



Democratic Backsliding and De-Democratization: How the Georgian Dream Party Eroded the Rule of Law, Undermined the Integrity of Independent State Institutions, and Consolidated Power

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Abstract: The article examines political and legislative developments in Georgia between 2020 and 2024, highlighting policies and legislative actions that have undermined the country's democratic trajectory and its now-suspended EU integration efforts. It sheds light on the process of democratic backsliding and de-democratization, emphasizing the consolidation of power and the erosion of the integrity of independent institutions. Though de-democratization is, as a rule, unoriginal and predictable in its brutality, lessons can still be learned and "warning signs" heeded from this Georgian case study. Hybrid activities, such as the brutal police clampdown on public demonstrations manifesting assertions of state capture, have occurred and can be expected in other transitional contexts as well. The awakening from dreams can be brutal.

Keywords: Georgian Dream Party, Georgian opposition, de-democratization, democratic governance, EU integration, lessons learned, democratic backsliding.

Introduction

Democratic backsliding is a cumulative process involving a series of steps that erode democratic norms and institutions. While in some cases democratic backsliding may be temporary, unintentional, and part of an (immature) democracy's

ups and downs, and thus reversible, *de-democratization*, the deliberate full erosion of democratic institutions as an autocratic project will be more difficult to renegotiate. Backsliding usually precedes full de-democratization and may be further used to weaken yet uneroded islands in an otherwise stable autocratic course. Furthermore, the existence of democratically labeled institutions within an autocratic space should not distract from the malignant intentions. After all, the Soviet Union held elections and maintained the illusion of political parties, a parliament, and courts of justice.

Democratic backsliding initially manifests itself in executive aggrandizement – the centralization of power that the executive branch achieves by weakening checks and balances, whether through constitutional changes, emergency powers, or the simple buy-off of elected opposition politicians in fragile parliaments. The independence of institutions designed to function as parts of a system of checks and balances (such as the judiciary and the media) is undermined, and with it their ability to hold the government accountable. The security sector (defense, law enforcement, foreign and domestic intelligence, border management, courts of justice, and the internal and external oversight bodies of these organizations), which in democracies is in charge of the security and safety of every citizen, now becomes state security – in charge of the security and safety of the interest group capturing and now posing as the state.

In parallel, democratic norms of cohabitation erode. Society experiences polarization and demonization of opponents, divisive rhetoric, and the isolation and labeling of opponents as enemies of the state, or even of the people. The rule of law is undermined by autocratic leaders who selectively apply and enforce laws to harass and defund political opponents. Elections are manipulated. Democratic institutions and watchdog organizations become underfunded or entirely defunded. International cooperation on transparency and accountability building is eliminated, and former international friends of the nation are first ridiculed and then denied access to the state. At a later stage, the now openly de-democratizing state may use anonymized “public order” outfits to harass, arrest, physically harm, intimidate, and make opponents disappear.¹

¹ For the above see: Thomas Carothers and Brendan Hartnett, “Misunderstanding Democratic Backsliding,” *Journal of Democracy* 35, no. 3 (July 2024): 24-37, www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/misunderstanding-democratic-backsliding/ (arguing that conventional understandings of democratic backsliding are incomplete and proposing a new framework for understanding the phenomenon); Thomas Carothers and Benjamin Press, “Understanding and Responding to Global Democratic Backsliding,” Working Paper, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/10/20/understanding-and-responding-to-global-democratic-backsliding-pub-88173> (providing an overview of the global trend of democratic backsliding and discussing the contributing factors); Michael W. Bauer and Stefan Becker, “Democratic Backsliding, Populism, and Public Administration,” *Perspectives on Public Management and Governance* 3, no. 1 (March 2020): 19-31, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ppmgov/gvz026> (discussing the impact of populist governments on public administration and how they can contribute to democratic backsliding).

