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Georgia's Backsliding from Democracy

*Is the Russian Path
Dependency on the rise?*



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SUMMARY

In the decade since the first peaceful transition of power in post-Soviet Georgia, the country has **moved further away from the principles of a democratic political order**. In order to maximize its power, in recent years the ruling group has factually frozen Georgia's accession to Euro-Atlantic institutions and is gradually moving closer to the Kremlin. Pressure on opposition politicians and parties, independent NGOs and the media has intensified as the authorities seek to demonize their political opponents.

In an attempt to retain power in Georgia, the ruling group is actively using methods and techniques that have allowed Putin to consolidate his power in Russia. In a softer form, with an eye on the political orientations of Georgian citizens (they are in favor of European integration), Bidzina Ivanishvili and his team are gradually introducing the features of "sovereign democracy" and, to some extent, autocracy in Georgia. Ivanishvili's relations with Russia facilitated these developments. Under his "shadow" leadership, **Georgia is pursuing policies that are beneficial to Moscow - to the extent that Georgian citizens "allow" it.**

The article examines **parallels between the strategies Putin has used to consolidate his power in Russia and those employed by the Georgian ruling group**. Both Putin and Ivanishvili give all key positions in the state to 'their own people', using the principles of **crony capitalism and state capture**. This allows Ivanishvili to control Georgian politics without holding any positions in the state. Both leaders are **trying to eliminate** the opposition and independent media (Putin has been successful, Ivanishvili only partially so far). Putin crushed independent NGOs in Russia in the 2010s. Now the ruling group in Georgia is looking for a way to do the same.

Another common element of Putin's and Ivanishvili's strategy is the **attack on the youth**, as it is the 20-30 year olds who form the backbone of the opposition to both regimes. To make the youth less oppositional, the authorities are banning academic freedoms from universities and strengthening patriotic education (Putin did this and the ruling team in Georgia would like to do it). Ivanishvili's team has been more successful in **controlling the courts**: as in Russia, they make the decisions the authorities want.

Both the Russian and Georgian authorities have declared the **West an enemy** of their country and a threat to national sovereignty. The Russian authorities have even declared a direct war against it, while the Georgian authorities are more cautious trying to convince voters that at least some of the Western institutions and representatives are not good because they do not respect Georgia and wants to drag it into a war. Georgian propaganda is driven by a desire of the ruling team to hold on to power (a country that has rejected the principle of democratic transfer of power cannot join the EU) and fear of the Kremlin (if Georgia adopts policies that Russia does not like, it could attack Georgia again). By trying to appease Russia, Georgian rulers pretend that they reduce the risk of another Russian attack. At the same time, by trying to get rid of the opposition, Georgian Dream is effectively blocking the European integration.

In Russia, Putin won an uncontested victory, but in Georgia **the struggle is far from over**. The opposition did not disappear, opposition parties, independent media and NGOs are active. We consider **three scenarios**. If things go well (an optimistic option), Georgia will carry out the necessary reforms and gain EU candidate status. Russia's defeat in the war against Ukraine, which will demoralize the pro-

Russian anti-democratic forces in Georgia, can prompt it. In a realistic scenario, the Georgian Dream remains in power after the 2024 elections, but through a series of compromises, this will not prevent Georgia from achieving EU candidate status. Polarization in society would diminish and Georgian politics would become more pluralistic. Finally, in the negative

scenario, repression against the opposition in Georgia will intensify and relations with Europe will deteriorate significantly. This scenario can be stimulated if the Russian regime can save face in the result of aggressive war with Ukraine, since the inherently weak Georgian government needs some patronage from abroad.

The article is divided into four chapters. Chapters 1-2 describe how, after 2012, Bidzina Ivanishvili and the Georgian Dream gradually brought Georgian politics into a crisis, increasing pressure on the opposition, independent NGOs and media. Chapter 3 details the strategies of transition to an authoritarian regime that Georgia has imported from Russia. These strategies include

- (1) handing out key state posts to friends and colleagues,

- (2) liquidating the opposition and independent media,

- (3) liquidating independent NGOs,

- (4) demonizing the youth and taking measures to eliminate academic freedom in universities,

- (5) turning the judiciary into a pocket system, fully implementing any wish of the authorities,

- (6) declaring the West an enemy, disrespecting Georgia and wishing it harm.

The ruling team in Georgia achieved the greatest “success” with strategies 1 and 5. The authorities implemented strategies 2-4 only in recent years. Society has so far prevented the government from reaching its goals, but the onslaught continues. The government has been implemented Strategy 6 in full scale since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine.

The conclusion of this chapter summarizes the **similarities and differences** between the situation in Georgia and Russia: the Georgian opposition and civil society are much stronger than in Russia. Strategies similar to those used in Russia are therefore resisted and do not always succeed. The final chapter briefly outlines possible scenarios for future developments.

1. BACKGROUND

Parliamentary elections of 2012 was the first peaceful transfer of power in Georgia since the independence in 1991. Therefore, it improved the country's democratic rate. However, there were worrying signs related to the composition and initial discourse of the victorious Georgian Dream coalition. Previous government of the United National Movement was not a champion in democracy building and expectations for more pluralistic politics after the change were understandable. However, the attitude towards defeated opponent and actions taken against him were deviating from the rule of law principles.

Even election program of the Georgian Dream included alarming promise to stop making Georgia an apple of discord between the West and Russia. It was alarming due to the years long tendency of Georgia trying to go to the West, aspiring the integration in to the NATO and the European Union and Russia trying to halt her. In these circumstances, it was doubtful that international tensions around Georgia could diminish, unless Russian leadership dropped hegemonic ambitions in the region or Georgia decided to change its foreign policy orientation and start the rapprochement to Russia. Since there was no sign for the former development, the latter was becoming realistic and dangerous for the same democratic future of Georgia.

However, Georgia was continuing the **approximation with the EU** – signing the Association Agreement in 2013 and receiving visa-free regime in Schengen Zone in 2016. It was pleasing the pro-European segments of the society, weakening their attention towards internal developments. At the same time, controversial legal processes, more and more distancing Georgia from the European path, were going on in the country.

Under the guise of adhering to the European perspective, the GD launched a never-ending campaign of demonisation of political opponents. After gaining victory in the 2012 parliamentary elections, it released a number of people from prisons and declared them “political prisoners” (Georgian NGOs, which initially participated in the special commission dealing with their files, soon withdrew because of the apparently subjective and unfounded decision-making process). Former high-ranking officials were summoned to court on various charges, including misuse of public funds to employ party activists, while the GD leadership did the same virtually unhindered. Government agencies were purged on the pretext that the employee might have been a supporter of the previous government. The judicial system was hastily reformed, even in violation of parliamentary procedures, in order to ensure the loyal composition of the courts. Media outlets that remained critical of the government were subjected to intense pressure through the prosecution of their owners and/or managers (cases of TV Rustavi 2, TV Pirveli, later TV Mtavari and TV Formula). At least since the 2018 presidential elections, **manipulation of the electoral process** (in particular the use of administrative resources, intimidation of voters and the rejection of complaints by election observers by the Central Election Commission on formal grounds) has increased. Statements by high-ranking GD/government officials that charges against certain prominent individuals (including former President Michael Saakashvili) were related to their political activities or critical positions often accompanied these processes.

At the same time openly anti-European and, hence, **pro-Russian political forces became active** in Georgia as never before. It is noteworthy that the prominent anti-European media outlet, the newspa-

per Asaval-Dasavali was named by the GD leader, billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili to be a flagman of Georgian media. With the help of the ruling party, one of such organizations, namely the Alliance of Patriots, managed to overcome the election threshold in 2016 parliamentary elections. At the same time, the most pro-democracy factions of the European Democrats and the Republicans left the Georgian Dream coalition. The executive government became purely represented by the

GD party members or its nominees, while before had the members from the other factions of the coalition. In fact, key figures in the government, namely the Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili and the minister of interior Vakhtang Gomelauri represent the inner circle of Bidzina Ivanishvili, being previously associated with his business empire. Currently Ivanishvili himself prefers to stay in the Shadow.

2. NEW WAVE OF THE BACKSLIDING

Development of the Political Crisis

2.1

Since 2019 the situation started developing into the direction of the political crisis. As has often happened in Georgia in the past, the trigger was a splash of national emotions when, following the ruthless decision of the ruling majority in the Russian Duma, Communist Party deputy Sergei Gavrilov visited Georgia in June 2019 through the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy and sat in the chair of the Speaker of the Georgian Parliament. Opposition started the protest within the parliament building, being soon supported by the protesters outside. The police, using excessive force, dispersed mass protests in front of the parliamentary building. The crisis was indicated by the results of so called Gavrilov night: the speaker of the parliament resigned and the promise of the change of the elections system was announced.

However, promises did not materialise and the 2020 parliamentary election results were followed by new protest actions, usage of the police force and eventual arrests, including the suspension of the parliamentary immunity and the subsequent arrest of the chairman of the biggest opposition party, the UNM – Nika Melia (February 2021). In general, from time to time, targeted arrests of the opposition activists were being continued: examples are the arrest of the former minister of defence Irakli Okruashvili (July 2019) and the arrest of the sponsor of the newly created opposition TV channel Mtavari, Giorgi Rurua (November 2019).

