineria uses a parable of a turtle voluntarily removing its defense shield to illustrate how Georgia, under the Georgian Dream government, has systematically weakened its national defense and security in the face of persistent Russian aggression. Over two decades, Russia has undermined Georgia through military build-up in occupied regions, borderization, cyber-attacks, and propaganda. Instead of strengthening defenses, the Georgian Dream has severed ties with NATO, halted strategic projects, and allowed Russian infiltration into critical sectors. This degradation of national security structures was compounded by the dissolution of the National Security Council and the failure to update vital security documents. Ideologically, the Georgian Dream's leadership has promoted policies aligning with Russian interests, openly opposing Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. This shift is evident in actions against political opponents and media, fostering an environment conducive to Russian influence. The extensive infiltration of Russia-affiliated actors into strategic sectors, declining defense spending, and the controversial handling of defense deals exemplify the erosion of Georgia's defense capabilities. The article argues that as the Georgian Dream drifts towards Russia, the threat to Georgia's national security and statehood intensifies, leaving the country vulnerable to further Russian aggression.

Thornike Gordadze examines the mechanisms through which the Georgian Dream party maintains its electoral dominance in Georgia despite widespread public support for EU membership and significant protests against the government's pro-Russian policies. The party's electoral strategy relies heavily on administrative resources, economic incentives, threats, and manipulation of election results. Georgian Dream's MPs show personal loyalty to Bidzina Ivanishvili rather than adhering to any ideological

or geopolitical stance, shifting positions as needed to maintain power. The party's control extends to election administration, where loyalists in key positions influence vote counting, manipulate voter lists, and tamper with ballots. Additionally, the party uses public sector employment and social programs to secure votes, and coercion and intimidation tactics are employed by security services and criminal elements to suppress opposition. Despite these undemocratic practices, Georgian elections are still competitive, though not entirely fair. The upcoming October 2024 elections are also framed as a crucial referendum on Georgia's European integration, challenging the pro-European camp to mobilize effectively against the entrenched advantages of the ruling party.

Last but not least, Jaba Devdariani reviews recurring governmental attacks on foreign-funded NGOs and media in Georgia. By adopting the "foreign agents" law, the ruling Georgian Dream party has instigated a severe political crisis by pushing legislation aimed at curbing these civil society groups, accompanied by anti-Western rhetoric and violent defamation campaigns. This mirrors a similar crackdown by Eduard Shevardnadze's government in 2001-2002. The article highlights how, under Shevardnadze, Georgia's political landscape was precarious yet maintained a pro-Western stance, allowing NGOs to advocate for human rights and democracy. Conversely, the Georgian Dream has taken a more authoritarian approach, reducing NGO influence by controlling state institutions, leveraging economic incentives, and employing coercion. This shift reflects a broader decline in democratic practices and increased alignment with Russian interests, posing significant challenges to Georgia's civil society and its pro-European aspirations ■

With Respect,

Editorial Team

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JABA DEVDARIANI

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.

This pivot in foreign policy heralds a rapid descent into Russian-style authoritarianism, or even dictatorship, eliminating any space for civil society, political opposition, or dissent.

More significantly, this pivot in foreign policy heralds a rapid descent into Russian-style au-

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.

Ivanishvili and his Georgian Dream party have extensively invested resources, time, and political capital in consolidating their power and capturing state institutions.

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 denouncement 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.

By 2024, the Georgian Dream had become a monolithic party, allowing no room for internal dissent or debate.

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.

If Georgian Dream wins the 2024 elections, this would ensure another party loyalist as President.

The issue of the insubordinated presidency was addressed in the 2018 constitution, which abolished the elective presidency and transferred the appointment to the College of Voters, comprising MPs and state municipality representatives. If Georgian Dream wins the 2024 elections, this would ensure another party loyalist as President.

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.

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.

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.

In essence, the Parliament has lost all capacity to counter the interests of the oligarch and the ruling majority, with control mechanisms solely in the hands of the Georgian Dream.

In essence, the Parliament has lost all capacity to counter the interests of the oligarch and the ruling majority, with control mechanisms solely in the hands of the Georgian Dream.

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.

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

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, Partskhaladze 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.

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.

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.

* * *

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 ■

BID ON GREED

The State Capture and Lessons Learned – Implications for Georgia

In the not-so-distant past, Georgia was among the captive nations, subjugated by the Communist regime. Unfortunately, contemporary Georgia finds itself in another form of captivity – a country with a state capture problem, as explained in detail by our editor. State capture is a form of political corruption where private interests significantly influence a state's decision-making processes to its advantage. This occurs when influential individuals, groups, or corporations manipulate state policies, laws, and regulations to their benefit, often through illicit means such as bribery, coercion, and nepotism. Unlike other forms of corruption, which typically involve isolated acts of bribery or embezzlement, state capture represents a systemic problem where private interests co-opt the entire state apparatus.

The most typical symptoms of state capture can be described as follows:

- **Legislative Influence:** Manipulating the legislative process to pass favorable laws.
- **Regulatory Manipulation:** Ensuring regulatory bodies serve private interests rather than public welfare.
- **Judicial Control:** Subverting the judiciary to secure favorable outcomes in legal matters.
- **Administrative Corruption:** Appointing loyalists to key bureaucratic positions to ensure compliance with private agendas.

Ivanishvili effectively “owns” Georgia, with control over its ruling party, judiciary, legislature, businesses, media, etc. – all traits of state capture.

State capture can occur in various forms and to different extents, but its hallmark is the subversion of state functions to serve the interests of a



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select few rather than the public good. In Georgia's case, the "select few" refers to one man - Bidzina Ivanishvili, founder of the Georgian Dream party and former Prime Minister. He amassed his fortune, which exceeds Georgia's national budget, in Russia, where an oligarchic rule is well established. Often referred to as an oligarch due to his self-imposed distance from any official title or function but exuberant influence on Georgian politics, Ivanishvili effectively "owns" Georgia, with control over its ruling party, judiciary, legislature, businesses, media, etc. - all traits of state capture.

Examining the behavior of other state capture cases worldwide reveals striking similarities with current events in Georgia, making it easier to understand the dilemma Georgians are facing.

Given the origins of his wealth, many inside and outside of Georgia believe he is manipulated by

the Russian leadership, and they offer numerous pieces of evidence to support this claim. The latest is the "foreign agents' law," poorly disguised as a "transparency law," which mimics similar legislation adopted in Russia and instrumentalized for the oppression of dissent. Whatever Ivanishvili's motives are, examining the behavior of other state capture cases worldwide reveals striking similarities with current events in Georgia, making it easier to understand the dilemma Georgians are facing.

In Nicaragua, the Ortega family exemplifies state capture.

In Nicaragua, the Ortega family exemplifies state capture. President Daniel Ortega and his wife, Vice President Rosario Murillo, have centralized power and [undermined](#) democratic institutions. Their rule is marked by the erosion of checks and balances, suppression of dissent, and manipulation

of state institutions for personal gain. Ortega has maintained a tight grip on the National Assembly, ensuring laws are passed to consolidate his power. The judiciary in Nicaragua is heavily influenced by the executive branch, with judges often appointed based on loyalty to Ortega rather than merit, leading to biased rulings that favor the regime. Independent media outlets face constant harassment, censorship, and even shutdowns. Journalists critical of the government are often threatened, imprisoned, or forced into exile. The Ortega family has significant [control](#) over the economy, with numerous businesses linked to the family or their allies, further consolidating their political power.

In Venezuela, state capture has been a critical factor in the country's descent into economic and political chaos.

In Venezuela, state capture has been a critical factor in the country's descent into economic and political chaos. Under the leadership of Hugo Chávez and his successor, Nicolás Maduro, Venezuela has experienced severe financial mismanagement, widespread corruption, and human rights abuses. Chávez and Maduro [used](#) oil revenues to create a vast patronage network, ensuring loyalty among military and civilian elites. This patronage system has been crucial in maintaining their grip on power despite widespread opposition. The judiciary in Venezuela is primarily seen as an extension of the executive branch. Judges not aligning with the government's agenda are often replaced, ensuring that legal challenges against the regime are stifled. Electoral processes in Venezuela have been heavily criticized for lack of transparency and fairness. The government uses tactics such as gerrymandering, voter intimidation, and control over the electoral commission to secure electoral victories. The Maduro regime has cracked down on opposition leaders, activists, and journalists. Many have been imprisoned on dubious charges, while others have been forced into exile.

State capture in Belarus involves the consolidation of power by a small elite, primarily centered around President Alexander Lukashenko.

State capture in Belarus involves the consolidation of power by a small elite, primarily centered around President Alexander Lukashenko, who has ruled the country since 1994. The phenomenon in Belarus is characterized by the centralization of authority, suppression of opposition, and the intertwining of state and private interests to maintain control over the political and economic landscape. Presidential decrees often override legislative decisions, diminishing the role of other branches of government. The parliament of Belarus functions more as a rubber stamp for Lukashenko's decisions rather than as an independent legislative body. Elections in Belarus are widely criticized by international observers for being neither free nor fair. Allegations of vote rigging and suppression of political opposition are common. The Belarusian economy is heavily state-controlled, with economic opportunities and privileges often granted to regime loyalists. This ensures the support of key business figures who benefit from state contracts and favorable regulations. The judiciary in Belarus is not independent and often acts in accordance with the interests of the ruling regime, resulting in biased rulings, particularly against political opponents and activists. Media is mainly state-controlled or heavily regulated, ensuring the regime can control the narrative and limit critical reporting. Political opponents, activists, and independent journalists face harassment, imprisonment, and violence.

Foreign Policy Consequences

State capture profoundly impacts foreign policy. When private interests and corrupt officials control state apparatuses, foreign policy often serves

to maintain their power and protect their economic interests. This results in alignment with other authoritarian regimes, economic dependencies, strategic alliances, and diplomatic isolation from democratic nations.

State capture profoundly impacts foreign policy.

Countries suffering from state capture often align their foreign policies with the interests of those who benefit from the corruption. Corrupt regimes may create or sustain economic dependencies that favor their personal or political survival. Such states face diplomatic isolation or sanctions from the international community. To mitigate those consequences, they form strategic alliances with other captured or authoritarian states.

The Ortega regime has tailored its foreign policy to sustain its power and align with other authoritarian regimes. The close relationship between Nicaragua and Venezuela has been a cornerstone of Ortega's foreign policy. Venezuela, under Chávez and later Maduro, provided financial aid and subsidized oil, which helped Ortega consolidate power domestically. Nicaragua has also strengthened ties with Russia and China, both of which have less stringent conditions regarding human rights and governance. These relationships provide economic and military support while counterbalancing Western influence. Ortega's policies and human rights abuses have led to strained relations with neighboring countries and regional bodies such as the *Organization of American States* (OAS), which has criticized Nicaragua's democratic backsliding.