Background

Georgia's current ruling party came to power in 2012, marking the first peaceful transition of power through elections since the country's independence in 1918. The election of Georgian Dream was significant for other reasons as well – the primary factor behind voters' support was widespread concern over human rights abuses and authoritarian practices under the previous administration.² Yet, during that prior administration, from 2004 to 2012, Georgia achieved significant progress in advancing its integration with European and Euro-Atlantic institutions. Major reforms included effective support for a free market economy, anticorruption efforts, judicial and law enforcement reforms, as well as advancements of reforms in education, energy, defense, and the security sector – all of which aligned Georgia's policies with NATO and EU priorities.

Since assuming office, Georgian Dream has officially shared these foreign policy goals, identifying European and Euro-Atlantic integration as core objectives. The government signed an Association Agreement with the European Union in 2014, achieved visa liberalization with the Schengen Area in 2017, and submitted its EU membership application in 2022.³ A constitutional amendment in 2017 further reinforced the state's commitment to democratic development, mandating the government to use all its resources and efforts toward full EU and NATO integration.⁴

However, despite this, Georgia's democratic trajectory between 2012 and 2020 remained inconsistent. While the Georgian Dream administration cites achievements in economic growth and high international rankings on democracy, anticorruption, and human rights, organizations such as Freedom House and the Economist Intelligence Unit have consistently classified Georgia as a

² Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2011 – Georgia," Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, June 17, 2011, <https://www.refworld.org/reference/annualreport/freehou/2011/en/79659>; Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2012: Georgia*, January 22, 2012, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2012/country-chapters/georgia>.

³ European External Action Service, "The European Perspective for Georgia," Delegation of the European Union to Georgia, September 20, 2022, accessed May 19, 2025, www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/european-perspective-georgia_en?s=221; European Council, "European Council conclusions on Ukraine, the membership applications of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia, Western Balkans and external relations," Council of the European Union, June 23, 2022, www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/06/23/european-council-conclusions-on-ukraine-the-membership-applications-of-ukraine-the-republic-of-moldova-and-georgia-western-balkans-and-external-relations-23-june-2022/.

⁴ "Constitution of Georgia," Article 78, Parliament of the Republic of Georgia, August 24, 1995, accessed December 1, 2024, <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/30346?publication=36>.

semi-democratic, hybrid state.⁵ Civil society groups, academics, and independent experts have persistently highlighted challenges impeding democratic development.⁶ Key issues include heightened political polarization, the influence of informal oligarchic governance, ineffective anticorruption efforts, limited government accountability and transparency, weak parliamentary oversight, concerns about judicial independence, and deficiencies in the rule of law. Additionally, maintaining a free, pluralistic, and independent media environment, along with ensuring robust human rights protections, remains an ongoing challenge.

Developments between 2020 and 2024, in particular, point to a reversal in Georgia's democratization trajectory, as the country experienced significant democratic setbacks and even signs of autocratic regression. Following the ruling party's third-term election victory in 2020, deep political polarization ensued, with opposition parties refusing to enter Parliament, citing allegations of electoral fraud. The United States and EU partners actively engaged in mediating an agreement between political forces to ensure opposition participation in Parliament. The rift and severe polarization between the ruling party and the opposition continued in subsequent years.

The Georgian public actively responded to the government's backsliding on democratic commitments under the EU-Georgia Association Agreement with an intense wave of protests. Despite this resistance, these movements fell short of achieving their goals, as the public's focus on domestic issues was repeatedly overshadowed by a deepened sense of vulnerability to external threats, driven by global geopolitical instability and, most notably, by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This invasion intensified concerns about Moscow's assertive stance toward Georgia, demonstrated by escalating pressure on Georgia's occupied territories, the expanding share of Georgia's foreign trade with—and growing energy dependence on—Russia, and increased anti-Western Russian propaganda and disinformation through traditional and social media.

While it represented an increase in the region's security threats, Russia's aggression against Ukraine opened an unexpected window of opportunity for Georgia and other EU eastern neighbors to accelerate their paths toward European integration. Alongside Ukraine and Moldova, in late February and early March 2022, Georgia seized a historic chance and submitted its application for European Union membership – a milestone that aligned it with the broader trend

⁵ Freedom House, "Nations in Transit 2024: Georgia," <https://freedomhouse.org/country/georgia/nations-transit/2024>; Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), *Democracy Index 2023: Age of Conflict*, Report, 2024, <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2023/>.