2021 brought the new indication of the political crisis as well as an attempt to solve it with the help of the EU. Negotiations between the opposition and the ruling party under the direct mediation of the president of the European Council Charles Michel revealed the structural depth of the political crisis. The agreement, reached in April 2021, spoke about the “**perceptions of polarised Justice**” and implied the release of Nika Melia and some others; it included reform of the Judiciary, especially in terms of the developing objective and transparent criteria for selection/promotion of judges. It also addressed long lasting complaint of the opposition, that Georgian judiciary was run by the

clan, affiliated with the ruling elite. High Council of Justice was perceived as one of the main instruments in the hand of this clan. Hence, the draft of the agreement included the following clause: “Substantive reform of the High Council of Justice to increase transparency, integrity and accountability, including in appointments, appraisals, promotions, transfers, disciplinary measures and appeals shall be drawn up, submitted to the Venice Commission and the OSCE/ODIHR for an opinion and their recommendations shall be fully implemented”.¹ The agreement also stipulated election system reform and assignment of the opposition MP’s to the chairmanship of 5 parliamentary committees.

While some clauses of the agreement, namely the release of Nika Melia and other above mentioned prisoners, was enforced, the rest of 2021 and the whole 2022 went accompanied with new and steadily increasing signs of the crisis. It started with the militant mob attacking journalists on July 5, 2021, who gathered on the main avenue to report on the planned anti-homophobic “March of Dignity”.² Soon afterwards the ruling party left the Charles Michel brokered agreement. Activity of anti-LGBTQ groups, who found tacit protection from the government was followed with no less questionable local elections, marked with the same usage of administrative resources indicating on the merger of the ruling party and a state apparatus. On October 1st former president Saakashvili who illegally returned to Georgia was arrested. While in prison, he was treated inhumanely as reported by the offices of Public Defender and State Inspector’s Service.³ Internal turmoil was exacerbated by the large-scale Russian military aggression in Ukraine: Reluctance to unequivocally condemn Russia, unwillingness to support Ukraine caused polemics between Georgian and Ukrainian governmental officials, led to the Ukrainian ambassador leaving Georgia.

At the same time, this war and the international reaction on it opened an opportunity for Georgia to apply for the candidate membership of the EU together with Ukraine and Moldova. While the Georgian Dream party never renounced formally European and Euro-Atlantic orientation, which was enshrined in the constitution, it seemed that this opportunity was received by the Georgian government as an unpleasant surprise. Georgia submitted request but steps, made by its government in parallel, determined the EU refusal to grant the candidacy status to Georgia, giving her time to meet conditions instead. It is noteworthy that while expecting the verdict from Brussels, Georgian court finalized the court trial against the director of the critical TV Channel Mtavari Nika Gvaramia, which was going on since 2015 and sentenced him for 3,5 years in prison under the charges of the abuse of power in private media company. Such charge was never heard of before in Georgia and increased the civil society and international criticism of judiciary and the whole government. The very timing of this decision, coinciding with the expected decision of Brussels on the EU candidacy of Georgia was especially suspicious.

¹https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/210418_mediation_way_ahead_for_publication_0.pdf

²The march never materialized, while the violent act was preceded by the Prime minister’s statement that such march would have been a provocation. One of the beaten cameraman, Lekso Lashkarava, died in a few days.

³After the critical assessment by the State Inspector’s Service of the ill treatment of Saakashvili, the service, whose responsibility was the investigation of misdeeds committed by the law enforcement officials, was abolished. Her former chief, Londa Toloraia called this decision “The most non-European Law” <https://jam-news.net/georgia-abolishes-state-inspector-service/>

Sabotage of the European Agenda

2.2

In June 2022 The EU commission issued the set of recommendations for Georgia:

- ▷ Reduction of Political polarization;
- ▷ Ensuring independence and accountability of the state institutions;
- ▷ Improvement of the election legislation in accordance with international suggestions (OSCE/ODHIR and the Venice Commission);
- ▷ Ensuring independence and accountability of the judiciary with the special emphasis on the integrity of courts and fundamental reformation of the high council of justice;
- ▷ Guarantying the independence of anti-corruption agency;
- ▷ De-oligarchisation through diminishing the influence of private interests over political and public life;
- ▷ Ensuring the environment for independent media, including provision of the highest standards for the criminal proceedings against media owners;
- ▷ Strengthening of gender equality;
- ▷ Ensuring the civic participation on every level of decision making;
- ▷ Adoption of the legislative acts which would provide reliance on the ECHR created precedents in Georgian court decisions;
- ▷ Ensuring due process of the election of new public defender and his/her independence.⁴

Georgian government claims that it almost adopted all necessary measures to ensure the implementation of these recommendations. In reality, though, new steps, being made from the governmental side, create **additional pressure on civil society and media**. It was done through legislation on defamation, attempts to limit non-governmental organizations' activity and the campaign of the demonization of any protest grouping, employing anti-liberal, anti-gender and anti-tolerance discourse.

At the end of 2021 Georgian parliament adopted changes in the law on broadcasting, regulating hate speech and allowing the state media regulatory commission to review complains on defamation and insulting, circumventing the court procedures. At the same time, rather vague definition of the hate speech was adopted.⁵ The law should be enacted in June 2023 and media representatives, together with human rights NGOs fear that it will be used for further intimidation of free media and curtail free speech.

The most vivid recent example of the deviation from the European standards was the draft law "On transparency of agents of foreign influence", submitted to the parliament by the recently created faction "The Peoples Power", strongly affiliated with the ruling party and with its shady leader Bidzina Ivanishvili personally. Very soon it became apparent that the draft, which aimed at special registration procedures for all organiza-

⁴Explanations of the Young Lawyers Association of Georgia, <https://gyla.ge/ge/post/saias-ganmarteba-evropuli-komisiis-mosazrebastan-dakavshirebit#sthash.w7lcoxT8.1nkRG7Hh.dpbs>

⁵US State Department 2022 Report on human Rights in Georgia <https://civil.ge/ka/archives/532648>

tions, more than 20% of whose budgets are made of foreign grants, had full support from the ruling party. Despite warning and protests from the civil society, opposition and the European embassies, the parliament adopted the law which became labeled as Russian Law, since it repeated the logic of the 2012 law adopted in the RF. It triggered huge protest rallies and clashes with the riot police, going on March 7-9th 2023 in front of the Parliament. Mass protest brought the result and the parliament withdrew the law.

But then, instead of conciliatory steps towards large segments of the society and especially students, who played substantial role in these protests, the government encouraged **demonization campaign targeting the protesters, opposition at large, NGOs, critical media and student activists**. In interviews, assessing the recent events, prime minister Irakli Garibashvili spoke about Satanist clothes, wore by some protesters, and announced that all of them, who did not obey police orders would be punished. Soon a youngster, Lazare Grigoriadis, distinguished with non-traditional haircut and non-Georgian surname was picked up as a suspect for burning the police car and sentenced for two months' pre-trial custody. Before the court verdict the leader of the ruling party, Irakli Kobakhidze declared him as "lacking proper orientation in every sense" implying sexual orientation. He also labeled the opposition as "Liberal-Fascists".

The same person was especially energetic to portray NGOs and other protesters as slanderers on Georgian Orthodox Church, who use foreign money for the attacks against the Church and making other steps "against the state interests".⁶ Hence, criticism of the Georgian Church on one or another matter was and is portrayed as the action going against the national interests. It is done frequently, since the high rate of Georgian church among ordinary citizens, such propaganda is an efficient tool of the demonization of the opponents. Basically such attitude, publicly expressed by high-rank officials, encourages militant fanatic groups to assault physically on opposition representatives or civil society activists.

The portal "Myth Detector" of MDF⁷ produces regular reports which indicate how social media outlets, as well as real and fake Facebook accounts are used in the campaign against all opponents of the government, especially those, having clearly pro-European agenda. Homophobic language is intensively used in this campaign, which is quite similar to anti-European rhetoric of Kremlin's propagandists. What is interesting, there are clear links between such hate speech oriented outlets and the government. For instance, Alt-Info, one of the most radical entity whose members clearly express sympathies towards Putin's Russia, enjoys immunity and protection from governmental circles. Messages coming from such sources that NGOs' are "grant-eaters", recent protests aimed at staging an anti-governmental "Maidan" etc., vividly pour water on the governmental mill.

The paradox is that attacking opponents, **criticising western diplomats and international NGOs' the government still sticks to the message that it pursues the European agenda**, while claiming that these are very NGOs who want Georgia to be denied the European perspective. It is obvious that knowing the traditionally positive attitude of Georgian society on the European integration, the governmental propaganda aims to avert the public anger for possible failure of receiving the EU candidate's status from itself. Whether this tactic is going to be effective or not, that is another matter.