Venezuelan foreign policy has been characterized by strong anti-US rhetoric and opposition to US influence in Latin America, justified by rhetoric of "resisting imperialism and external influence." Human rights abuses and electoral manipulation have led to extensive sanctions from the US, the European Union, and several Latin American countries.

These sanctions aim to pressure the regime but also contribute to Venezuela's economic crisis and isolation. To counteract international sanctions and diplomatic isolation, the regime has fostered close relationships with countries like Russia, China, and Iran.

One of the most significant foreign policy consequences of state capture in Belarus is the country's increased dependence on Russia. This relationship is multifaceted, encompassing economic, political, and security dimensions. Belarus's state-controlled economy relies heavily on subsidies and favorable trade terms from Russia. Russian energy subsidies are crucial for the Belarusian economy, providing discounted oil and gas essential for domestic consumption and export revenues. This economic dependence limits Belarus's ability to pursue an independent foreign policy and makes it susceptible to Russian influence. The behavior of the Belarusian regime has led to severely strained relations with the European Union and Western countries. In response to electoral fraud, political repression, and human rights violations, the EU and the United States have imposed multiple rounds of sanctions on Belarusian officials, businesses, and state-owned enterprises. These sanctions target key sectors of the economy, including finance, oil, and potash, and aim to pressure the regime to implement democratic reforms. High-level diplomatic engagements are limited, and Belarus has been excluded from various international forums and initiatives.

Long-term Foreign Policy Consequences

The long-term consequences of state capture on foreign policy are overwhelming. The regime's dependence on countries like Russia and China, strained relations with the West, and limited engagement with other international actors create a precarious foreign policy environment. Heavy re-

liance on other autocratic countries makes these states strategically vulnerable. Any changes in Russian or Chinese policy or economic conditions could have severe repercussions and limit their ability to pursue independent national interests.

Since neither Russia nor China is particularly fond of the current international system, where smaller countries have a chance to advance their national interests, further isolation from the West undermines their sovereignty.

Ongoing diplomatic isolation and sanctions from the West hinder their ability to participate meaningfully in the international community. This isolation restricts opportunities for economic development and cooperation. Economic difficulties stemming from sanctions and dependence on Russia and China, combined with political repression, contribute to public discontent and social unrest. Since neither Russia nor China is particularly fond of the current international system, where smaller countries have a chance to advance their national interests, further isolation from the West undermines their sovereignty.

Consequences for Georgia

More examples of state capture can be brought to the table, but the cases mentioned offer a clear picture of Georgia's future. Any "Georgia watcher" can testify that all the abovementioned problems persist in today's Georgia. Given the consequences of the state capture phenomenon, it seems pre-determined what kind of direction Georgia would take. "Normalizing ties with Russia" has increased the Georgian economy's dependence on Russia which previous governments successfully diversified towards more stable, predictable, and resilient markets. Drastically increased interactions with China, including lifting the visa regime,

mimic modes other similar regimes take. All this is in the name of decreasing the "malicious influence of the West," whose critical and uncomfortable voices started to challenge and irritate the ruling elite and primarily the ruler himself.

It seems very logical that to consolidate and maintain power, the ruler would not only target, harass, and suffocate the political opposition and uncontrolled businesses but would extend oppressive measures to any independent institution, whether civil society organizations or media. The recently adopted "foreign agents' law" represents merely an instrument for such oppression, as well described in the special [report](#) by the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe. Unlike in the above-examined cases, where state captors claim the political title of the Head of the State, in Georgia, Ivanishvili believes he is playing a "little trick" (his words), officially distancing himself from any official labels. Ivanishvili probably believes that this way, he will avoid being subject to obligations, criticism, sanctions, accountability, or responsibility. That belief in impunity makes him more determined to pursue his malicious policies without fear of consequences.

Even though such actions were predictable and multiple times noted by many experts (including yours truly), this time, fortunately, the West seems to be moving from verbal condemnations to concrete actions, hence revealing the true anti-Western and authoritarian nature of the current Georgian leadership.

All five previous presidents of Georgia (including the incumbent one), despite their differences and political preferences, never questioned Georgia's pro-Western stance and aspiration to be institutionally integrated into the EU and NATO, supported by more than 80% of the population.

All five previous presidents of Georgia (including the incumbent one), despite their differences and political preferences, never questioned Georgia's pro-Western stance and aspiration to be institutionally integrated into the EU and NATO, supported by more than 80% of the population. Contrary to the aspirations of the people of Georgia and contrary to the Constitution of Georgia, Ivanishvili

and his cronies are clearly driving the country toward the fate of Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Belarus. If they remain in power, Georgia will not only be a "one-man show," but it will surely become a "one-man shop," further eroding state sovereignty and pushing the country into the club of "international outcasts" with predictable consequences ■

Georgian People vs. Russian Dream

Article 78 of the Georgian Constitution states that “the constitutional bodies shall take all measures within the scope of their competencies to ensure the full integration of Georgia into the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.”

On 28 May 2024, the ruling Georgian Dream party overcame the presidential veto and finally adopted the law “on the transparency of foreign influence”, inspired by the Russian law on foreign agents. The end goal of this law is to eradicate any critical voices from the NGOs and media. This happened five months before the general elections scheduled for 26 October 2024.

When evaluating this move of the ruling Georgian Dream party, the European Union was crystal clear – European Council President Charles Michel [assessed](#) the bill as “not consistent with Georgia’s EU aspiration and its accession trajectory...” which would bring Georgia further away from the EU. High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the Euro-

pean Commission, Josep Borrell, and Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement, Olivér Várhelyi, also issued a joint [statement](#) stressing that adoption of the law “would negatively impact Georgia’s progress on its EU path” and that this law “is not in line with EU core norms and values.” The Venice Commission also strongly recommended [repealing](#) the law.

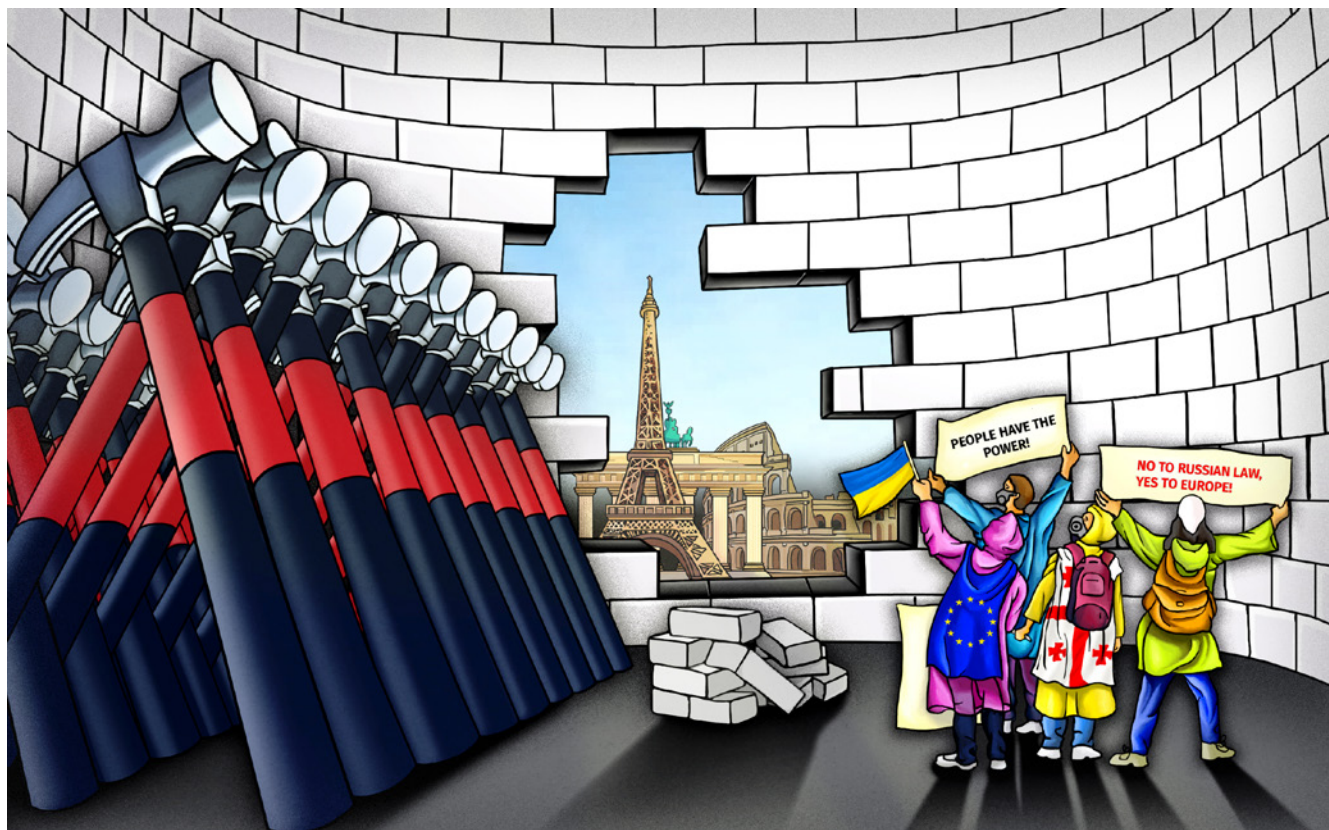
The rhetoric of the Georgian Dream throughout April and May was clear and straightforward: the European Union was accused of infringing on Georgia’s sovereignty, and the “Global War Party” was alleged to be trying to drag Georgia into war.

The bill’s reintroduction was followed by statements from the honorary chair of the ruling party, Bidzina [Ivanishvili](#), the Prime Minister of Georgia, Irakli [Kobakhidze](#), and the [Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#). They all unveiled what the GD has been trying to hide for quite some time – Georgian authorities decided to make a U-turn and go against the



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Constitution. The rhetoric of the Georgian Dream throughout April and May was clear and straightforward: the European Union was accused of infringing on Georgia's sovereignty, and the "Global War Party" was alleged to be trying to drag Georgia into war. The Prime Minister of Georgia even scandalously [accused](#) EU Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi of threatening to assassinate him as had purportedly happened to Slovakia's Prime Minister Robert Fico.

The Georgian Dream has thus become the only political force in Georgia's history to openly challenge the country's European future and its integration with the EU and NATO.

The Georgian Dream has thus become the only political force in Georgia's history to openly challenge the country's European future and its integration with the EU and NATO. In December 2023, the European Union stated that for Georgia to progress on the EU path and begin accession negotiations,

the Georgian Dream must, among other things, organize free, fair, and competitive elections; implement de-oligarchization, reform the judiciary, ensure the rule of law, combat elite corruption, and align Georgia's foreign and security policies with those of the European Union. However, fulfilling these nine steps would mean the Georgian Dream undermining its foundation of power.