⁶ Transparency International Georgia, <https://transparency.ge/en>; Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, <https://idfi.ge/en>; Georgian Young Lawyers' Association, <https://gyla.ge/en/>; Civil Society Foundation, <https://csf.ge/en/>; Georgian Institute of Politics, <https://gip.ge/>; Civil Council on Defense and Security, Tbilisi, <https://civilcouncil.org/>; Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, <https://gfsis.org/>; Social Justice Center, Tbilisi, <https://socialjustice.org.ge/en>; International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, <https://www.isfed.ge/eng>.

in Eastern Partnership countries seeking to fast-track EU integration in the wake of Russia's aggression.⁷

However, since then, Georgia's trajectory has further diverged from the path of integration and reform. Key government decisions have indicated a marked departure from EU commitments. This trend became especially clear when Georgia failed to meet the nine steps required for candidate status by July 2023, fueling perceptions that the government was intentionally stalling Georgia's European integration.⁸

In December 2023, despite these challenges, the European Council granted Georgia EU candidate status, contingent on the government's commitment to advancing reforms in critical areas.⁹ Key reforms were required to improve the electoral system and judicial sector, addressing concerns over a polarized political process and a politicized justice system. This involved enacting ambitious electoral reforms and strengthening the parliamentary role of opposition representatives.

Despite this encouraging signal from the European Union, Georgia is in fact no longer experiencing temporary democratic backsliding but rather undergoing a deepening process of authoritarian consolidation. This shift is marked by the ruling party's systematic erosion of institutional independence, suppression of political opposition, and legal restrictions on civil society and the media. Additionally, the consolidation of power within the judiciary, law enforcement, and electoral bodies—coupled with Georgia's growing divergence from EU and NATO policies—has further accelerated this trend. If these patterns persist, Georgia risks transitioning into full autocracy, with democratic recovery becoming increasingly improbable.

2022 to Today: Rhetoric, Disinformation, and Legislative Shifts

Since 2022, U.S. and EU authorities have criticized the Georgian government for obstructing democratic progress.¹⁰ In particular, there has been a notable rise in anti-Western rhetoric that is openly hostile to Western values and institutions.

⁷ European External Action Service, "The European Perspective for Georgia."

⁸ European External Action Service, "The EU and Georgia Factsheet," Delegation of the European Union to Georgia, November 1, 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/eu-and-georgia-factsheet-0_en; Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI), "9 Steps Towards EU: State of Implementation," Monitoring Report, 2024, April 11, https://idfi.ge/en/9_steps_towards_the_european_unio_status_of_implementation.

⁹ European External Action Service, "The EU and Georgia Factsheet."

¹⁰ Transparency International Georgia, <https://transparency.ge/en>; Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, <https://idfi.ge/en>; Georgian Young Lawyers' Association, <https://gyla.ge/en/>; Civil Society Foundation, <https://csf.ge/en/>; Georgian Institute of Politics, <https://gip.ge/>; Civil Council on Defense and Security, Tbilisi, <https://civilcouncil.org/>; Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, <https://gfsis.org/>; Social Justice Center, Tbilisi, <https://socialjustice.org.ge/en>; International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, <https://www.isfed.ge/eng>.

The disinformation campaign—often targeting Western democratic values such as respect for LGBTQ+ communities—is actively promoted by the government and ruling party elites. Its goal is to erode public confidence in Western societies and their way of life, pushing the narrative that the West is no better than Russia, which illegally occupies Georgian territories on the one hand, but claims to firmly defend Christian and traditional values on the other.

Since 2022, Georgian civil society organizations have consistently highlighted that anti-Western statements from Georgian Dream leaders have become increasingly frequent and are being reinforced by specific legislative initiatives and decisions.¹¹

A report by a local media watchdog identified five key propaganda narratives shaping anti-Western sentiment in Georgia¹²:

- (1) The West was accused of attempting to involve Georgia in the Ukraine conflict by “opening a second front,” exploiting fears of the war spilling over.
- (2) Russia’s war in Ukraine was framed as an opportunity to mend relations with Moscow, portraying Russia as the solution to reclaiming Georgia’s occupied territories and as a counterbalance to perceived threats from Türkiye.
- (3) Propaganda claimed the West was planning to replace Georgia’s government through a “revolutionary scenario,” likened to Ukraine’s 2014 Euromaidan, which was depicted as an extremist coup.
- (4) Western criticism of Georgia’s democratic practices was equated to interference in sovereign affairs, echoing the Russian concept of “sovereign democracy.”