⁶MDF portal "Myth Detector" report <https://www.isfed.ge/geo/sotsialuri-mediis-monitoringi>

⁷<https://mythdetector.ge/ka/>

3. HOW FAR IT MAY GO – COMPARISON WITH THE RUSSIAN EXAMPLE

Russia as exporter of autocracy

3.1

Russia under Putin has repeatedly been seen supporting authoritarian regimes (from Venezuela and Syria to Hungary and Belarus) and attempting to undermine democratic political regimes including the US and many European countries. Russia has supported established authoritarian regimes and sought to discredit and disrupt democracies by helping politicians loyal to Russia to gain power in their countries or representation in parliament, and by making it difficult to pursue policies that are disadvantageous to Russia.

In none of these cases, has Russia sought to **directly export all elements of its model of autocracy**. However, in so called “near Abroad”,⁸ Kremlin frequently tried to install friendly regimes and/or lobby particular individuals in the neighboring governments. It also showed the genuine “class” solidarity with various illiberal rulers. On the other hand, Vladimir Putin has borrowed some elements of his regime from China (control of the Internet, video surveillance systems, "re-education camps") and Belarus (inspection of the contents of the personal devices of detainees in public places, preventive work with opposition members, arbitrary crackdowns on political opponents).

Before the Euromaidan in Ukraine (2013/2014), Putin hoped that Viktor Yanukovich would succeed in building a model compatible to the system Putin himself had built in Russia in the 2000s. This included control of the oligarchs, the media, the conquest of the most profitable sectors of the economy by the dominant clan, and the development of propaganda narratives for a Ukrainian audience by Russian political consultants.

The Euromaidan thwarted this attempt. Even during the civil protests in Kiev, Putin and his siloviki tried to give Yanukovich the support that would allow him to stay in power by crushing the protests. This attempt proved eventually unsuccessful and forced Russia to 'write off' a lot of investments it had made in Ukrainian politicians, officials and security forces.

The Russian attempt to encourage autocracy in Georgia has taken **longer** (more than 10 years) and **has a chance of being more successful**.

⁸ This term was coined by the Russian diplomacy in the 90s, indicating the differentiation between the Post-Soviet space and the rest of the world in the foreign policy of the RF.

Ivanishvili's ties to Russia

3.2

The Kremlin saw the victory of Bidzina Ivanishvili and his Georgian Dream party in the 2012 parliamentary elections as a victory for itself. Russia expected Ivanishvili not to consider the return of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by force and/or with the help of the Western diplomacy, to abandon the Georgia's orientation towards the US and the EU, and to pursue a "multi-vector policy".⁹ Throughout 2012 and early 2023, the policies of Ivanishvili and the Georgian Dream lived up to these expectations. There is a theory that by entering Georgian politics in 2011, Ivanishvili may have promised the Kremlin to abandon Saakashvili-inspired "anti-Russian" actions, and in return, the Kremlin allowed Ivanishvili to sell his Russian assets proficiently.

Throughout his political career, **friendly relations with Russia** have been one of Ivanishvili's main goals. In October 2012, he expressed disappointment that he had not received congratulations from Putin after his election victory¹⁰ and described the events of 2008 as a provocation by Mikhail Saakashvili. In July 2013, he sought a meeting with Putin, hoping to normalize not only economic but also political relations. Even the war in Ukraine did not cause Ivanishvili and Georgian Dream to abandon their 'multi-vector policy'.

Ivanishvili and Georgian Dream opted for Moscow whenever their orientation towards it clashed with the Euro-Atlantic course Georgia had chosen during the Rose Revolution. However, they do so in such a way that the doors of Brussels and Washington are not closed, but only half-closed for Tbilisi.

After entering politics, Ivanishvili claimed that he would sell all his Russian businesses. This turned out to be **untrue**. Transparency International Georgia found that Ivanishvili owned at least 10 Russian companies through offshore entities in 2012-2019, and still owned at least one company (with Russian subsidiaries) in 2022.¹¹ Ivanishvili's relatives also own companies in Russia. Some of them do business with Russians subject to personal US sanctions.

Ivanishvili made his fortune in Russia in the 1990s, mainly in the financial, non-ferrous and ferrous metals sectors.¹² At the time, he had good connections with officials and the security forces. Ivanishvili had supported Boris Yeltsin and Alexander Lebed in the 1996 Russian presidential elections. Ivanishvili stood out for his ambition to resolve complex business conflicts **to the benefit of all parties and to "play by the rules"**.¹³ He continues to maintain ties with Russia's business elite. This was confirmed by Ivanishvili's publicly disclosed conversation with Russian oligarch Vladimir Evtushenkov about how to circumvent sanctions.¹⁴

⁹ <https://rg.ru/2012/10/05/gruziya-site.html> (in Russian)

¹⁰ <http://ria.ru/world/20121003/765454886.html> (in Russian)

¹¹ <https://transparency.ge/en/post/russian-businesses-bidzina-ivanishvili-and-his-relatives>

¹² <https://www.forbes.ru/forbes/issue/2005-05/19783-chelovek-s-dengami> (in Russian)

¹³ <https://www.banki.ru/news/interview/?id=34385> (in Russian)

¹⁴ <https://jam-news.net/leaked-conversation-between-georgias-ruling-party-founder-russian-oligarch-sparks-outrage/>

Now Ivanishvili is also trying to solve many problems "amicably". Nevertheless, now he is a politician, not a businessperson. Many of his opponents are "intransigent". In addition, the Kremlin is putting increasing pressure on Ivanishvili, and he shifts from an "inclusive" policy in favor of various political actors to a policy of exclusion, denying his opponents the right to their own position. He cannot **solve** the political problems to the benefit of all parties.

How Georgia is importing a political system from Russia

3.3

In addition to geopolitical friendship and business relations, Putin has become a political mentor for Ivanishvili. Just as Putin has strengthened the authoritarian regime in Russia since 2000, Ivanishvili has limited the institutions of democracy in Georgia since 2012. The parallels between the strategies of Putin in Russia and Ivanishvili in Georgia are discussed below.

Key positions to hand out to friends

3.3.1

In Russia

Putin has given key positions in the Russian economy and politics to **his friends and associates**.¹⁵ Alexei Miller, Putin's colleague from the St Petersburg mayoralty, became head of Gazprom in 2000. Igor Sechin, another of Putin's City Hall subordinates, was promoted to deputy head of the presidential administration, deputy prime minister and then head of state-owned Rosneft. It was Rosneft that received the assets of Yukos, the liquidation of which Sechin presided over. Vladimir Yakunin, backed by Putin, set up the first business center in St Petersburg and took control of Bank Rossiya, which had been set up by the Leningrad Obkom of the CPSU. Bank Rossiya then became an instrument of wealth accumulation for Putin's friends. Putin took Yakunin into the Presidential Control Directorate and then made him head of Russian Railways.

Sergei Chemezov, whom Putin knew from his service in the FSB in the East Germany, later worked with him in the presidential administration and then headed Rosoboronexport and Rostekhnologii, key companies managing state assets in the military-industrial complex. German Gref, a colleague of Putin's in the St Petersburg mayor's office, headed the think tank which designed Putin's reform program for the early years of his presidency and then served as economy minister and head of Sberbank, Russia's largest bank. Nikolai Tokarev, who also served with Chemezov and Putin in the KGB in East Germany, went on to work in the presidential administration, Zarubezhneft and Transneft. Yuri Kovalchuk, whom Putin knew from his time in City Hall (Kovalchuk worked for the St Petersburg Association of Joint Ventures), ran Rossiya Bank (the closest to Putin) and then created a large media group controlling TV and Internet assets. His views on the common enmity between Russia and the West and his close friendship with Putin

¹⁵ <https://www.forbes.ru/sobytiya-slideshow/vlast/101007-10-sputnikov-prezidenta> (in Russian)

may have played a role in Putin's preparations for war with Ukraine during the COVID-19 epidemic.

Arkady Rotenberg, a friend of Putin's from his childhood sambo section, owned distilleries and liquor companies before becoming a leading gas pipeline builder for Gazprom. His company has built the Crimean Bridge. Dmitry Kozak, Putin's colleague in the St Petersburg mayor's office, has worked in senior positions in the government apparatus, in the cabinet and the presidential administration since Putin's rise to power. Dmitry Medvedev, another St Petersburg mayoral colleague, served as prime minister, succeeded Putin as president and now sits on the Security Council. Alexey Kudrin, who also met Putin as mayor of St Petersburg, has headed the Finance Ministry and the Audit Chamber and served in the government. Gennady Timchenko, a friend of Putin since 1994, was a major exporter of oil and oil products. He owns energy, infrastructure and transport assets.

In Georgia

People who Ivanishvili trusts run his businesses and assets. Ivanishvili has **the same approach** to politics. Irakli Garibashvili, after working in various companies, became Minister of Interior, Minister of Defence and twice (2013-2015 and from 2021) Prime Minister. Before following Ivanishvili into politics, Garibashvili was Ivanishvili's personal secretary and assistant.¹⁶ Giorgi Kvirikashvili, who served as general director of Kartu Bank, which Ivanishvili founded between 2006 and 2011, went on to serve as Georgia's minister of economy, foreign affairs and finally prime minister.