The Georgian Dream's hold on power is maintained through a judiciary controlled by a corrupt group of judges, three of whom have been sanctioned by the US State Department for corruption. The Ministry of the Interior is led by a former bodyguard of Mr. Ivanishvili. Riot police and special task forces have been using brutal force to attack peaceful protesters and stifle dissent. The Prosecutor's Office of Georgia is another tool used by the Georgian Dream to persecute political opponents and anyone who opposes the regime. Former Prosecutor General Otar Partskhaladze was sanctioned by the US State Department for his ties with the Russian FSB and for influencing Georgian society and politics in favor of Russia. Loyalty within the

Ministry of Defense is another foundation of the Georgian Dream's power. David Khidasheli, a close associate of sanctioned Russian tycoon Vladimir Yevtushenko, served as Adviser to the Georgian Defense Minister from 2020 to February 2024. The Georgian Dream also relies heavily on state institutions and the media that disseminate anti-Western narratives and disinformation. In May 2023, a Meta [report](#) revealed that the Strategic Communications Department of the Government Administration of Georgia conducted a coordinated campaign against protesters opposing the Russian-style “foreign agents’ law”. In contrast, the EU has called for reforms in these pillars of power, a task that has proven self-defeating for Ivanishvili and the Georgian Dream.

Georgia's society is now confronting a complete state capture by oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, whose personal wealth constitutes nearly one-third of Georgia's GDP.

Georgia's society is now confronting a complete state capture by oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, whose personal wealth constitutes nearly one-third of Georgia's GDP. As this journal has documented on multiple occasions, his interests exert substantial influence over the country's decision-making process.

EU Accession – Genuine Will that GD Never Had

The ruling Georgian Dream party has never been genuinely interested in the EU accession process. Few believed their 2020 pre-election pledge to submit a membership application to the EU in 2024, viewing it as merely a tactic to attract pro-European voters ahead of the Parliamentary elections. The Georgian Dream was [opposed](#) to applying for membership even in March 2022,

following Ukraine's application and Moldova's declaration of intent to follow suit. The government only changed its stance within 24 hours under public pressure and street protests demanding that the application be submitted.

The EU's response to Georgia's membership application, which usually takes years, was swift and unexpected. Within three months, the Georgian Dream received a response indicating that, unlike Ukraine and Moldova, Georgia needed to fulfill 12 recommendations before being granted candidate status. The Chairman of Georgian Dream attributed this failure to Georgia's geographical distance from the EU, [stating](#) that “geographical position also prevented Georgia from obtaining the status.” The EU's decision put the Georgian Dream in a difficult position: they had to either openly oppose EU integration or fulfill the 12 recommendations, risking the loss of power due to their reliance on a loyal judiciary system, lack of transparency, and endemic corruption. The Georgian Dream's leadership opted for a middle path, addressing only the low-hanging fruits rather than conducting genuine reforms.

Consequently, only three of the 12 recommendations were fulfilled, allowing the Georgian Dream to maintain grip on the essential pillars of its power, without reforming them per EU request. At the end of 2023, the EU granted candidate status to Georgia, emphasizing that the decision was primarily motivated by the pro-European will of the Georgian people. As European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen [stressed](#) while presenting the enlargement package, the EU “supports the genuine aspirations of the overwhelming majority of its citizens to join the European Union. These aspirations need to be better mirrored by the authorities who should engage more with the opposition and civil society on matters of national interest.”

This EU decision was yet again exploited by the Georgian Dream. It allowed the ruling party to

validate its free-riding strategy and demonstrate, particularly to its pro-European voters, that it could advance on the EU path without significant reforms. This move also diluted the argument that the Georgian Dream is pro-Russian. Simultaneously, granting candidate status without merit [reduced](#) the EU's strong and effective leverage over the Georgian Dream.

Full Speed Towards Authoritarianism

The state capture and the Georgian Dream's push towards authoritarianism did not occur overnight. It has been a gradual process, often escaping the EU's attention or being met with inconsistent policies and messaging. Given Georgia's status as a frontrunner of the Eastern Partnership, some severe democratic deficiencies were either easily forgiven or quickly forgotten. In 2017, Azerbaijani investigative journalist Afgan Mukhtarli was allegedly abducted in Tbilisi, transferred to Baku, and sentenced to six years in prison. The European External Action Service issued [statements](#), and the European Parliament adopted a [resolution](#) urging Georgian authorities to “ensure a prompt, thorough, transparent and effective investigation into Afgan Mukhtarli's forced disappearance in Georgia and illegal transfer to Azerbaijan and to bring the perpetrators to justice.” Seven years later, no one has been brought to justice.

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During the 2018 presidential elections, Ivanishvili announced a debt relief program amounting to GEL 1.5 billion (approximately EUR 500 million)

for 600,000 individuals. According to the OSCE ODIHR election observation mission's [report](#), “it was considered by a number of ODIHR EOM interlocutors to be forms of vote buying, a practice prohibited by the Election and Criminal Codes.”

In 2019, the ruling Georgian Dream party [violated](#) the European Convention on Human Rights by violently dispersing an anti-occupation rally outside the Parliament building. The protest erupted after Sergei Gavrilov, a Russian communist MP, addressed the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy session from the Speaker's seat in the Georgian Parliament.

The ruling party regularly violates the peaceful assembly of minority groups, as evidenced by the Georgian Dream's encouragement of far-right groups to deliberately attack participants of Tbilisi Pride in 2021 and 2023. Since then, the government has [failed](#) to bring the perpetrators and instigators of the violence to justice.

Despite warnings from the US Administration and EU and the [opinion](#) of the Venice Commission, the ruling party appointed judges to the Supreme Court of Georgia for lifetime appointments, raising concerns about their impartiality and qualifications. This resulted in Georgia losing the EU's micro-financial [assistance](#) of EUR 75 million, which was conditioned on judicial reform.

In 2021, it was revealed that the Georgia Security Service was allegedly spying on then-EU Ambassador to Georgia Carl Hartzell, US diplomats, Israeli Ambassador Ran Gidor, and employees of other diplomatic missions in Georgia. The prosecution is still awaiting the results of internal investigations within the State Security Service.

In 2022, the Georgian Dream worsened the Criminal Procedure Code by extending the list of crimes under which covert investigative measures are allowed. The president's veto and the negative opin-

ion tabled by the Venice Commission did not stop Georgian Dream from enforcing the law. Given the lack of effective parliamentary oversight over the security services, this law drastically deteriorated Georgia's human rights standing.

Regarding foreign policy, instead of engaging with the EU, the Georgian Dream sought closer ties with China, culminating in the signing of a Strategic Partnership [deal](#) in 2023, starting [visa free](#) travel with China in 2024 and just recently [awarding](#) the construction of the strategic Anaklia deep sea port to a Chinese state owned China Communications Construction Company (CCCC). Simultaneously, the Georgian Dream engaged with the pro-Russian leadership of Hungary, hoping it could protect their interests at the EU level. As part of this strategy, Georgian Dream leaders regularly attend the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) annual gatherings in Budapest and criticize liberal values.

The Georgian Dream also refused to provide political support to Ukraine following Russia's unjustified and unprovoked war. Additionally, it decided to resume direct flights with Russia, contradicting the alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) as required by the EU-Georgia Association Agreement. As part of their policy of appeasing Russia, family members of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who are sanctioned by the USA and EU, were allowed to visit Georgia.

A Wall

Six months have passed since the EU granted candidate status to Georgia with nine prerequisites proposed to open accession negotiations. At least

five of these steps were already included in the EU's 12 recommendations before granting candidate status and still need to be fulfilled. Since November 2023, the Georgian Dream has made no progress to ensure that Georgia advances on its EU path. So far, none of the steps have been [fulfilled](#). Instead, the Georgian Dream passed a Russian-style law on foreign agents and imposed terror on citizens who opposed it and sought a European future. The Georgian Dream, which came to power in 2012 promising justice restoration and closer ties with the EU, is now acting in Russia's best interests. It has all but erected a wall between the Georgian people and the EU.

With the adoption of the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, the Georgian Dream has reached a point of no return.

With the adoption of the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, the Georgian Dream has reached a point of no return. It has lost the trust of its citizens and international partners, aligning with Kremlin and friends of Russia and becoming isolated from the global community. The European Union needs to move from words to actions and demonstrate its support for the aspirations of the Georgian people by sanctioning those decision-makers who undermine Georgia's European path and are engaged in corruption and state capture. The EU must also provide a clear update on how the adoption of this law and implementation of the nine conditions affects Georgia's candidate status and opening of the accession talks. General elections scheduled on 26 October 2024 are poised to be a genuine test for Georgia to either continue its European path or become Russia's backyard ■

A Turtle Without a Shell

Sergey Rastorguyev, a Russian political scientist, used a parable about a fox deceiving a little turtle into abandoning its shell to [explain](#) information warfare as the purposeful training of an enemy to remove its defenses. Applying this parable to Georgia, one can see a turtle handing over its defensive shell to an angry Russian bear.

Georgian Dream government has imposed policies that have significantly weakened Georgia's national security instead of strengthening resilience.

Over the last two decades, Russia has persistently undermined areas vital to Georgia's national defense and security. These actions include a military buildup in Georgia's occupied regions, notably the recent declaration by Russia to re-establish the [Ochamchire](#) naval base, the '[borderization](#)' of the occupied regions, kidnappings and murders along the occupation line, cyber-attacks, propaganda campaigns, and other [hybrid tactics](#). Paradoxically,

in response, the Georgian Dream government has imposed policies that have significantly weakened Georgia's national security instead of strengthening resilience.

Much like in Rastorguyev's parable, Georgia has reached a point where its leadership has purposefully degraded its defense capabilities to "avoid" irritating Russia. Steps taken by the Georgian Dream under Russian pressure include [severing](#) ties with NATO, suspending strategic projects like the [Anaklia](#) deep-sea port, degrading national security architecture and defense capabilities, and allowing the infiltration of critical strategic defense and security sectors.

Structural and Institutional Degradation

Georgia's national security architecture underwent significant transformation following constitutional changes initiated in 2009 and formalized in 2013. This shift transitioned the governance



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model from a strong presidential system to a parliamentary one, thereby expanding the government's authority and assigning it the central role in national security planning and execution.

The change of power and subsequent political turbulence between outgoing and incoming governments, coupled with power struggles within the ruling party, have had profound implications for Georgia's national security architecture.

The landscape further altered with the victory of the Georgian Dream in the October 2012 parliamentary elections. The change of power and subsequent political turbulence between outgoing and incoming governments, coupled with power struggles within the ruling party, have had profound implications for Georgia's national security architecture.