¹¹ Nino Chanadiri, “Awakening Totalitarian Traditions: Russian Disinformation in the Lead-up to the Georgian Elections,” Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, October 14, 2024, <https://gfsis.org/en/awakening-totalitarian-traditions-russian-disinformation-in-the-lead-up-to-the-georgian-elections/>; Social Justice Center, “The Evolution of Georgian Dream’s Relations with the Western Partners: A Descriptive Analysis,” August 13, 2024, <https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/kartuli-otsnebis-dasavlel-partniorebtan-urtiertobebis-evolutsia-deskriptiuli-analizi>; Social Justice Center, “The Annual Report of the State Security Service of Georgia (SSSG) Contains Anti-Western Rhetoric,” June 12, 2024, <https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/antidasavluri-ritorika-sus-is-qoveltsliur-angarishshi>; Davit Kutidze, “Strategic Documents of the Russian Federation and Parallels with the Georgian Dream’s Rhetoric,” Research Institute Gnomon Wise, October 18, 2024, <https://gnomonwise.org/en/publications/analytics/223>; Democracy Research Institute, “Reports against Disinformation,” 2022-2025, www.democracyresearch.org/eng/852/1/t/869/.

¹² “MDF Report on Anti-Western Propaganda in 2022,” *Civil.ge*, March 7, 2024, <https://civil.ge/archives/585917>.

- (5) Civil society and media organizations were labeled as “foreign agents,” a narrative culminating in the passage of a Russian-style “foreign influence” law in May 2024.

The changes in Georgian Dream’s policies and rhetoric can be attributed to several reasons. One primary factor to consider is that, since 2022, Georgian Dream has been clearly working to secure its power ahead of the upcoming 2024 parliamentary elections. Through anti-Western rhetoric and disinformation—primarily disseminated via pro-government media outlets and social media campaigns—the ruling party aims to garner support from pro-Russian voters without alienating its pro-Western base. Consequently, while Georgian Dream’s messaging often includes anti-Western elements, it still claims commitment to the EU membership process.

Another concern is that, beyond securing victory in the next elections, Georgian Dream may have prioritized oligarchic interests by distancing Georgia from the West – a course that directly contradicts the public’s predominantly pro-European and pro-NATO aspirations.¹³ Notably, the Russian government and major media outlets have openly endorsed Georgian Dream’s rhetoric, raising suspicions that the party is advancing Russian interests under the influence of its informal leader, Bidzina Ivanishvili, rather than serving Georgia’s national agenda.

The Georgian Dream’s policy shift occurred despite strong pro-Western public sentiment. An April–May 2024 survey revealed that 70 % of Georgians support membership in the European Union and 57 % favor NATO integration, while only 7 % prefer Georgia’s alignment with the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union.¹⁴

Despite the strong pro-Western sentiment among the Georgian public, as reflected in the survey, the Georgian Dream government pressed forward with passing laws that directly contradict these aspirations. In 2024, the party managed to pass anti-democratic and EU integration-impeding laws such as the Foreign Influence Transparency Act and the Law on Protection of Family Values and Minors. These decisions were made amidst large-scale public protests in the capital, yet the government proceeded with its legislative agenda as planned. Georgian and Western media, along with political leaders, referred to these as “Russian” laws, noting that similar legislation introduced in Russia years ago has crippled civil society and independent media. Fears of a similar impact on Georgia led to intense protest movements in the capital.