Archil Kbilashvili, who served as Georgia's Prosecutor General, had previously defended Ivanishvili's interests as a partner in a law firm. Irakli Karseladze, after working for Ivanishvili (Cartu Group), served in the Government Office, the Tourism Development Fund, and the Georgia Co-Investment Fund. Later he was the Minister of Regional Development and Infrastructure. Vakhtang Gomelauri, who became interior minister, was previously Ivanishvili's security chief. Grigol Liluashvili, who worked as a partner in Ivanishvili's companies, is now head of the State Security Service.

Maia Tskitishvili and Nodar Javakhishvili, who both held the portfolio of infrastructure minister at different times, were employed at Kartu. The director of Kartu Bank was Dmitri Kumsishvili, then Minister of Economy and Finance and Deputy Prime Minister. Anzor Chubinidze moved from his post as head of Ivanishvili's personal protection unit to head the Special State Protection Service.

As in Russia, government positions in Georgia under Ivanishvili are not meritocratic, based on open competitions with transparent criteria, but on **personal merit, loyalty and devotion** to the country's informal leader. This is leading to a decline in the quality of public administration, to immobility of government and to the creation of a system in which an official's fate is determined not by public scrutiny but by the approval or disapproval of the country's leader. Most importantly, the country's executive is completely **under the control of the first person**. Bidzina Ivanishvili makes the main decisions in the country.¹⁷ Formally, he does not hold any government posts. However, people who owe their success and prosperity to Ivanishvili hold all the key positions in the state.

¹⁶ <https://jam-news.net/how-does-oligarch-bidzina-ivanishvili-de-facto-rule-georgia/>

¹⁷ <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/32323390.html> (in Russian)

Elimination of opposition and independent media

3.32

In Russia

From the moment Putin came to power in Russia, he sought to control the information space. This required **the elimination** of independent media and the establishment of a system to control loyal state and private media. The situation was made easier for Putin by the fact that by 2000 three conglomerates headed by oligarchs Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky and Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov owned the main opposition media.¹⁸ Prosecutions forced Berezovsky and Gusinsky to flee the country, while Luzhkov quickly realized that he could not argue with Putin. As a result, the television channels ORT, NTV, TV Centre and several newspapers and magazines came under the control of structures loyal to Putin.

The link between the Kremlin and the media began to emerge as early as 1996, when media tycoons helped Boris Yeltsin become president. In the 2000s, journalists working for the state began to receive **talking points from the presidential administration** on how to cover key events. The authorities concentrated financial resources in their hands, driving billionaires out of the media business, and from 2000 began to finance federal and regional media. Journalists were forced to "work for the client" or create financially independent media, which was not easy in Russia in the 2000s. The development of the Internet helped by making the process of creating and distributing media cheaper.

The first serious public protests in Russia in 2011-2012 resulted in a sustained attack on print and online media, which by then were competing with television (the TV was fully controlled by the authorities). The state consistently took control of media outlets¹⁹ such as Kommersant, Gazeta.ru, Lenta.ru and RIA Novosti (a sliver of liberalization during the Medvedev presidency); Gran.ru was banned; Novaya Gazeta, Vedomosti, Ekho Moskv, Forbes, RBC, The New Times, Dozhd and others came under constant attack.

A major blow to independent media was **the ban on foreign ownership**. Since the late 2010s, Russian businesspersons who owned large media holdings could no longer guarantee their independence. If such media were critical of the authorities, the security services threatened the businessperson with a hit on his main assets.

Since 2021, less than a year before the war, the state has moved from relatively soft tactics against the media (changing management, selling publications, and pressure) to hard ones. It moved to a direct attack on old and new media (Meduza, The Insider, Mediazona, MBH Media, Open Media, The Bell, Project, Important Stories, VTimes, etc.). These publications and their journalists were recognized as foreign agents and then some of them became "undesirable organizations". All publications opposing the war in Ukraine have been **blocked since the beginning of the war**. As a result, the Russian media space is gradually approaching the Soviet one in terms of homogeneity. Telegram and YouTube remain the only windows through which mass users can find

¹⁸ <https://cpj.org/reports/2000/03/russia-analysis-march00/>

¹⁹ <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/russia-media-crackdown/31621206.html>

truthful information about what is happening in the country and the world.

In Georgia

Until recently, Georgia enjoyed much greater media freedom, especially compared to Russia. However, the situation has gradually deteriorated in recent years.²⁰ This is reflected in the Reporters Without Borders press freedom ranking (2022), where the country has moved from 60th to 89th (out of 180 countries).²¹ Georgian government interference has restricted media freedom and violence against journalists, including during elections, has increased sharply²². In 2023 rating of Georgia raised to the 77th position.

Attacks on journalists were reported during the elections and during the homophobic counter-rally to the Tbilisi Pride March²³ (police failed to act at the time; one journalist died after being beaten). Many opposition media outlets (TV Pirveli, Formula TV, Mtavari Arkhi, On.ge, Netgazeti and Tabula) were attacked. Even modestly pro-governmental Georgian Public Broadcasting crew suffered. In Russia too, extra-legal groups have often targeted journalists. It is a way of retaliating or intimidating a journalist, while the authorities seem to have nothing to do with it.

As in Russia, the Georgian authorities are trying to change the ownership of media outlets that pursue policies they do not like. The editorial policy of media outlets changes with the change of ownership. The change of ownership of the Rustavi 2 TV channel in 2019 resulted in many journalists leaving the channel.²⁴ Its policy has changed and it has become more loyal to Ivanishvili and Georgian Dream. The change of ownership of the channel led to the prosecution of Nika Gvaramia, the former general director of Rustavi 2. The channel was the main opposition television in 2010s and its collapse was preceded by extreme dissatisfaction from the Patriarchate and Moscow.²⁵ Ivanishvili was not interested in making Rustavi 2 as loyal, as Imedi was. However, after 2019 Rustavi 2 got taboo on particular themes and had to show a lot of respect for the authorities.

The government has repeatedly expressed its **dissatisfaction with the independent media**.²⁶ The authorities tried to apply the same scheme (attacking the media via its shareholder) to the TV "Formula".²⁷ "Georgian Dream is also unhappy with the Palitra Media holding.²⁸ This is part of a deliberate, coordinated attack on uncontrolled media in order to discredit them. Members of Georgian Dream accused the Mtavariqi channel of discrediting the Georgian authorities because it asked the parliament for public information on the financial cost of a trip to Italy.²⁹ The personal details of the journalist who made the request to the parliament were published – this way the authorities wants to intimidate journalists.

Another tool used by the authorities in Russia to combat critical media is the filing of numerous lawsuits by officials offended by the words of journalists. The courts have

²⁰ <https://akademie.dw.com/en/georgia-media-freedom-in-decline/a-65076202>

²¹ <https://civil.ge/archives/488589>

²² <https://rsf.org/en/index>

²³ <https://civil.ge/archives/430551>; <https://civil.ge/archives/431780>.

²⁴ <https://civil.ge/archives/317346>; <https://civil.ge/ru/archives/317358>; <https://civil.ge/archives/437000>.

²⁵ <https://civil.ge/ru/archives/242468>; <https://civil.ge/ru/archives/312430>.

²⁶ <https://civil.ge/archives/435374>

²⁷ <https://civil.ge/archives/444057>

²⁸ <https://civil.ge/archives/534334>

²⁹ <https://civil.ge/archives/523381>

been used to put pressure on the media. 28 lawsuits have been filed in a short period of time against three opposition TV channels, Mtavari Archi, Formula and Pirveli TV.³⁰ The plaintiffs are representatives of Georgian Dream and people associated with them. The courts have ruled in favour of the plaintiffs. State companies, deputies and senators have filed similar lawsuits in Russia. The lawsuits have forced the media to become more cautious and loyal. Several media outlets have been labelled 'enemy media'. The verdict against Nika Gvaramia was the culmination of judicial pressure on the media. It intends to show media managers that they must play on the side of the ruling party.

The authorities are not forgetting the regional media either. After Ivanishvili, former parliamentary speaker Irakli Kobakhidze and the head of the Ajarian government Tonike Rizhivadze lodged numerous complaints against TV and Radio Ajaria, a new director was elected. The journalistic team split and many left the company. Despite objections from journalists and NGOs, the editorial policy was changed and the protesting journalists were dismissed.³¹

As in Russia, **the ruling team is relying on the media, which they themselves control**. For example, Irakli Rukhadze, Ivanishvili's business partner, bought the Imedi TV station from the widow of billionaire Badri Patarkatsishvili. Imedi is totally loyal to the ruling team.³²

In addition to the government, the Patriarchate and the parliament are also dissatisfied - both institutions have imposed severe restrictions on the work of the media.³³ The particular public institutions, such as the Ministry of Culture, especially **discriminate against opposition journalists**.³⁴ The mayor of Tbilisi, Kaha Kaladze, the leader of the Georgian Dream coalition, Irakli Kobakhidze, and the prime minister, Irakli Garibashvili, are extremely hostile to the opposition media.³⁵ The authorities have in fact declared war on them since at least 2018-2019. There is still media pluralism in Georgia, but working conditions for opposition journalists are getting worse every year. There are cases of journalists being fired for asking critical questions of speakers in various media.³⁶ This, combined with court cases and physical and verbal attacks on journalists, makes the situation extremely dangerous for the media.