In early 2014, in addition to the National Security Council, which was subordinated to the President, the Government of Georgia created the State Security and Crisis Management Council as an advisory body to the Prime Minister. This move faced criticism from politicians and the expert community, who argued that the existence of two councils introduced problematic parallelism that hindered coherent national security policy planning.

Constitutional amendments adopted in 2018 brought further changes. It was announced that the National Security Council would be dissolved, making way for establishing a Defense Council. Unlike its predecessor, this new entity would convene solely in times of war, indicating a shift of focus toward crisis management. However, before the final abolition of the Security Council, the government decided to dissolve the State Security and Crisis Management Council by the end of 2017.

This move left a void in the formalized structure for national security planning and execution.

Although efforts were made to address this vacuum by establishing a State Security Council under a Prime Minister in 2019, critical conceptual documents essential to national security — such as threat assessments, national security concepts, or defense strategies — have not been formulated or updated in years.

These changes to Georgia's national security coordination mechanism showed a lack of a serious approach to safeguarding the nation's defense and security interests. Such volatility undermined the coherence and effectiveness of strategic planning, leaving Georgia vulnerable to well-pronounced or unforeseen threats and challenges.

Conceptual and Ideological Degradation

The structural and institutional degradation of the high-level coordination mechanism flashed out Bidzina Ivanishvili's strategic vision of Georgia, its role in a regional context, and relations with Russia. These ideas were exhibited in Ivanishvili's quotes below during a 2013 televised [interview](#), which became the basis for the so-called policy of 'normalizing' relations with Russia. In practice, as expected and warned by security experts, normalization materialized in a one-sided compromise on Georgia's national interests and [dragging](#) Georgia into Russia's orbit.

"I cannot believe that it is Russia's strategy to conquer and occupy neighboring countries."

"But in parallel to it, a question arises: is it possible to combine the restoration of friendly relations with Russia and at the same time to have good relations with NATO and to aspire towards NATO and to have good relations

with the United States and NATO-member states? I think that Armenia is a good example here; Armenia gives a good example for Georgia, and it can be a source of envy in a positive sense.”

“Armenia is on excellent terms with Russia and has friendly relations with [Russia] while also being on excellent terms with the United States and other NATO-member states. So I think it’s possible, and I think that we have to, and I believe that we will combine it.”

Fast forward to Bidzina Ivanishvili’s statements of April 2024, and it becomes clear that the announced dramatic shift in Georgia’s foreign policy has already occurred.

Fast forward to Bidzina Ivanishvili’s [statements](#) of April 2024, and it becomes clear that the announced dramatic shift in Georgia’s foreign policy has already occurred. Ivanishvili openly embraced policies that are [not consistent](#) with Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspiration and its accession trajectory and will bring Georgia further away from the Western institutions and not closer. He endorsed conspiracy theories alleging that a “Global War Party” seeks to undermine Georgia’s identity and sovereignty and announced repressions against political opponents, free media, and civil society organizations after the October 2024 elections, framing all as agents of foreign influence. For the first time in history, a key policymaker openly declared the West as an enemy of Georgia and announced repressions against anyone opposing the Georgian Dream.

Ivanishvili’s statement served as policy guidance for an official policy change. Responding to [concerns](#) from the US embassy in Tbilisi, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs [blamed](#) the US for violating the spirit of partnership by imposing unaccept-

able preconditions. Later, the Prime Minister [is-sued](#) a press release echoing Russia’s anti-Western propaganda and blaming the West for instigating color revolutions. At a briefing on 8 May, Speaker of the Georgian Parliament, Shalva Papuashvili, [addressed](#) the ongoing protests against the “Foreign Agents’ Law” and announced that the Political Council of Georgian Dream has decided to create a database containing information on all individuals “who are involved in violence, blackmail, threats, and other illegal acts, threats, and blackmail,” or “who publicly endorse these actions.” This statement led to violence against opposition figures and activists.

Isolating Georgia from the West is a long-standing strategic goal for Russia.

Isolating Georgia from the West is a long-standing strategic goal for Russia. The Georgian Dream’s policies, rhetoric, and actions have created enormous opportunities for Russia to manipulate and jeopardize Georgia’s national security. As a result, Georgia is the most exposed country in the volatile security environment of this turbulent region. Strategic engagement of Western stakeholders is crucial for safeguarding Georgia’s vital interests and mitigating mounting security threats and risks, given the grave vulnerabilities created by the Georgian Dream’s accommodating policies and [growing](#) dependence on Russia. It is clear that if Russia and its local proxies succeed in isolating Georgia from its Western partners, the country will face existential challenges not only to its national security but to its statehood more broadly.

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Russian Infiltration

One major result of the Georgian Dream's defense and security policy is the extensive infiltration of strategic sectors by Russia-affiliated actors. Over the past few years, Georgia's state security apparatus has seen a significant drain of Western-educated professionals. Numerous individuals have resigned and been dismissed from political and public positions due to their critical views on the Georgian Dream's pro-Russian drift. Moreover, scandals involving individuals with clear links to Moscow being active in Georgia's political, economic, and even defense affairs have become commonplace.

One major result of the Georgian Dream's defense and security policy is the extensive infiltration of strategic sectors by Russia-affiliated actors.

In 2016, the Chief of the Joint Staff, General Gigi Kalandadze, [revealed](#) on the Rustavi2 TV channel that crucial military facilities' coordinates and classified information were handed over to Russian special services after the August 2008 war. The breach included firing points and central command headquarters vital for Georgian defense against Russian aggression. This alarming revelation underscored the degradation of national defense and compromised security infrastructure. The handover was allegedly conducted by a former military officer, Tristan Tsitelashvili, who was released as a political prisoner by Georgian Dream in 2013. Later, Defense Minister Mindia Janelidze practically [admitted](#) the breach and that Tsitelashvili indeed entered the closed facility, but the incident was downgraded to minor misconduct, and no investigation followed.

Former Chief Prosecutor of Georgia, Otar Partskhaladze, who now holds Russian citizenship and resides in Moscow, has been a close ally of Ivan-

ishvili and the Georgian Dream leadership. He had accumulated considerable wealth during and after his tenure, significantly [increasing](#) his property holdings limited to two items before entering politics to 24 actual listings. Partskhaladze was sanctioned in 2023 by the US Government for influencing Georgian society for the benefit of Russia and collaborating with the Russian Federal Security Service. Georgian Dream officials have staunchly defended him, but no official investigations have been initiated.

The so-called cartographers' [case](#) was used to influence the 2020 elections. The Georgian Dream arrested two experts from the Ministries of Foreign and Internal Affairs, blaming them and the Saakashvili government for handing over a disputed border area near the David Gareji Monastery to Azerbaijan. A pivotal role in this case was played by Davit Khidasheli, a businessman with close [ties](#) to Moscow, who served as an adviser to the defense minister from 2020 to 2024. Khidasheli procured maps in Russia that purportedly evidenced territorial concessions. However, these alleged concessions turned out to be nonexistent, leading to the collapse of the prosecutor's case against the accused civil servants due to insufficient evidence. Despite this, the Georgian Dream used the case for manipulating nationalist sentiments before the 2020 elections, demonizing the opposition and civil society.

Furthermore, investigative journalists in Ukraine and Georgia have [revealed](#) unsettling ties between Russia and the Georgian strategic defense industry. After severe sanctions on Russia's defense industry following its full-scale attack on Ukraine and Georgia's refusal to help Ukraine, a disturbing depth of infiltration was exposed. The intertwining of Tamaz Somkhishvili's business interests with Tbilisi Aviation Plant, holding shares and operating within the confines of the Sukhoi Aircraft Manufacturing Company, and the adjacent company TAM Management working on military repairs was

revealed. Public registry records showed Somkhishvili's company maintaining a Moscow representative office and being involved in contacts directly or indirectly affiliated with the Russian Ministry of Defense. Somkhishvili's past roles in prominent Russian companies like *Lukoil* and *Rosneftexport*, coupled with his Russian citizenship confirmed by Ukrainian Defense Intelligence, further fuel concerns. These revelations underscored the urgent need for transparency and vigilant measures against malign influence from Russia-linked entities within critical defense infrastructure.

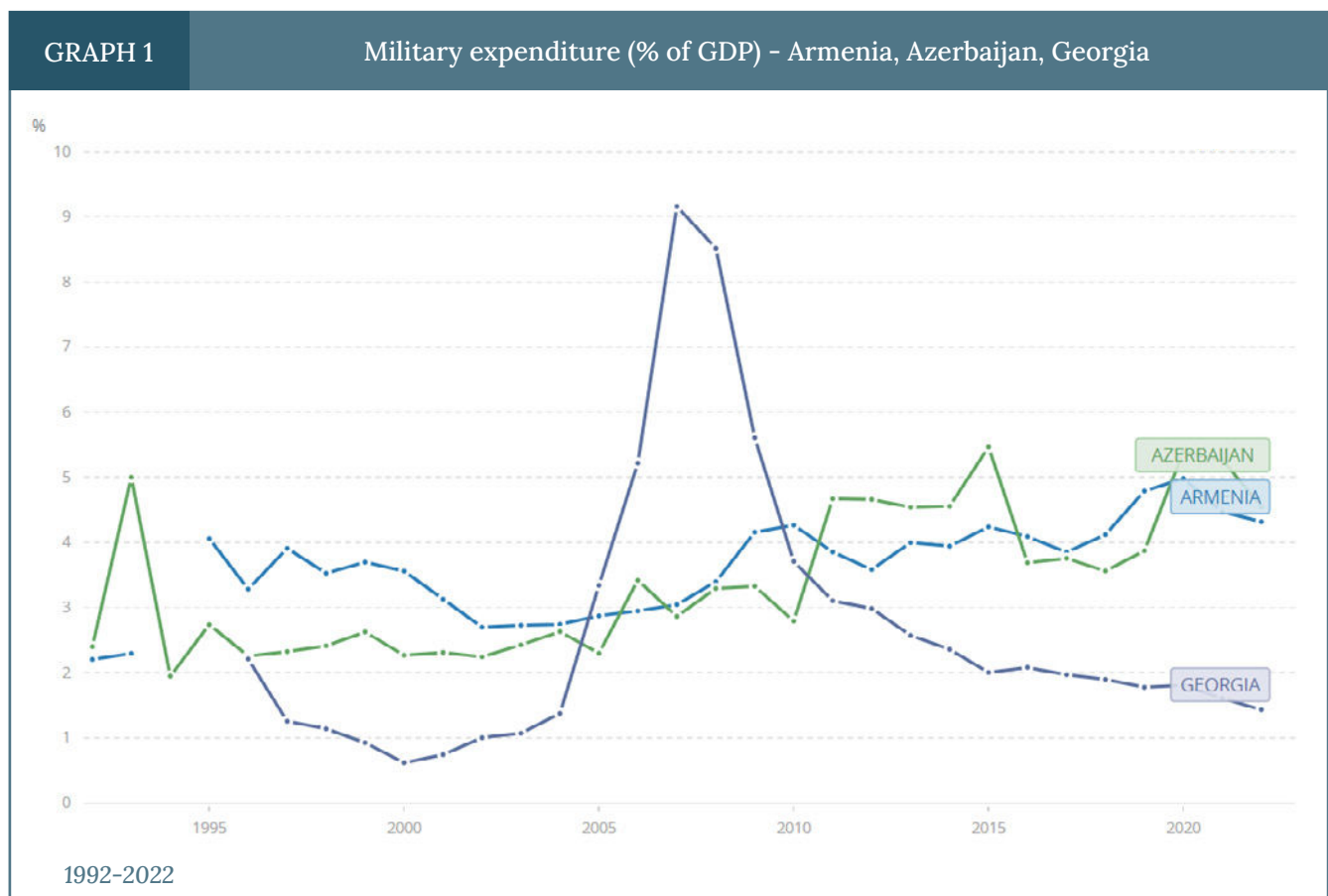
Drained Funding and Capabilities

Another grave concern is Georgia's drastically declining defense spending, which poses a significant risk amid a rapidly deteriorating security environment in the region. The total defense budget