These legislative moves have been widely criticized by Western leaders, with high-ranking officials from the European Union and the United States repeatedly

¹³ Kornely Kakachia and Shota Kakabadze, “What’s Behind Georgian Dream’s Anti-Western Rhetoric and Foreign Policy Behavior,” Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) Policy Memo No. 58, September 12, 2022, accessed December 1, 2024, <https://gip.ge/publication-post/whats-behind-georgian-dreams-anti-western-rethoric-and-foreign-policy-behavior/>.

¹⁴ The Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRR) Georgia, “Caucasus Barometer 2024 Georgia,” Fieldwork Dates: April 16, 2024 to May 13, 2024, <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2024ge/codebook/>.

warning that Georgia's European integration will be stalled unless these laws are withdrawn.¹⁵

Making / Keeping the Judicial System and the Rule of Law Dependent

The consolidation of democracy in Georgia hinges significantly on establishing a robust, independent judicial system rooted in the rule of law. Despite over two decades of reforms aimed at strengthening judicial independence—undertaken with substantial collaboration and support from Western allies such as the United States, the European Union, and its member states—Georgia's judiciary continues to face significant challenges. Persistent allegations of political interference, unfulfilled reform plans, and an entrenched “judicial clan” undermine the judiciary's role in promoting the rule of law, justice, and democratic governance.¹⁶

In 2012, Georgian Dream came to power with the promise of freeing the judiciary from political pressure and transforming it into an effective institution, as well as improving fair and independent judicial and investigative practices. However, reform efforts—initially promising—lost momentum, particularly after 2020. Reports from the European Commission and human rights organizations highlight stalled implementation and politically motivated decisions.¹⁷ Recent reforms have not been aligned with the Venice Commission's recommendations and have weakened the independence of key judicial institutions. Between 2020 and 2024, trust in the judiciary dropped by 6 %, with more citizens doubting court rulings.¹⁸

¹⁵ “U.S. State Department ‘Incredibly Concerned’ About GD’s Anti-Western Rhetoric,” *Civil.ge*, May 9, 2024, <https://civil.ge/archives/604736>.

¹⁶ Giorgi Mshvenieradze, Vasil Zhizhiashvili, and Shota Qobalia, “Map of Authoritarianism in Georgia,” Georgian Democracy Initiative & Gnomon Wise, January 2024, [https://gdi.ge/storage/files/doc/Authoritarianism%20map%20Georgia%202024\(1\).pdf](https://gdi.ge/storage/files/doc/Authoritarianism%20map%20Georgia%202024(1).pdf); Freedom House, “Nations in Transit 2024: Georgia,” Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, “Campaign to Tackle Dirty Money Steps up with New Sanctions,” Press Release, *Gov.uk*, April 2, 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/campaign-to-tackle-dirty-money-steps-up-with-new-sanctions>; U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, “2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Georgia,” March 30, 2020 <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/georgia/>; U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, “2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Georgia,” April 22, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/georgia/>; U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, “2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Georgia,” March 20, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/georgia/>.

¹⁷ European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council: Commission Opinion on Georgia's Application for Membership of the European Union,” Brussels, June 17, 2022, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52022DC0405>.

¹⁸ Caucasus Barometer is the regular household survey about social-economic issues and political attitudes conducted by CRRC. “Caucasus Barometer 2024 Georgia: TRUCRTS:

According to reports by independent legal watchdogs, the High Council of Justice (HCOJ) and influential judges strategically position allies across the judiciary, facilitate an opaque process for appointing judges and court chairs, and create political leverage over high-stakes cases. This consolidation of power enables the ruling party to maintain a compliant judiciary, reinforcing concerns about judicial independence and suspicions that political loyalty may take precedence over legal merit.¹⁹

The “judicial clan” phenomenon extends beyond the *Supreme Court* to the *Constitutional Court* as well, as the integrity of judicial appointments is further compromised by political involvement in the selection of judges, particularly in these two courts.²⁰ Similar concerns have been raised in several official reports²¹: both the Venice Commission and the OSCE have highlighted the lack of transparency and due process in these appointments. Instances such as the appointment of judges during the COVID-19 emergency in 2020—without public scrutiny or adequate disclosure—illustrate how procedures were manipulated to install politically favorable candidates.²²

In 2023, efforts were made to increase court transparency through legal amendments. However, rulings are only disclosed after the Supreme Court’s final verdict, a process that can take years. As a result, only Supreme Court decisions are accessible online.²³ This limited transparency has not contributed to

Trust – Court System” (Fieldwork Dates: April 16, 2024 to May 13, 2024), <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2024ge/TRUCRTS/>; “Caucasus Barometer 2020 Georgia: TRUCRTS: Trust – Court System (Fieldwork Dates: December 8, 2020 to December 14, 2020), accessed December 1, 2024, <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2020ge/TRUCRTS/>.