³⁰ <https://transparency.ge/en/post/court-judgments-defamation-against-media-having-signs-kleptocracy>

³¹ <https://civil.ge/archives/329009>; <https://civil.ge/archives/302899>; <https://civil.ge/archives/338861>; <https://civil.ge/archives/348863>

³² <https://civil.ge/archives/394153>; <https://civil.ge/archives/304167>

³³ <https://civil.ge/archives/516649>; <https://civil.ge/archives/513177>; <https://civil.ge/archives/536662>; <https://civil.ge/archives/524278>

³⁴ <https://civil.ge/archives/507894>; <https://civil.ge/archives/457054>

³⁵ <https://civil.ge/archives/443647>; <https://civil.ge/archives/440390>

³⁶ <https://civil.ge/archives/497287>

3.3.3 Elimination of opposition NGOs

3.3.3

In Russia

The pressure on independent NGOs in Russia **increased dramatically** after the 2011-2012 protests, which did not result in a change of regime or a lessening of authoritarian tendencies. Putin then decided that the opposition was beginning to **threaten his monopoly on power** in Russia. In order to maintain power he needed to eliminate the opposition, independent media and NGOs. Through civil society organizations, Putin and his cronies believe, foreign governments can support the opposition, amplify protest sentiments and stage 'colour revolutions'. The example of Ukraine has shown Putin that civil society organizations, especially youth ones, have enormous mobilisation potential.³⁷ This is why the Kremlin has moved from cooperation to discrimination against NGOs and then to outright bans on their activities.

In the 2000s, the practice of banning foreign NGOs from working in Russia was selective (Soros Foundation, British Council). Laws passed in 2012 established a framework: "foreign agents" are **enemies of the state** who are still allowed to work, but with serious restrictions. "Undesirable organizations" are those foreign NGOs that are immediately and completely banned from working in Russia.³⁸ The Ministry of Justice has liquidated several NGOs. The laws began to be actively enforced after 2014. The law prohibited foreign-funded NGOs from engaging in educational and awareness-raising activities, cooperating with the authorities, participating in the development of policies in various spheres of public life, analyzing the activities of the authorities, and so on. All this was equated with interference in politics as Russia's internal affairs. The state decided to consider education, ecology, historical memory projects, opinion polls, election-monitoring, protection of human rights as "politics".

In 2014-2016, around 200 NGOs became foreign agents and had to limit the scope of their activities.³⁹ "Hostile" NGOs designated as foreign agents were stigmatised and subject to draconian fines. NGOs that did not become foreign agents had to show restraint and loyalty to avoid being labelled. The existential risks for NGOs increased dramatically.⁴⁰

In the 2020s, a new, tougher law on foreign agents was passed. Not only organizations, but also citizens and the media were designated as foreign agents. By spring 2022, around 450 organizations and individuals had been recognized as foreign agents. Apart from NGOs, these include journalists, human rights activists, politicians, actors, scientists and activists. Most of them **have had to leave Russia**. The number of undesirable organizations is approaching a hundred (democratic and human rights foundations, media, analytical, educational and religious organizations). There are legal paradoxes: foreign citizens are sometimes recognized as foreign agents. Moreover, organizations founded by Russian citizens become undesirable. After the war broke out, the vast majority of these people and organizations left Russia.

³⁷ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1060586X.2015.1034981>

³⁸ https://publicverdict.ru/articles_images/likvidacia.pdf (in Russian)

³⁹ https://publicverdict.ru/articles_images/freedom_of_association_eng_June_2016_IS.pdf

⁴⁰ <https://ridl.io/from-fifth-column-to-transmission-belt-the-evolution-of-the-role-of-non-profit-organisations-in-putin-s-russia/>

The laws on foreign agents and undesirable organizations are used to suppress dissent. Since 2022, even a person who receives no foreign funding can be recognized as a foreign agent: the undefined "foreign influence" is enough.⁴¹ Memorial, which won the Nobel Prize in 2022, was dissolved for alleged violations of the Foreign Agents Act. In fact, the foreign agent laws, together with other repressive measures, have **destroyed civil society**.

In Georgia

"Georgian Dream actually copied the law on foreign agents from the Russian one.⁴² It has the same goals as Putin's team. However, the situation in Georgia is very different from that in Russia. Foreign-funded NGOs are more visible in Georgian public life than they were in Russia before a similar law was passed in 2012. Moreover, Georgian society is much more prepared to defend its rights than Russian one. Virtually the whole of society, the media, opposition parties and businesses have risen to defend NGOs against the lawmakers.⁴³ Large-scale protests (over 30,000 participants), violently dispersed by the police, forced the ruling party to postpone the adoption of the law. However, it is highly likely that Georgian Dream will try to pass the law in an amended form.

The Georgian government needs such a law even more than the Russian government did. Georgian NGOs **play a huge role** in exposing the mistakes and abuses of the authorities to society. The link between opposition media, political parties and NGOs creates **political pluralism** in Georgia and prevents the ruling group from relaxing. The opposition and the vast majority of Georgian society are pro-European. Since Georgian Dream's support among the electorate is far from absolute and its victory in the parliamentary elections is not guaranteed, it is in the interest of GD **to weaken the influence** of critical NGOs on society and **to silence them**.

If Georgian Dream succeeds in passing the law on foreign agents, NGOs will no longer be able to operate freely or will be expelled. The ruling team wants to shut down NGOs that criticize it or support opposition parties.⁴⁴ Passing a law that labels NGOs working with donor funds from developed democracies as "enemies" would legalize violence against them.⁴⁵ After that, the wiretapping of NGO leaders and journalists by security forces, their arrests and beatings, which are now extraordinary phenomena in Georgia, will be "taken for granted" as directed against enemies. As the opposition in Georgia has been largely marginalized in the decade since 2012 (its participation in public and political life is extremely limited), **NGOs, media and universities remain the main obstacles to further consolidation of the Dream's power**.

There is a possibility that new approaches to the adoption of the draft law on foreign agents will be made through a slide project of the Georgian authorities - the recently created, with Russian help, Power of the People movement.⁴⁶ The purpose of this association is "to protect Georgia from Western pressure". These politicians call Georgian NGOs "US agents" and claim that the US is only funding "harmful projects" in Georgia

⁴¹ <https://reports.ovdinfo.org/svoboda-slova-v-rossii> (in Russian)

⁴² <https://civil.ge/archives/529427>

⁴³ <https://civil.ge/archives/528908>; <https://cepa.org/article/georgias-protesters-win/>; <https://eurasianet.org/fury-in-georgia-as-foreign-agent-vote-ends-in-dispersal-of-protesters>; <https://www.csis.org/analysis/georgia-civil-society-wins-against-russia-style-foreign-agents-bill>

⁴⁴ <https://civil.ge/archives/528611>

⁴⁵ <https://www.equaltimes.org/why-georgian-civil-society-wants>

⁴⁶ <https://www.codastory.com/ru/georgia-anti-west/> (in Russian)

and teaching people how to prepare for revolution. In early May, Power of the People, which is close to Georgian Dream, said it would prepare a tougher version of a law banning foreign agents from working in Georgia.⁴⁷

Georgian Dream MPs who, according to them, broke away from it in order to be able to tell the people the truth about Western officials formed the «Power of the People». This "truth" is as follows: "The US and Europe are dragging Georgia into war, and the denial of EU candidate status is good for the country. However, the Prime Minister of Georgia, the leader of Georgian Dream and the Mayor of Tbilisi spoke the same truth in almost the same words soon after the formation of the Power of the People. In exchange for candidate status, Georgia would have had to give up part of its sovereignty and enter the war, and this way peace will be preserved in the country, the Power of the People rejoices.

The Power of the People are actively recruiting supporters from among those loyal to the authorities in the regions. It has unlimited access to three pro-government TV channels and financial resources. In the 2024 elections, the People's Force could help Georgian Dream. Against the backdrop of the Power of the People radical statements, the Dream will appear more moderate, which could attract voters. In addition to NGOs, Power of the People and the Alliance of Patriots are organizing to pass a law in Georgia banning LGBT propaganda.⁴⁸ This law would be similar to the Russian law and would be supported by Georgian Dream and the Patriarchate.

Hostile youth

3.3.4

In Russia

In 2011-12, the Russian authorities saw a dramatic change in the composition of the protesters. Instead of dozens and hundreds of experienced democrats, mostly in their 40s and 50s, **the new face of protest was 20-30 year old boys and girls**, recent university graduates. Over the next 10 years, the protests became even more rejuvenated. This was evident in the political, environmental and other protest movements in Moscow, St Petersburg and the regions.⁴⁹ The 2017-2019 protests, which were largely stimulated by Alexei Navalny's investigations, were even referred to as '**school protests**'.