in 2022 amounted to a mere USD 360 mln, representing only 1.43% of the GDP, a drastic plunge from 2.98% in 2012. For comparison, in 2022, Armenia spent 4.35% of GDP on defense, amounting to USD 795 mln, while Azerbaijan's defense budget totaled almost USD 3 bln, representing 14.95% of the GDP. The alarmingly deteriorating [trend](#) of regional imbalance, undermining Georgia's national security, is evident in the data (see below graph 1).

Another grave concern is Georgia's drastically declining defense spending, which poses a significant risk amid a rapidly deteriorating security environment in the region.

Moreover, a closer look at Georgia's defense spending structure reveals an even more concerning imbalance. In 2021, nearly 87% of the total budget allocated for defense programs (USD 305 mil-



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lion) was [directed](#) toward management and social programs, with only 3% allotted for infrastructure development and a mere 10% for maintenance and enhancement of defense capabilities.

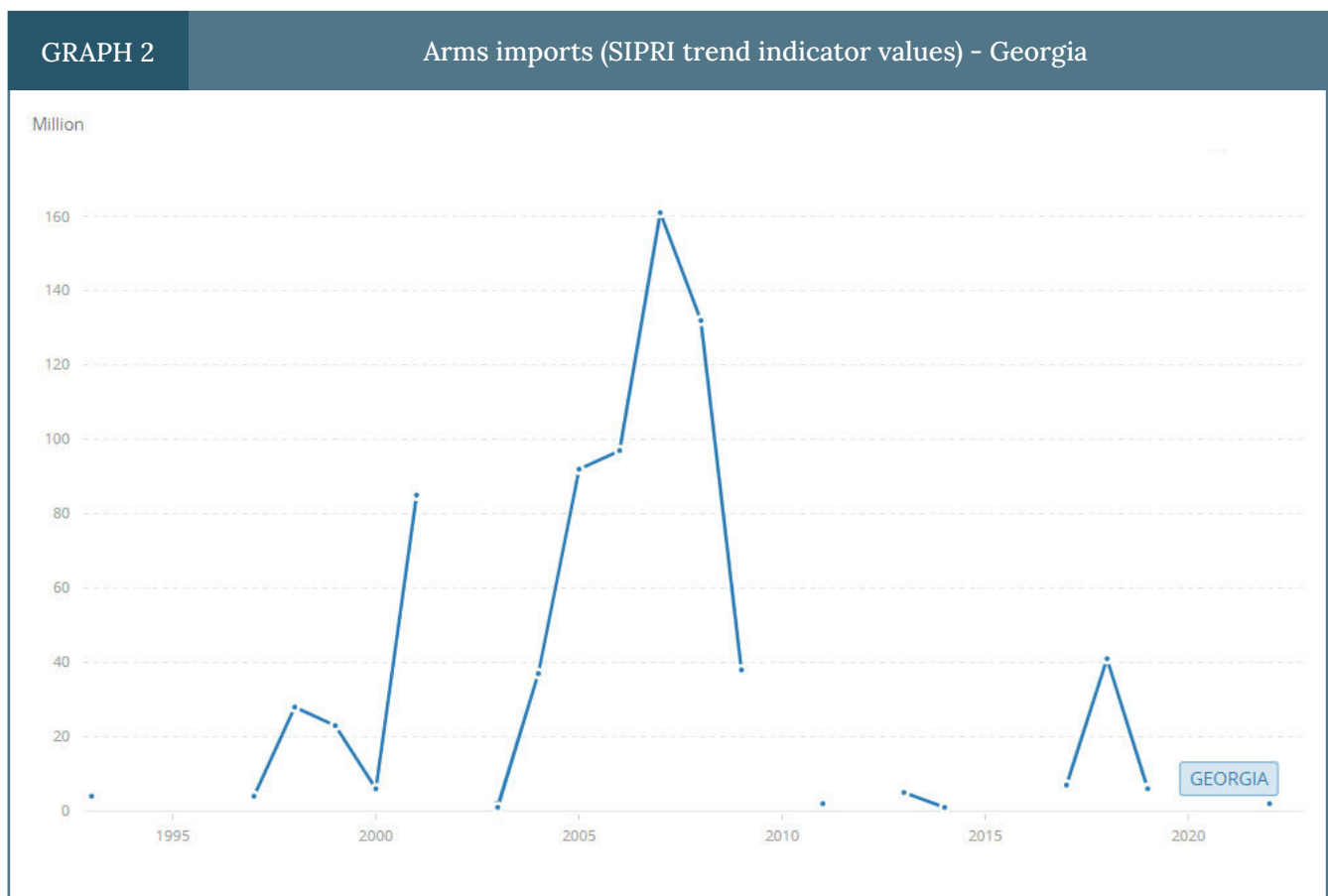
Graph 2 highlights the near absence of arms acquisition until 2017, attributed to the reluctance of partners to sell weapon systems to Georgia following the Russian aggression in 2008. However, the decision by the US to provide Javelin anti-tank missiles to Georgia briefly spurred arms acquisition in 2018, reaching up to USD 40 million, otherwise plummeting below USD 10 million before and after this period. These insufficient funds underscore the disregard for defense by the Georgian Dream government, posing a significant threat to the country's national security.

One specific example of the leadership of the Georgian Dream sabotaging Georgia's defense development is the air defense deal between Georgia

and France. While it was heralded as a step forward in bolstering the country's defense capabilities, it remains clouded in controversy. Despite Defense Minister Tina Khidasheli finally [signing](#) the agreement with *ThalesRaytheonSystems* in 2015, critical details such as the system's type and cost were deliberately obscured, perpetuating an environment of secrecy.

One specific example of the leadership of the Georgian Dream sabotaging Georgia's defense development is the air defense deal between Georgia and France.

Former Defense Minister Irakli Alasania's startling [claim](#) that Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili and former Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili sabotaged the deal at Russia's behest underscores concerns about the Georgian Dream's commit-



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ment to national security. Alasania's dismissal and subsequent accusations reignited a political crisis, raising suspicions of Russia's covert influence over Tbilisi's arms procurements from the West. Despite denials from the current government and the French embassy, the murky circumstances surrounding the deal's collapse highlight a troubling pattern of interference and opacity, leaving questions about the true motives and allegiances of Georgian Dream's leadership.

Drifting Toward the North

While the war in Ukraine continues to consume the full attention of Western stakeholders, the Georgian Dream doubles down on its open drift toward the Russian orbit. Russian-style disinformation and propaganda campaigns targeting all active opponents of pro-Russian policies have intensified, especially after a constant wave of pro-democracy protests hit Tbilisi in response to the government's effort to impose a Russian-style law on foreign agents. Law enforcement agencies have shown brutal aggression against peaceful protesters, with beatings and illegal detentions becoming regular practices. The Georgian Dream has irrevocably chosen to impose absolute authoritarian rule at all costs. From this perspective, the deliberate degradation of Georgia's national interests, as well as the resilience of the defense and security fabric, can be seen as a logical course of

action for a government aiming to maintain power by using law enforcement as a politicized tool for repression.

Escalated disengagement and demonstrative turn away from Georgia's strategic Western partners create a staggering allusion to the Georgian Dream willingly handing over the nation's defensive shell to the Russian Federation.

On the other hand, the threat from Russia has also grown considerably. If the Kremlin decides it is in Russia's interests to escalate tensions in the region further, the pro-Russian policies of the Georgian Dream will not deter further Russian aggression. In this context, completely degrading Georgia's deterrence and defense capabilities poses a fundamental national security threat. This threat is multiplied by the degradation of another potential deterrent—Georgia's strategic partnership with the West—putting the country in existential danger. There is an ever-growing risk of Russia taking advantage of Georgia's exposure and vulnerability to finalize its subjugation to Russia's exclusive sphere of influence during these turbulent regional and internal times. Escalated disengagement and demonstrative turn away from Georgia's strategic Western partners create a staggering allusion to the Georgian Dream willingly handing over the nation's defensive shell to the Russian Federation ■

Behind the Ballot: How the Georgian Dream Secures Electoral Wins

Despite the widespread mass protests against adopting the “Russian law” in Georgia and consistent opinion polls over the past two decades showing that 80 percent of the population favors EU membership, many foreign observers are puzzled. They question how a parliament elected by these same people can vote to pass a law that jeopardizes the country’s European integration.

This article describes how the ruling Georgian Dream party secures electoral victories without substantial reliance on party programs or ideological orientations. The party merely sets some blurry red lines, such as avoiding overtly pro-Russian or anti-Orthodox stances; however, within these frameworks, it acts without any political or moral compass. These red lines can also be scrapped and changed, depending on political expedience. For instance, not being overly anti-European and anti-American seemed to be one such red line; however, in the last few months, the Georgian Dream’s

anti-Western statements and policies have skyrocketed.

This analysis will outline the electoral machinery established by the Georgian Dream, which uses administrative resources, economic benefits distribution, threats, result manipulation, and other tactics to secure a comfortable majority in parliament. In Georgian elections, ideological preferences and geopolitical orientation compete strongly with more practical and material considerations.

Georgian MPs: Personal Loyalty over Ideology and Geopolitics

One major reason for the discrepancy between the parliament’s actions and the majority’s will is that the Georgian Dream party never explicitly opposed the EU during their electoral campaigns. Instead, they consistently presented themselves to both the electorate and the international commu-



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nity as pursuing European integration. Many voters, whether motivated by conviction, pressure, or self-interest, believed they were not jeopardizing the country's European future. The ruling party and its leaders probably were never genuinely pro-European but were pragmatic enough to avoid alienating a significant portion of society.

Today's Georgian Dream parliamentarians lack any ideological preference, serving as loyal followers of Ivanishvili, willing to shift from social democracy to the far right to ensure his continued power.

Another factor is the personal loyalty of elected representatives to Bidzina Ivanishvili, the billionaire and de facto ruler of the country. This loyalty encompasses government members, heads of law enforcement bodies, and MPs. Over the years, the party has become highly monolithic, consistently purging hesitant elements, such as the 2012 coalition partners (the Republicans, the Free Democrats) and Georgian Dream members from civil society. Today's Georgian Dream parliamentarians lack any ideological preference, serving as loyal followers of Ivanishvili, willing to shift from social democracy to the far right to ensure his continued power.

Over half of the Georgian Dream deputies are official [millionaires](#) who view their membership in parliament as a means to protect their business interests. This lack of principles within the majority parliamentary faction is illustrated by the events of March 2023. Eighty-six GD deputies voted in favor of the so-called "foreign agents' law" in the first hearing. After unprecedented protests, Ivanishvili decided to withdraw the law and the same number of deputies who initially supported it then voted against it just days later. The absolute majority of these MPs voted in favor of the same law one year later.

Influence and Control over Election Administration

Allegations of vote-counting manipulation by the Georgian Dream have raised concerns about the legitimacy of election outcomes in Georgia. The ruling party has strategically placed loyal officials in key positions within the Central Election Commission (CEC) and district election commissions. These election commission members receive training and directives that align with GD's interests, influencing how they manage the vote-counting process.

Recent developments illustrate that the CEC's neutrality is highly questionable. The Georgian parliament abolished the position of deputy to the president, which was usually appointed based on the opposition's suggestion. This decision followed a disinformation campaign involving the current CEC Chairman, a GD loyalist, who falsely claimed that the political opposition was planning an attack to replace him with his deputy, an opposition representative.

Additionally, the Chairman of the CEC can now be elected by a simple majority of parliament rather than the previously required qualified majority. President Salome Zourabichvili [attempted](#) to veto this change, warning that "there is a risk that the elections will be organized by a biased, single-party administration controlled by the ruling party, leading to a lack of confidence in the electoral process, both within society and the international community."

Moreover, in May, the Georgian Dream proposed another set of amendments to the Election Code. These amendments intend to change the current decision-making system which requires the support of two-thirds of CEC members for certain Commission decisions. Instead, the ruling party proposes that if the Commission fails to make a

decision with this rule, it can be re-voted in the same meeting and adopted with a simple majority of the Commission members. According to Georgian [NGOs](#), these changes “rule out opposition involvement in the decision-making process and further intensify the doubt about the unconscionable influence of the ruling party in the election administration.”

The district and precinct election commissions employ numerous techniques to influence election results. One common tactic involves manipulating voter lists by [inflating](#) them with fictitious or deceased individuals. Conversely, opposition supporters are often removed from voter lists, particularly in areas with a strong opposition presence.

In addition to manipulating voter lists, ballot boxes are also tampered with. While direct ballot stuffing is rare, introducing pre-filled ballots into the ballot boxes during the voting process is more common, a tactic known as [chain-voting](#) or, more colloquially – “Armenian carousel.”

Georgian elections usually have a relatively high number of [invalid ballots](#), ranging from three to five percent of the total, often attributed to the meticulous scrutiny of electoral commission members. Studies indicate that most invalidated ballots favor the opposition. [Destroying ballots](#) that support opposition candidates, often under the pretext of procedural errors, is also common.

Falsifying counted results can also occur, including tampering with results sheets. This involves altering the results recorded on official tally sheets before submission to higher authorities. This usually happens in those precincts where the precinct election commission members and NGO observers are either bought or expelled by the government. In such cases, the remaining members are often pressed into signing a protocol independent of the actual vote tally. Such precincts are known as [“green precincts”](#).

Experts and long-time observers of Georgian elections [claim](#) that commission manipulations, such as number changes and ballot box stuffing, affect between two and five percent of votes in Georgia. These figures are lower than in countries with entrenched dictatorial regimes like Russia or Belarus. However, in Georgia’s pluralist context, these are significant numbers likely to impact the results.

Election Alchemy: Transforming State Resources into Votes

Many argue that the outcome of the elections is decided well before election day, mainly due to the long-tested practices of the GD electoral machine. These practices include using administrative resources, economic and social incentives, clientelism, and coercion and intimidation.

The use of “administrative resources” in elections is a common tactic in many imperfect democracies and hybrid political systems. Scholarly research defines administrative resources as using state positions, funds, and influence to benefit the ruling party. It is [argued](#) that the ruling party automatically secures around 25% of votes due to the support of public employees and their families. This practice makes a level playing field impossible, rendering opposition victories theoretical without significant political changes.

In Georgia, both the bureaucracy and judicial system have historically lacked independence. Even liberal, reformist, and pro-Western governments (2003–2012) could not resist the temptation to control fundamental institutions vital for democracy.

In Georgia, both the bureaucracy and judicial system have historically lacked independence. Even

liberal, reformist, and pro-Western governments (2003-2012) could not resist the temptation to control fundamental institutions vital for democracy. Consequently, reforms from 2003 to 2012 built a relatively solid and efficient state apparatus as compared to other post-Soviet neighbors. However, this efficient bureaucracy has become a formidable weapon for Ivanishvili and the GD, who view it primarily as an “administrative resource.”

This explains the significant increase in public sector employment. Currently, 302,000 people are considered public employees with their number [growing](#) by 4-5% annually since 2017. This growth has led to stronger politicization and clientelism, reducing the space for an independent civil service. Former senior civil servants have revealed extensive clientelism and politicization, affecting even kindergarten teachers and employees of state museums and public hospitals. Given this level of interference, it is improbable that the GD would allow complete independence to bodies dealing with crucial topics like the media, the judiciary, or the central electoral administration.

Public servants play a critical role in Georgian elections as they are heavily [mobilized](#) to support the GD's campaign efforts. This includes campaigning during work hours, effectively turning them into unpaid campaign workers. Public employees are also asked to be active on social media, mainly Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram, to actively “like” and “comment” on GD leadership posts and criticize opposing opinions. Government offices and resources, such as vehicles and communication tools, are used to support campaign activities.

Loyal public servants might receive promotions, bonuses, or other benefits as a reward for their political support. Public servants may also selectively enforce laws and regulations to disad-

vantage opposition parties and their supporters. They are often [required](#) to compile lists of potential voters and persuade them to support the ruling party. Public servants frequently serve as poll workers, influencing the voting process to ensure favorable outcomes for the GD.

The State Security Service of Georgia (SSSG, or SUS in Georgian) plays a key role in securing pro-GD votes on election day. Their involvement in the electoral process [raises](#) significant concerns about election integrity. The presence of operatives wearing blue jeans and black polo shirts at polling stations and their role in manipulating results through intimidation and tampering are well-noted.

Besides employees of various ministries, security services, city halls, and regional and local administrations, electoral clientelism particularly affects school and kindergarten teachers and primary and secondary school administrators. These professionals are [mobilized](#) extensively as voting often occurs in schools, and school staff are frequently involved in polling station commissions. Teachers in Georgia are relatively vulnerable, with around 70% [failing](#) their qualification exams, making their continued employment highly dependent on the goodwill of political authorities.

[Leaks](#) from the secret files of the Georgian intelligence services (SUS), organized by a former imprisoned high official, reveal that the SUS closely supervises the appointment of principals and teachers in schools and has extensive files on their political preferences. Recalcitrant principals or teachers face considerable physical and psychological pressure, as exemplified by the tragic [death](#) of school director Ia Kerdzaia in Zugdidi.

One favored technique for using administrative resources is to artificially inflate administrative roles by creating positions within government [NNLEs](#) (non-entrepreneurial, non-commercial

legal entities) to employ socially vulnerable individuals. This results in more civil servants dependent on the state budget and guaranteed votes for the ruling party during elections. An investigation in Zestafoni showed that these “fictional jobs” included unnecessary roles in local libraries, where tasks assigned were often redundant, suggesting the true intent was political rather than practical. Interviews with library staff and residents indicated that many services, such as book deliveries, were rarely performed, underscoring the program’s political motives.

The GD’s attempts to use electoral clientelism often reach absurd levels. For instance, at the Zugdidi Botanical Garden, where admission was free, six employees were paid as cashiers.

Other high-demand occupations include cemetery and municipal park employees, municipal waste management workers, and similar roles. In Keda, a small town in Adjara, for example, 150 people have been hired as cleaners, almost all of them claiming to be GD coordinators. The GD’s attempts to use electoral clientelism often reach absurd levels. For instance, at the Zugdidi Botanical Garden, where admission was free, six employees were [paid](#) as cashiers.

Vote Buying and Commodification of the Ballot

The Georgian Dream often [provides](#) direct financial incentives to voters. These incentives can include cash payments, free food distributions, gift cards, or other monetary rewards in exchange for votes. Reports have surfaced of GD operatives discreetly distributing cash to voters in exchange for support, often near polling stations, where “coordinators” manage cash transactions with pre-agreed voter lists.

In economically disadvantaged areas, food packages, clothing, and other essentials are often [distributed](#). These packages typically include potatoes, onions, flour, sugar, cooking oil, and party-branded promotional materials. In some communities, voters receive building materials such as cement and bricks, ostensibly for community development but tied to securing votes.

The Georgian Dream also uses state-funded social programs and benefits to buy votes. This includes one-time financial aid packages to targeted groups, such as pensioners and unemployed individuals, shortly before elections. Additionally, the government may temporarily increase pensions, unemployment benefits, or other social welfare payments during the election period. Moreover, GD authorities may threaten to withdraw social assistance from particular beneficiaries to influence their political choices. In 2018, before the second round of the Presidential Elections, the Georgian Dream went as far as to [write off](#) bad debts to several hundred thousand voters, which was widely interpreted as vote-buying.

Another tactic is offering employment opportunities or promises of jobs in the public sector to individuals who pledge their support to the party. Potential voters are often offered temporary employment for short-term government projects or public works, contingent on their voting behavior.

In every municipality, GD coordinators identify specific needs at the individual level, such as families with members suffering from illnesses or relatives imprisoned or fined. GD representatives offer public funding for medical treatment, [reduced prison sentences](#), or penalty removals in exchange for votes. This personalization of electoral issues and commodification of the ballot, combined with the GD’s extensive administrative and financial resources, gives the ruling party a significant advantage.

Coercion and Intimidation

Public servants, or socially vulnerable persons, are often coerced into demonstrating support for GD. On election day, they are required to show a picture of their ballot marked for the ruling party or its candidate. This coercion can include threats of job loss, creating a climate of fear where expressing political dissent becomes risky. Public servants are frequently required to attend GD rallies and events during work hours, and their participation is closely monitored to ensure compliance.