In one of the 2019 protests, 59% of the participants were under the age of 35, while 23% were under the age of 25.⁵⁰ The situation was similar in 2017.⁵¹ As the sociological survey (2019) showed,⁵² the older a resident of a large Russian city was, the less likely

⁴⁷ <https://sova.news/2023/03/03/odin-iz-liderov-prokremlevskih-dvizhenij-gruzii-podderzhal-zakon-ob-inoagentah/> (in Russian)

⁴⁸ <https://nlevshits.com/v-gruzii-iniciirujut-zakon-o-zaprete-lgbt-propagandy/> (in Russian)

⁴⁹ https://www.4freerussia.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2019/05/Russian-Youth_web_eng.pdf; <https://atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Prospects-of-the-Russian-Protest-Movement-Russian.pdf>; <https://www.golos-ameriki.ru/a/moscow-protest-new-faces-and-character/5052330.html>

⁵⁰ <https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2019/08/11/808586-prishel-saharova>; <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2019/08/14/putin-s-pesky-millennials> (in Russian)

⁵¹ <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-navalny-protests-new-generation/28394359.html>

⁵² <https://protest.dekoder.org/youth-protest-poll>

he or she was to have participated in protests in the past year. At the time, a 16-year-old city dweller was five times more likely participating in the protests than a 34-year-old, and at least an order of magnitude more likely than a 60-year-old. According to FOM, Putin's approval rating at the beginning of 2019 averaged 42%, compared to 32% for young people.

The Russian protests were not very numerous. Those who «do not trust Putin at all» (14% in 2019) mainly attended them. However, among those who do not trust Putin, more than 45% of 16-year-olds and only 17% of 34-year-olds took part in rallies. The willingness of anti-Putin people to take part in protests is stronger in the younger groups. Before the war with Ukraine, young people who were 'dangerous' to the Russian authorities were a minority in their age group, but they were very active and outnumbered the proportion of people in older age groups who were prepared to protest.

Until 2017, young people were one of Putin's most loyal age groups. Then more and more young people began to realize that Putin was leading the country down a blind alley. The anti-Western course, the "traditional values", the lack of social "lifts" and the growing interference of the state in private life caused a **noticeable allergy among some young people**.⁵³ The gap in values (different views, interests, priorities and lifestyles) between the generations became increasingly visible. At the same time, the Kremlin's numerous attempts to organize youth movements in the 2000s and 2010s failed to have a meaningful impact because they lacked a strategic vision of the future that could attract young people. Apart from money and career prospects in the civil service and state-owned enterprises, there was nothing to attract young people.

The authorities' response to the rejuvenation of the protests has been the poisoning, arrest and numerous cases against Navalny (he is the best at encouraging young people to protest); the cases against media Doxa and the Protest MSU channel (the popular student internet publication and channel), the expulsion of the most critical academics and politically active students from universities.⁵⁴

Like protest sentiments, negative attitudes towards war are stronger among young people than among the older generation.⁵⁵ Young people are less susceptible to propaganda, **most do not want to take part in the war** and many understand that it is a major blow to their personal future. While 83 per cent of those over 60 support the war, 38 per cent of those under 30 support it and 51 per cent oppose it.

In Georgia

Georgia's universities are still free. However, the government has already realized that it is less popular among younger age groups. Moreover, the Euro-Atlantic course as a national choice is more important to 20-year-olds than to 60-year-olds. **The main drivers of protests in Georgia in recent years have been 20-30 year olds**. They were the ones who forced the authorities to suspend the adoption of the law on foreign agents. They are the most active supporters of Georgia's European choice and of Ukraine.

⁵³ <https://cepa.org/young-russians-and-civic-engagement/>; <https://www.zois-berlin.de/publikationen/youth-in-russia-outlook-on-life-and-political-attitudes>; <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/06/17/how-putin-kremlin-lost-russian-youths/>; <https://www.svoboda.org/a/27331008.html>

⁵⁴ <https://rb.gy/luzo3>; <https://theins.ru/opinions/grozovsky/248589>; <https://theins.ru/obshestvo/162365> (in Russian)

⁵⁵ <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/long-read-russian-youth-against-war>

The Georgian ruling team wants to change the mood of young people in its favor and pressurize universities where prominent academics critical of Ivanishvili and the Georgian Dream are teaching. Destructive, anarchist and extremist forces who want to maintain destabilization, and chaos in the country, and disorder, organized the protests against the law on foreign agents, said Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili.⁵⁶ In addition to the opposition parties, he mentioned the "Franklin Club",⁵⁷ an organization working at the University of Georgia (engaged in education, media, research, political discussions, and civil activism). "The Franklin Club poisons and brainwashes young people, Garibashvili said, and carries out anti-state, subversive activities.

This information is, of course, a lie. The Franklin Club promotes classical liberal and libertarian values.⁵⁸ The prime minister added that the young people were dressed in Satanist uniforms and that the main opposition party had turned into an extremist organization. Russian propagandist Vladimir Solovyov and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has praised Garibashvili for these speeches. The first even named Garibashvili 'a man with balls'.

The leader of Georgian Dream, Irakli Kobakhidze, convinces the public that it was the committed "liberal fascism" (what is that?), the extremist youth, who were at the forefront of the protests against the law on foreign agents, organizing "violent actions against the state". Kobakhidze's list of "enemies of the state" even included the University of Georgia and the Free University.⁵⁹ This shows that Georgia, like Russia, can restrict academic freedom in universities, which are extremely concerned about this.

Pocket court

3.3.5

In Russia

Russia ranks 107 out of 140 in the Global Rule of Law Index 2022 (Georgia ranks 49).⁶⁰ The rule of law did not exist in Russia in the 1990s either, but at that time, the courts operated in a competitive political environment. There were many different actors putting pressure on the courts (it was easy to 'buy' them). The system was pluralistic – it responded to incentives from business, the state and the media, and took the decisions that were most pressed upon it. In the 1990s, the court was partially independent, it had no external "boss" and pluralism was maintained within the court. Constitutional Court judges wrote "dissenting opinions" on important issues. At that time, the authorities, oligarchs, political and social groups competed for influence on the court, and no single group could monopolize influence on the judiciary.

The situation changed in the 2000s. The Yukos affair was a turning point: Putin and the siloviki wanted a complete break-up of the company and its nationalization, which was poorly coordinated with the laws of the time. **The government tried to ensure that**

⁵⁶ <https://civil.ge/archives/531107>

⁵⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/FranklinClubGeo>

⁵⁸ <https://sova.news/2023/03/17/ekstremisty-anarhisty-i-satanisty-strashilki-ot-vlastej-gruzii-o-klube-franklina/> (in Russian)

⁵⁹ <https://civil.ge/archives/531259>; <https://civil.ge/archives/531668>

⁶⁰ <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/global>

the decisions it wanted were taken. This was done through bribery, the promotion of a judge and sometimes repression. In 2013, the authorities abolished the system of arbitration courts. This was the most open and independent part of the Russian judicial system: it allowed entrepreneurs to win disputes against state authorities.⁶¹ The Supreme Arbitration Court, the most independent of the siloviki and the government, paid the price for its intransigence in the Yukos case.

Over the past decade, judges have lost what is left of their independence. Due to the lack of separation of powers and the suppression of all political and social initiatives and structures independent of the authorities, the **influence of government on the courts has become monopolistic.** The law in Russia no longer played the role of a check on the arbitrariness of the authorities.⁶² The final stage was the alignment of the courts of general jurisdiction into a single vertical, acting on the orders of the siloviki and the executive, and the expulsion of pluralism from the Constitutional Court. This happened in the late 2010s. As a result, the court in Russia has become an obedient instrument of repression, just as it was in the USSR.

In Georgia

Georgia's judicial system **has failed to become fully independent** in the 30 years of post-Soviet transformation. The Saakashvili government purged the judiciary of corruption but subordinated it to the government. Saakashvili later admitted that was a mistake.⁶³ Ivanishvili and Georgian Dream took advantage of the mistake: after they came to power, the rule of law began to deteriorate. The government's pressure on the court was strongly felt in the cases against Saakashvili (and the demand for his extradition from Ukraine in 2017), against the United National Movement, and in the cases against opposition media (starting with Rustavi 2 TV in 2015).⁶⁴ The court has been used for political purposes - to crack down on political opponents.

In 2017, the ECHR rejected all three judicial candidates from Georgia proposed by the Georgian authorities: they were incompetent or ruled in favour of the government.⁶⁵ At the time, the country's judicial system was already in deep crisis. Judges were not independent and, as the then President Giorgi Margvelashvili noted, citizens were deprived of the right to an impartial and fair trial. At the same time, a parliamentary majority passed a package of laws on judicial reform in a way that stripped judges of their independence. The judges are effectively controlled by the High Council of Justice, which appoints court presidents.