The crucial role in coercion and intimidation beyond public employees is [assigned](#) to “thieves-in-law” (a term referring to a specific criminal fraternity within the former Soviet Union, particularly developed in Georgia) and petty criminals under their command. During the campaign and on election day, they threaten voters with physical harm if they do not support the Georgian Dream. This is especially effective in areas where criminal groups hold significant influence, primarily in certain urban areas. Additionally, threats to destroy property or businesses if individuals or communities do not comply with voting directives are frequent. Criminal networks are often mobilized to ensure voter turnout for the GD. This includes transporting voters to polling stations and managing logistics to ensure that GD supporters turn out in large numbers.

Criminals and “thieves-in-law” are also used to suppress opposition activities. This includes [disrupting](#) opposition campaign events through orchestrated violence or intimidation, harassing opposition candidates and their supporters, and deterring them from active campaigning through physical attacks or threats.

Two other specific groups often activated in voter intimidation are drug addicts benefiting from

state drug substitution programs and certain combat sports circles. Commonly called [metadon-shiki](#), individuals fearing removal from drug substitution program lists are easily manipulated by authorities and are often asked to intimidate potential opposition voters on election day.

Martial arts athletes, such as wrestlers, are another group mobilized for intimidation. Municipal administrations or the Culture and Sports Ministry allocate substantial funds to finance training in sports clubs via various “youth and sports support programs.” In some cases, martial arts athletes [receive](#) promises of financial aid or direct cash payments to attack GD opponents or civil society members violently. Controlling various sports federations is a significant aspect of GD’s electoral strategies, and many athletes are elected to the Georgian parliament through the GD party list. Several others serve as mayors or heads of local administrations.

Competitive but Unfair

International observers typically [describe](#) Georgian elections as largely competitive, with all political forces having access to the electoral process (unlike in Russia, for example), but not entirely fair as the conditions of competition clearly favor the ruling party.

The distinction between state functions and ruling party activities has always been blurred in post-independence Georgia, however, the Georgian Dream has taken this to an unprecedented level.

The distinction between state functions and ruling party activities has always been blurred in post-independence Georgia, however, the Georgian Dream has taken this to an unprecedented

level. The GD's use of public servants to influence elections is a clear example of exploiting administrative resources for political gain. By coercing, mobilizing, and rewarding public employees, the ruling party ensures its dominance at the expense of fair and transparent electoral processes. Furthermore, the widespread practice of vote buying undermines the democratic process by distorting the free choice of voters and creating an uneven playing field. It fosters a culture of dependency and patronage, where voters expect material benefits in exchange for their support.

Unmasking the electoral practices that keep the Georgian Dream in power reveals that the Georgian parliament and other elective bodies do not necessarily reflect citizens' wishes and aspirations. The hidden manipulations within the ballot box make an opposition victory difficult under normal circumstances. With the adoption of the "Russian law" in May 2024, the GD and Ivanishvili have created extraordinary circumstances that could cause this well-oiled electoral machine to begin showing signs of fracturing since, for many voters, the elections have become a test for up-

holding a constitutional commitment to pursue European and Euro-Atlantic integration.

The success of the pro-European camp in the elections will depend not only on the mobilization of the pro-European electorate and successful campaign but also on the extent to which the institutionalized advantages that the Georgian Dream has created over the years will be undermined and dismantled.

Therefore, the October 2024 elections pose a significant challenge for Georgian society and the opposition parties. These elections are often dubbed a "referendum" over whether the country should go west or north. However, the success of the pro-European camp in the elections will depend not only on the mobilization of the pro-European electorate and successful campaign but also on the extent to which the institutionalized advantages that the Georgian Dream has created over the years will be undermined and dismantled ■

Shooting the Messenger: Governments vs. Georgia's NGO Sector

For the second year running, Georgia's ruling party, the Georgian Dream, is plunging the country into a deep political crisis over the same piece of legislation that aims to regulate – and, in effect, curb – foreign-funded civil society groups and media. The wave of pressure, accompanied by strident anti-US and anti-Western rhetoric, cozying up to Moscow, defamation campaign, and, lately, violence, has been described by several commentators as “unprecedented.”

A similar campaign was launched against NGOs in Georgia in 2001-2002 by none other than Eduard Shevardnadze and his Citizens Union of Georgia.

Yet, a similar campaign was launched against NGOs in Georgia in 2001-2002 by none other than Eduard Shevardnadze and his Citizens Union of

Georgia. The similarity of that campaign with the current one is sometimes uncanny. Discerning the motivation and drivers behind these two attempts at curbing foreign-funded civil society groups may help determine their true objectives.

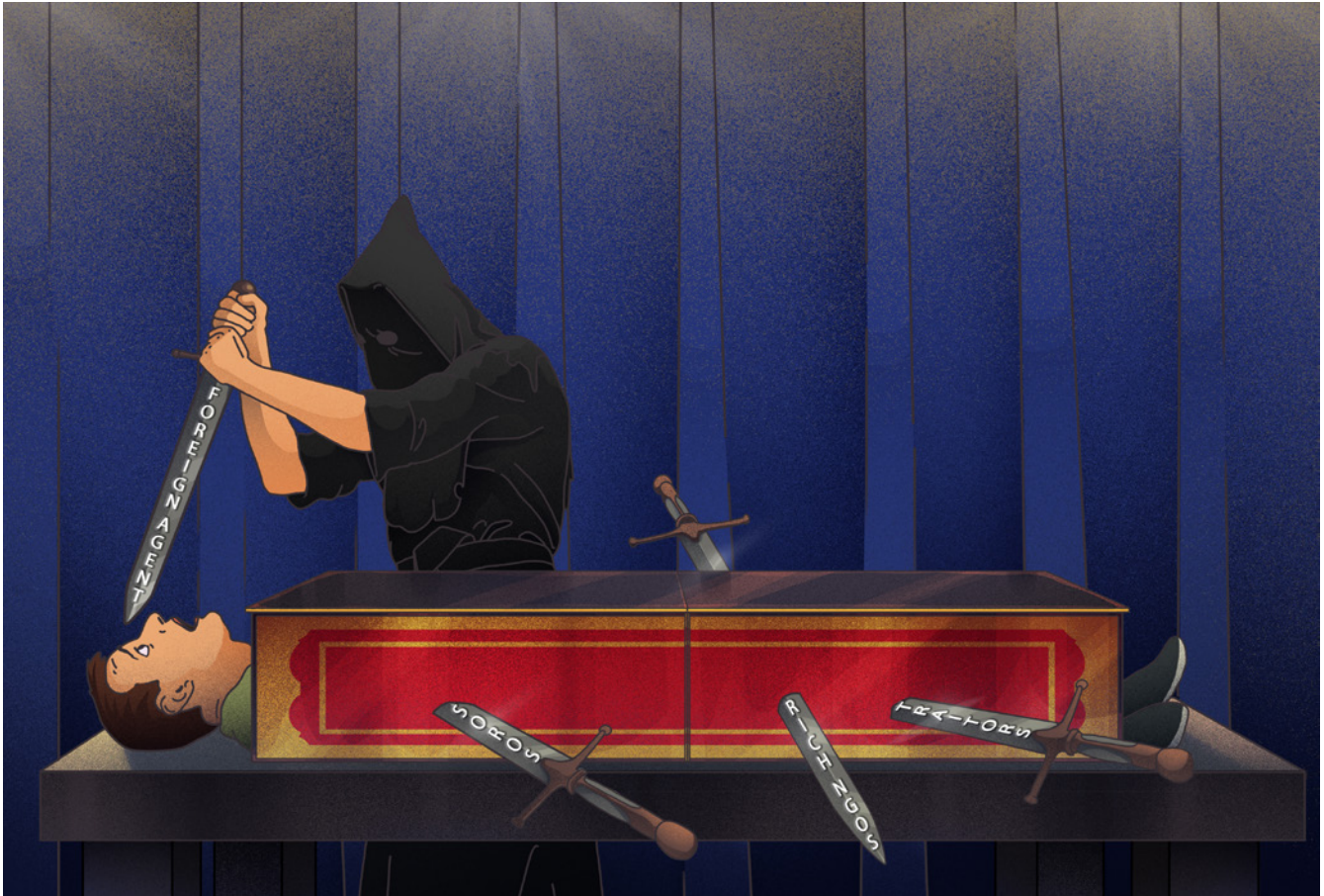
Too Much to Bear

It is 2001. Many international journalists and commentators refer to Georgia as a failed state. Yet, for many Georgians, there has been clear progress. Veteran Soviet politician Eduard Shevardnadze has managed to navigate the political field of warlords and criminals and stabilize the country's politics after the mayhem that followed the violent overthrow of the newly independent Georgia's first government in 1991. Still, the war in Abkhazia has the country truncated; over 200 thousand displaced persons have led to a precarious existence in overcrowded state properties and hotels since 1996.



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Jaba Devdariani, a seasoned analyst of Georgian and European affairs, has over two decades of experience as an international civil servant and advisor to both international organizations and national governments. His significant roles include leading the political office of OSCE in Belgrade from 2009 to 2011 and serving as the Director for International Organizations (UN, CoE, OSCE) at the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2011-2012. Currently, as a volunteer co-editor for Europe Herald, a Civil.ge project (FB/@EuropeHerald), Devdariani dedicates his expertise to elucidating European current affairs for a broader audience.



The Citizens Union of Georgia (CUG) is Shevardnadze's political base. A "big tent" party mostly merges with the state administrative apparatus. It unites all sorts – from hardliner traditionalists with pro-Russian sentiments who are in charge of the police, security, and army to progressive youngsters, many with US education. This body is unwieldy but essentially held together by Shevardnadze's charisma and wily maneuvers. There is no serious opposition that can contest CUG leadership. The Revival Union, a party of the regional strongman Aslan Abashidze, is in an uneasy coexistence with the CUG but does not challenge its leadership. Most of the political contestation goes on within the CUG between the conservative security service leadership and the so-called "young reformers" – Speaker Zurab Zhvania and Justice Minister Mikheil Saakashvili being their most notable representatives. Shevardnadze is already 73, and the question of succession weighs on the country. Parliamentary elections are scheduled for 2003, and the feeling is that the infighting may cost the CUG its grip on power.

Despite political and petty corruption and overall state dysfunction (kidnappings for ransom are common, there is almost no electricity in winter), Shevardnadze has kept Georgia in a pro-Western camp. Political contests within the CUG leave room for some independent media – the Rustavi 2 TV channel is the most notable example. Since 1996, the country has had a very liberal law on the registration of civil associations, which has since mushroomed. There were over [3,500 registered by 2001](#), even though only three to five hundred are considered "active" and mostly in the capital. Many of those are funded by Western, mostly US grants and act as crucial human rights watchdogs – the *International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED)* is a major election observer, the *Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA)* defends citizens against state malpractice and the *Liberty Institute* is notable in defense of religious and ethnic minorities. Liberal-minded media and newspapers help these groups publicize their findings. The "young reformers" in the Parliament are their allies and a vehicle to organize commit-

tee hearings where their reports are reviewed on a formal basis, much to the irritation of, for example, the corrupt police boss, Kakha Targamadze, who likes to call himself a “Man of Steel.”

Conservative CUG activists, aided undoubtedly by the police and security quarters, alongside ultra-nationalist firebrand MP Guram Sharadze, launched repeated attacks on NGOs, calling them “grant-eaters,” “raised on Western money,” and acting contrary to the traditions and interests of Georgia. NGO advocacy for ethnic and religious minorities has been causing particular ire.

In 2001, the international context was shifting rapidly. Following the 9/11 attacks on the US, the anti-terrorist agenda became central, and Vladimir Putin's Russia, for once, is portraying itself as the US ally in this fight. Putin succeeds in subsuming his bloody persecution of Chechens under the worldwide anti-terrorism struggle. Georgia's Pankisi gorge, where many Chechens from across the Caucasus range are fleeing, became for Russia a new lever of pressure on Georgia, which it accuses of harboring terrorists. President Shevardnadze's traditional weekly regularly [refers](#) to Pankisi, trying to assuage the Russian pressure. That is not working well: influential voices in Russia call for bombing Pankisi, and [there are widespread fears](#) that the US, sidetracked by anti-terrorist cooperation with Russia, would let it “take care” of Georgia. Moscow is using every pretext to get out of the 1999 Istanbul Agreement, where it pledged to withdraw two of its military bases from Georgia.

In this context of perceived Russian ascendancy, Georgia's pro-Russian security services feel emboldened, and the situation starts to deteriorate rapidly. When a well-known investigative journalist and news anchor from Rustavi2 channel was [found murdered](#) in his flat in July 2001, it sent a shockwave of fear in a wider civil society and Georgia's pro-Western circles. The [press review](#) from those days shows that the opposition points

the finger at the Georgian special services working at the behest of their Russian colleagues. Some in CUG's young reformer wing also agreed.

In this context, non-governmental organizations are becoming targets more and more often. State-run television channels broadcast talk shows that portray the NGOs as “grant-eaters” acting at the behest of the US. Similar publications multiply in the press, which is widely considered to publish attack pieces solicited from security services.

In September 2001, Shevardnadze [stepped down as CUG chair](#), apparently trying to stay above the party infighting. On 24 September, during his regular press briefing, [Shevardnadze attacked NGOs](#) and media, saying they get grant aid meant for the country's social development but instead use it to finance an “information war” against Shevardnadze and his government; he demands “transparency” of all of this aid and promises to discuss these matters with the US administration during his upcoming visit to the country.

Naturally, NGOs [reacted with suspicion](#) when, in October 2001, the Ministry of Finance initiated the draft Law on Charity, Grants, and Humanitarian Assistance. Even though the Ministry said it was to apply only to state grants and foreign grants to the state, the draft law foresaw a significant additional burden for NGOs in terms of grant registration and reporting as well as heavy penalties if these requirements were not met. A promptly assembled working group of experts manages to convince the Ministry that to reach their stated objectives – more transparency of the grants received by the state for taxation purposes – a simple regulation will suffice. NGO lawyers even draft that regulation together with the Ministry.

Also in October 2001, security services raided Rustavi2, triggering protest demonstrations and a political crisis that ended with the departure of the leaders of the two opposing camps: Speaker

Zurab Zhvania resigned on the condition that Kakha Targamadze, the Minister of the Interior, followed suit. That crisis has dominated the political scene and has temporarily diverted attention from NGOs. Once the new political configuration was established, the issue came back on the agenda from the top level.

In January 2002, President Eduard Shevardnadze personally asked the Ministry of Finance to draft the new Law on Humanitarian Assistance, which [was accomplished](#) in two days. The law contained the notion of “state control over the utilization of grants,” which was considered by NGOs as an attempt to have control over their projects and activities. As the law was to be brought to the Parliament on 24 April, Shevardnadze [said](#) international terrorists might support NGOs. The Security Council started examining additional regulations aiming to replicate some of the restrictive laws adopted by the US post-9/11. The [violent attack](#) on the Liberty Institute in July 2002 was the demonstration of the highest level of hostility towards civil society organizations. Still, through building coalitions with Western donors and advocacy, as well as seeking political champions within the Parliament and the administration, the NGO coalition has managed to [thwart](#) most of the hostile initiatives.

The 2003 elections and the subsequent regime change have led to a substantial relaxation of pressure from the authorities - at least for a while. But that is another story.

Some Things Never Change ...

Georgia's civil society organizations have emerged as a powerful and professional expert and watchdog community since the mid-1990s. Even though there is a certain truth in saying that many have had “elitist” origins and were de-linked from the grassroots, this does not paint a full picture. In-

deed, several have originated from grassroots greens movements while watchdog organizations, like the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA), were working closely with clients whose rights they were defending. It is also true that most of these institutional groups have worked with foreign funding, mainly from the West and mainly from the US. This is not for want of trying: Georgia's successive governments have refused to grant tax exemptions for charity contributions to NGOs, and given the poor state of Georgia's economy, funding uniquely through citizen support was, and remains, unrealistic.

Georgia's civil society organizations have emerged as a powerful and professional expert and watchdog community since the mid-1990s.

As entities that are able to retain professional staff and are financially and politically independent from the government and the successive dominant ruling parties, NGOs have been an obstacle whenever authoritarian tendencies emerge. The example of the 2001-2002 debacle provides some important insights into the crisis that is currently playing out in Georgia.

First, the ruling party, facing uncertain results in upcoming elections, tries to subdue civil society. The CUG was approaching the 2003 elections after its reputation was badly damaged following the flawed 1999 vote. Splits within the party were destabilizing. Similarly, even though leading the polls, the Georgian Dream felt it would not retain absolute control over the legislature in the 2024 elections, not under the new and fully proportional voting system. Accusations of [undue interference](#) of election watchdogs in the past elections were repeatedly [brought forward](#) as one of the reasons for keeping them at arm's length from the elections, and so was their “political role.”

Second, Russia's perceived ascendancy is a tempting window of opportunity for conservative elements to get rid of the "agents of US influence." The second Chechen war and Russia's newly found partnership with the US in anti-terrorism formed the backdrop of the CUG attack on NGOs. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and particularly the failure of Kyiv's summer offensive, shaped the background of the second introduction of the "foreign agents' law" in Georgia.

Third, given the overwhelming support of Georgian citizens to the Euro-Atlantic integration and the perception of Russia as a threat, local conservative actors like to dress the anti-NGO legislation as a copy of the US laws. The 2002 legislation was partially portrayed to echo the US anti-terrorism package. The 2024 laws were said to mimic the US Foreign Agent Registration Act (FARA) even though glaring differences made that comparison [patently untrue](#).

The key elements of the official propaganda channels in 2002 and 2024 were strikingly similar. The 2002 keyword was "grant-eaters," which was repeated in 2024 but substituted for more punchy "rich NGOs".

Fourth, NGOs are mostly discredited as "rich," "unpatriotic," and acting for "foreign interests." The key elements of the official propaganda channels in 2002 and 2024 were strikingly similar. The 2002 keyword was "grant-eaters," which was repeated in 2024 but substituted for more punchy ["rich NGOs"](#). Pointing to the "unpatriotic" nature of civil society leaders was the key argument for the firebrand nationalists in 2002. It became the mainstream discourse of the ruling majority in 2024, especially its radicalized nativist offshoot – the People's Power MP group. This discourse was related to supporting minority ethnicities and religions in 2002 but evolved to mostly target NGO support to the queer

community in 2024 as witnessed by the Council of Europe [report](#).

When CSOs are attacked, both defamation and physical violence are used to intimidate them.

And finally, when CSOs are attacked, both defamation and physical violence are used to intimidate them. The attack on the Liberty Institute and regular 'vigils' of Guram Sharadze's supporters at NGO offices were hallmarks of 2002. In 2024, orchestrated [intimidation](#) of political opponents and civic leaders is still continuing as this article is being written.

... While Some Things Get Worse

While some systemic similarities are striking, there are also significant differences that point to a general backsliding.

Most notably, in 2002, the Georgian leadership remained on the pro-Western trajectory even though trying to squeeze NGOs. President Shevardnadze and a significant portion of the ruling party functionaries were invested in furthering their partnership with Western allies. By contrast, in 2021-2024, the Georgian Dream descended into full-on paranoia about the West, and its full extent was most eloquently embodied in a [statement](#) by its founder and leader, Bidzina Ivanishvili.

Also, in 2002, NGOs succeeded in modifying or blocking successive damaging legislative initiatives by engaging with the government. Conversely, in 2024, the bridges of cooperation are burned. In 2002, NGOs were using networking, legal, and institutional channels to engage institutions: building advocacy coalitions, organizing parliamentary hearings, and working with the executive leadership and public administration in working groups. This was possible because, on the one hand, civic leaders had allies and champions with-

in the Parliament and, on the other, they could leverage expertise and political support from their Western donors and partners in a classical “boomerang pattern” described by Keck and Sikkink in 1998. By 2024, the Georgian Dream captured the state institutions to a comprehensive extent, making such engagement impossible.

The erosion of the democratic system and institutions in modern Georgia is underpinned by the wanton dissipation of Western leverage, which made the 2002 compromises possible.

Finally, the erosion of the democratic system and institutions in modern Georgia is underpinned by the wanton dissipation of Western leverage, which made the 2002 compromises possible. Indeed, the lesson that Mr. Ivanishvili seems to have learned from 2002 is that compromising leads to the loss of the grip on power – indeed, the CUG was routed in the 2003 Rose Revolution and disappeared as a party. Instead of learning the lesson that attempts to cling to power by hardening the regime leads to catastrophic consequences, Georgia’s current po-

litical leadership seems to have concluded that its predecessors were just too weak to exercise strong enough control. Mr. Ivanishvili’s personal wealth insulates its political base from the economic effects of confrontation with the West significantly better – the CUG’s threadbare administration was highly dependent on the lifeline from the international financial institutions.

Instead of learning the lesson that attempts to cling to power by hardening the regime leads to catastrophic consequences, Georgia’s current political leadership seems to have concluded that its predecessors were just too weak to exercise strong enough control.

But what the Georgian Dream disguises as its commitment to “[sovereignty](#)” against “liberalism” is, in fact, a thinly veiled attempt to consolidate its grip on power and effectively remove the only remaining independent check – civil society groups and the media. Georgians protesting in their thousands are not having that. And neither should Georgia’s partners. ■

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