At the end of 2018, parliament refused to approve the list of Supreme Court judges for life submitted by the High Council of Justice. This was against the wishes of Bidzina Ivanishvili and the parliamentary leadership. The appointment of judges for life, instead of being a procedure to make judges more independent, has instead turned into the **enslavement of the entire judiciary**, as the High Council of Justice is essentially controlled by the 'judicial clan', which is close to the authorities. The new judges who join the SJC are known for their work in the interests of the authorities.⁶⁶ The judges are

⁶¹ <https://www.forbes.ru/mneniya-column/vertikal/245937-sudebnaya-kontreforma-k-chemu-privedet-likvidatsiya-arbitrazhnykh-su> (in Russian)

⁶² <https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2018/03/01/752370-cto-derzhit-rossiyu> (in Russian)

⁶³ <https://sova.news/2021/11/29/saakashvili-ya-dopuskal-oshibki-glavnaya-etot-sud/> (in Russian)

⁶⁴ <https://shorturl.at/iCJZ5>, <https://shorturl.at/vBNP7> (in Russian)

⁶⁵ <https://shorturl.at/ayH59>; <https://shorturl.at/jkmF7>, <https://shorturl.at/dsLX0> (in Russian)

⁶⁶ <https://shorturl.at/vBEHP>, <https://shorturl.at/bgsBI>, <https://shorturl.at/dmRZO> (in Russian)

subordinate to the 'clan', which ensures that the judges make the decisions that the authorities want. The formal procedure has led to the opposite result. Judges subordinate to the clan have become "permanent".

Public protests forced some of the odious judges to step down, and the High Judicial Council later appointed others. However, they too are close to the "clan". "The courts are not staffed by impartial judges, but by political allies of the government," said the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The European Parliament, the US State Department and the US ambassador to Georgia, has made similar statements.⁶⁷

The influence of the clan that has seized power in the Georgian judiciary has grown in recent years. The opposition has drawn up a plan for judicial reform, but the authorities don't want to implement it. There is a growing number of political cases with highly questionable judges' decisions.⁶⁸ The clan controls the High Council of the Judiciary, which de facto controls the whole system. A change in the selection of judges was even a condition for EU aid to Georgia. Georgia rejected the judicial reform plan agreed with the European Commission without consulting the Venice Commission.⁶⁹

The US imposed visa restrictions on four members of the Georgian High Council of Justice on suspicion of corruption (the State Department says there is ample evidence of corruption among these judges). The Georgian opposition has attempted to launch a parliamentary inquiry into judicial corruption, called for by NGOs. However, the authorities have blocked these attempts. The ruling party strongly disagrees. Prime Minister Garibashvili said he was proud of our judges.⁷⁰

The West is the enemy

3.3.6

In Russia

The most risks for Russia and the main source of anti-Russian policies in the world is the United States, according to a new version of Russia's foreign policy concept recently approved by Putin.⁷¹ In this document, **Russia actually presents itself to the world as an empire** - "a distinctive state-civilization that unites the Russian and other peoples that make up the cultural and civilizational community of the Russian world". At the same time, Russia has a "unique mission" to "maintain the global balance of power", according to the concept. Russia does not see itself as an enemy of the West, but its strategic goals are "protection from destructive foreign influence" and "elimination of the vestiges of domination by the US and other unfriendly states in peaceful affairs". This, according to Russian propaganda, is what the Russian army is doing in Ukraine.

⁶⁷ <https://shorturl.at/prwz7>, <https://sova.news/2020/12/14/sovet-yustitsii-prinyal-reshenie-o-bessrochnom-naznachenii-15-ti-sudej/>, <https://shorturl.at/ehvB9>, <https://shorturl.at/dowEN> (in Russian)

⁶⁸ <https://shorturl.at/jtJR1>, <https://shorturl.at/ntLM6>, <https://shorturl.at/pEQTV> (in Russian)

⁶⁹ <https://sova.news/2021/05/26/s-klanom-dolzno-byt-pokoncheno-konferentsiya-sudej-prohodit-na-fone-protesta/>, <https://shorturl.at/gBDE8> (in Russian)

⁷⁰ <https://shorturl.at/kvxR2>, <https://shorturl.at/jMU18>, <https://shorturl.at/gjoC6>, <https://shorturl.at/eimFJ> (in Russian)

⁷¹ <https://www.svoboda.org/a/putin-ofitsialjno-priznal-ssha-glavnym-istochnikom-riskov-/32343710.html>

NATO and the West are not enemies for Russia, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova reminded, adding immediately: "The Russian language has a wonderful word 'enemy'. It is **worse than enemy**."⁷²

Another goal of Russian foreign policy is to oppose the "pseudo-humanist neo-liberal" values that the West imposes on other countries and to defend "**traditional values**". Russian civilization is very distinctive and has its own way, Putin argues. Russia sees itself as a victim of the West's rigid course and considers to be unconditional its right to act as it wishes in its zone of interest (which includes the ex-Soviet states). According to Putin, the West is deliberately aggravating the situation in the world and **exacerbating the chaos, which Russia is countering**.⁷³ Traditional Russian spiritual and moral values (including patriotism and service to the fatherland), according to the state concept approved by Putin, are threatened by the United States and other unfriendly countries, foreign non-profit organisations and certain media.⁷⁴

When the USSR collapsed, many Russians hoped that the country would become a democracy, that capitalism would be built and that living standards in Russia would quickly reach those of developed countries. None of this happened. By the end of the 1990s, there was a strong demand for order, a desire to restore respect and pride in the country. Putin successfully played on these feelings by maximizing his own power and antagonizing Russia with its neighbours and the West. He has encouraged the rise of imperial nostalgia and ethnic nationalism in Russia, which has led Russia into dictatorship and autarky.

In Georgia

The vast majority of Georgians support the country's integration into EU and NATO structures. Therefore, no matter how much the ruling group opposes it, it cannot openly talk about its desire to move closer to Russia and freeze European integration, lest it lose voter support. Nevertheless, members of the Ivanishvili team are doing all they can **to discredit Georgia's Western choice**.

The government takes credit for European integration - visa-free travel and an association agreement with the EU.⁷⁵ "Our government has made the country a reliable partner [of the EU]," says Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili. Then his argument becomes highly paradoxical: if Georgia achieves EU candidate status in 2023, the credit will go to the ruling team. Moreover, if Georgia fails, it will be the opposition's fault, says Garibashvili, the allegedly "destructive radical opposition" that does not want Georgia to get the status.

In reality, the responsibility for fulfilling all the requirements that the EU has set for Georgia lies with the legislative and executive powers. The only point on which both the government and the opposition have a responsibility is to reduce the level of polarization in society.

The ruling group is compromising Europe in parallel with its declared EU aspirations. Garibashvili described as "shameful" the European Parliament's resolution calling for

⁷² <https://russian.rt.com/world/news/1114482-zaharova-zapad-vrag> (in Russian)

⁷³ <https://iz.ru/1438040/2022-12-09/putin-zaiavil-o-soznatelnom-umnozhenii-zapadom-khaosa-v-mire> (in Russian)

⁷⁴ <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/09/11/2022/636bbc199a79473f80a317a4> (in Russian)

⁷⁵ <https://civil.ge/archives/531107>

the release of former Georgian president Mikhail Saakashvili for medical treatment: "The European Parliament has given us a direct confession, saying that Saakashvili is their agent and that they are doing everything to save him and get him out of prison. Garibashvili was outraged that the European Parliament "teaches us wisdom, does not recognize the sovereignty of our country, does not respect our country, its independence, our institutions".

Europe's destructive role in Georgia is not limited to being closer to the Georgian opposition than to the Georgian dream. The aim of the MEPs and the destructive opposition, says Garibashvili, is to overthrow the government by force and then plunge Georgia into war: "Our beautiful country will be turned into a shooting gallery. "Many had illusions and hopes that Georgia would go to war," he regularly repeats. - The only thing they are unhappy about is that we didn't go to war".

In effect, Garibashvili is **suggesting to his audience that perhaps they should not be so eager to join Europe if it does not respect and recognize Georgia**. So far, the audience has not received this message. Even the voters who support the Georgian Dream want Georgia to become an EU member. However, who can guarantee that this will continue? In Russia, too, the propaganda worked slowly, its effect gradually accumulating.

The propaganda used by the ruling team inculcated in Georgian citizens the idea that Europe:

- 1) supports "Georgia's enemy" (Saakashvili),
- 2) does not respect Georgia's sovereignty and its people,
- 3) wants to harm Georgia by forcing it into war - trying to use the country for its own purposes,
- 4) wants to overthrow the Georgian government by force,
- 5) supports the most destructive, extremist and anarchist forces that try to destabilize the situation in the country,
- 6) supports non-transparent organizations that represent values alien to the Georgian people ("non-traditional").

It is less than half a step from these theses to the statement that Georgia does not need such a Europe. This statement is based on fear and expands the fear. Russia is happy to support these fears. "If there is a repeat of August 2008, no one will make a fuss about Georgia and send troops there, they will just attack Tbilisi without thinking twice" - says propagandist Margarita Simonyan.⁷⁶ "If the radical opposition had carried out its revolutionary plans the year before last year or this year, Russian tanks would be in Tbilisi today. They would have brought Russian tanks to Georgia, just as they did in 2008," says Irakli Kobakhidze, leader of the Georgian Dream coalition.⁷⁷

This position of the Georgian ruling group relies on Georgia's deep trauma with Russia. When Georgia adopted a pro-Western policy, its relations with Russia deteriorated and it was left alone with Russia.⁷⁸ "It was the victim's own fault: it should not have provoked the aggressor," the Georgian ruling faction argued. This is why Georgia has only partially joined the sanctions against Russia, refusing to supply arms to Ukraine and regularly

⁷⁶ <https://sova.news/2023/04/24/fantomnye-boli-gruzinskoj-mechty-vtoroj-front-i-propaganda/> (in Russian)

⁷⁷ <https://civil.ge/archives/531259>

⁷⁸ <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89485> (in Russian)

criticizing its leadership. By trying to appease Russia, by not irritating Putin, by going along with Putin's foreign policy demands, Georgia may be reducing the risk of another Russian attack. Though, by trying to get rid of any opposition, and distancing from the West it is blocking its own European future which can be the only long term guarantee against Kremlin's aggressive inclinations.

For almost three decades, the Georgian people have had a **very strong pro-Western orientation**. However, in recent years, and especially since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the rhetoric and ideology of the Georgian authorities have been strongly aligned with the Kremlin's approach.⁷⁹ Georgia is copying Russia's ideology of 'sovereign democracy', introducing media censorship, targeting pro-Western NGOs as enemies and depriving the courts of their independence. All this alienates Georgia from Europe and brings it closer to Russia.

In effect, Georgia's ruling party is trying to sit on two stools. Its main goal is to maintain and maximize its power. However, by abandoning the alternation of power and destroying democratic institutions, it is impossible to integrate into Western society. **The strategy of staying in power for many years is much better suited to friendship with Putin.** So seems that the Georgian Dream wants to put relations with Europe and the US on hold in order to pursue further rapprochement with Russia. Like Russian leaders in the late 2000s and early 2010s, Georgian politicians would like to keep money in the West, educate their children and own real estate there, but have rules of the game in Georgia that would allow them to exclude the loss of power.

Autocracy in Russia and Georgia: similarities and differences

Autocracy in Russia and Georgia has some similarities and some differences. This section summarizes some of them.

Like Russia, Georgia is developing a personalized regime: one person takes key decisions in the country. But unlike Russia, he has no official powers, is not a professional politician, is not a strongman leader and is not even close to Putin's desire for power.

As in Russia, the leader appoints his own people to key government posts, takes control of the judiciary, marginalizes the opposition and fights independent NGOs and the media. Unlike in Russia, however, this struggle is not over: the courts are under the control of the authorities, but NGOs and media that oppose the authorities continue to operate.

As in Russia, the authorities are quietly resorting to "bribing voters" (forgiving the debts of 600,000 voters), pressuring employees of budgetary institutions and possibly inflating the number of voters (which allows votes to be allocated to the necessary candidates).⁸⁰ Unlike in Russia, however, opposition politicians and parties are still active in

⁷⁹ <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-praise-and-transatlantic-criticism-underline-growing-anti-western-sentiment-among-georgias-elite/>

⁸⁰ <https://shorturl.at/isCG4>, <https://www.forbes.ru/biznes/367901-mertvye-dushi-v-gruzii-vozmozhny-falsifikacii-na-vyborah-prezidenta>, <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/georgia-crisis/30926472.html> (in Russian), <https://civil.ge/archives/501659>

Georgia. Their overall level of support is not much lower than that of the ruling party.

As in Russia, the Georgian authorities demonise the West and claim that it is working against the interests of sovereign Georgia. However, the idea of integration into EU and NATO structures has so much support in Georgia that the authorities cannot openly withdraw from global institutions. Therefore, they are content to delay Georgia's further integration into these institutions. In parallel, they are gradually bringing Georgia and Russia closer together: increasing mutual trade, converging political systems and foreign policies.

4. Scenarios for Future

Variables

4.1

Georgia is a small and weak state. The first adjective refers to the territory (about 55 thousand square km without occupied territories), the GDP (25 bln. USD; per Capita 6700 USD⁸¹), the population (about 3,5 mln.). The weakness comes from the fact, that Georgia cannot control its internationally recognised borders and as current developments show, there is a lack of the consensus on basic values or foreign policy orientation within the government and the majority of the population. Georgia has much longer history of authoritarian rule than that of democratic or even anarchic. Georgia has vibrant civil society organisations; Georgian students have increasing opportunities to study abroad in well-known Western Universities. Though the economic inequality (highest in the EU Eastern Partnership Countries. PMCG⁸²), in combination with other above mentioned problems constitute unfavourable ground for the development of thriving civil society and free economy in the country.

One can add two more troubling trends for the democracy and open society development in Georgia. High trust to the Georgian Orthodox Church which has at minimum ambivalent attitude to the principles of tolerance, globalisation and international integrative tendencies. Low quality of the education in Georgia: according to the UNISEF assessment, two thirds of 15 years old Georgian students do not meet baseline standards in reading, science and mathematics (Unicef for Every Child. Georgia).⁸³ It makes to think that the high level of support for Georgia's integration in the EU is driven more by the pragmatic search of security and stereotypical thinking than by the informed and reflective choice. Such context makes Europeanisation of Georgia based on shaky ground – susceptible to alterations if the alternative is provided. Recent galvanization of anti-European political groupings and critical statements of the governmental representatives with regards of the European institutions (First of all the criticism of the European Parliament) can be seen as testing and further shaking of this ground.

However, despite all this systemic shortcomings characteristic for Georgia, it does not

⁸¹ <https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/23/gross-domestic-product-gdp>

⁸² <https://pmcg-i.com/publication/issue-130-poverty-in-georgia-2010-2020/>

⁸³ <https://www.unicef.org/georgia/general-education#:~:text=The%20low%20quality%20of%20education,in%20reading%2C%20science%20and%20mathematics.>

make this country to be doomed for isolation from Europe. Such factors as the existence of vibrant media, NGOs and the pro-European opposition, as well as traditional hostility of Georgian society towards political linkage with Russia makes Georgian government to be yet cautious and not to revert the foreign orientation irreversibly. Strong presence of the Europe, as well as the US in Georgia through various developmental missions, projects, diplomatic networks is also a factor for the government to reckon carefully its steps.

Negative, Positive and Realistic Scenarios

4.2

Seems like the Georgian government does not want to cut communication with the West altogether, but just tries a) not to infuriate Russia; b) to stay in power indefinitely, which is increasingly difficult without weakening, intimidating critical media and the NGOs who possess the tools for the efficient monitoring of the elections. If they manage to calm critical voices down in one way or another, dissuade people from mass protests, they hope that the EU will also become less critical and re-focus its attention from Georgia's poor democratic record to its geo-political and geo-economic potential. Hence, Georgian Dream may not be just openly and genuinely pro-Russian force: It definitely is pro-itself, hoping to develop Azerbaijani-like relations with the outside world. Though in fact, eventually such disposition makes it susceptible to Russian influence: Through such policy the ruling Georgian Dream, willingly or not, builds the system, resembling Russia's "sovereign democracy".

By and large, developments in small and weak Georgia very much depend on the regional balance of power. If the war in Ukraine is stalled or if it leads to some kind of face-saving and survival of Russian regime with its regional influences, Georgian government may become more and more repressive, even receiving support from the northern neighbour if the need for it will be. In this case, the EU candidacy of Georgia will be taken from the agenda while Brussels relations with Tbilisi will be the function of the former's relations with Moscow. That will be the negative scenario for Georgian democracy and Europeanisation for years to come.

The positive scenario is the one which results with the candidacy status, creation of the level plain field for elections and the eventual peaceful change of the government to the pro-European coalition. In order to make it happen, not only strong and mass resolve of all pro-European forces and their constant coordination is needed, but also active involvement of the international community with energetic usage of the conditionality principle coupled with the threat of individual sanctions for those power-holders who create obstacles for the democratisation. Russia's defeat in the War in Ukraine will be the decisive factor to make it happen: Such defeat will definitely demoralise anti-democratic, sometimes clearly pro-Russian segments in Georgian society. In this case snap parliamentary elections are not excluded either.

The most realistic scenario is that the Georgian Dream maintains the power until 2024 elections, while through some compromises manages to receive the status of the EU candidate country. Though for that no less joint work of the European institutions, Georgian civil society and the opposition is needed. Such compromise can be founded on

the ground of the de-escalation, which means stopping demonization campaign, not returning to the “foreign agents” law in whatever form, stop thinking about the restrictions of freedom of speech, releasing Nika Gvaramia from the prison and allowing Michael Saakashvili medical treatment abroad. The problems, like dependence of Judiciary on the government, the dominance of the governmental people in the election commissions will remain, but the overall context might not allow the GD to have an unequivocal victory in future elections. If it happens, Georgian polity will become more pluralistic than it is today.

Spring 2023 poll results, published by the International Republican Institute⁸⁴ and National Democratic institute⁸⁵ may also be interpreted as indicating to the feasibility of such scenario: While on the one hand, popularity of the government is going down and support for the European integration remains high, on another the rate of the opposition remains noticeably low. It gives the ruling elite an opportunity to maintain power. However, that will be very difficult and situation may move towards destabilisation if pro-European inclinations of the society are ignored and no reform/de-escalation agenda will be accepted by the government.

⁸⁴ <https://www.iri.org/news/iri-georgia-poll-finds-support-for-eu-accession-high-weariness-of-russian-presence-lack-of-faith-in-political-parties/>

⁸⁵ https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_March%202023%20telephone%20poll_Eng_PUB-LIC%20VERSION_FINAL_03.05%20%281%29.pdf

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