¹⁹ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, “2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Georgia.”

²⁰ Kerry Longhurst and Alexandra Sabou, eds., “Eastern Partnership Index 2023 –Charting Performance in the Eastern Partnership: Democracy and Good Governance, Policy Convergence and Sustainable Development,” Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.17613/ks3t-et13>; “Controversial Justice Re-Elected as Tbilisi Appeals Court Chair,” Civil Georgia, June 27, 2022, accessed December 1, 2024, <https://civil.ge/archives/498256>.

²¹ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, “2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Georgia.”

²² Vasil Zhizhiashvili, “Who Appoints the Judges of the Constitutional Court and How?” Georgian Democracy Initiative, 2020, accessed December 1, 2024, <https://gdi.ge/ge/blogi/vin-da-rogor-nishnavs-sakonstitutsio-sasamartlos-mosamartleebs>, in Georgian; “GYLA Calls on the Supreme Plenum to Suspend the Procedures for Appointing a Judge to the Constitutional Court,” *Publika.ge*, March 31, 2020, accessed December 1, 2024, <https://publika.ge/saia-mouwodebs-uzenaesis-plenums-sheacheros-sakonstitucio-sa-samartlos-mosamartlis-danishvnis-procedurebi/> – in Georgian; Nino Chichua, “A Constitutional Court Judge to Be Appointed on May 29,” *Netgazeti.ge*, May 28, 2024, <https://netgazeti.ge/news/456223/>. – in Georgian

²³ Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI), “Accessibility of Judicial Acts: Progress and Key Challenges,” March 29, 2024, https://idfi.ge/en/accessibility_

better judgment or improved alignment of Georgia's practice with international best practices and EU norms on judicial independence.²⁴

Moreover, in 2022–2023, the U.S. State Department reported undue pressure on judges, manipulation of case assignments, and suppression of dissenting voices within the judiciary.²⁵ In 2024, the European Court of Human Rights identified systemic issues within Georgia's judicial system,²⁶ including retaliation against critical judges.²⁷

Georgia's judiciary remains hampered by political influence, lack of transparency, and structural weaknesses. The continued existence of a "judicial clan" undermines judicial independence, erodes public trust, and compromises the judiciary's role as an impartial protector of the rule of law. Reforms have proven largely cosmetic, failing to address the deeper issues of politicization and accountability.

De-Democratization as the Undoing of Transparency and Accountability

Discussions on the stagnation of democratic reforms and Georgia's de-democratization often highlight that the consolidation of executive power has been driven not only by the ruling party's political interests but also by broader geopolitical shifts triggered by the war in Ukraine. Heightened security concerns have, to some extent, reduced public demands for accountability and transparency, as reflected in international research papers.²⁸

In Georgia's case, it has become evident that coordinated actions among all branches of government—executive, legislative, and judicial—have led to a marked strengthening of the executive branch.

"Empowering" the Parliament

Since the 2017 constitutional amendments, Georgia has functioned as a parliamentary republic, with the presidency holding limited powers. However, the ruling party has sought to curtail presidential power even further and exert influence over presidential actions. These efforts include obstructing the president's

of_judicial_acts_progress_and_key_challenges; European External Action Service, "The EU and Georgia Factsheet."

²⁴ IDFI, "Accessibility of Judicial Acts: Progress and Key Challenges."

²⁵ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, "2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Georgia."

²⁶ European Court of Human Rights, Fifth Section, "Case of Bakradze v. Georgia, Application no. 20592/21, Judgment," Strasbourg, November 7, 2024, <https://hudoc.echr.co.e.int/?i=001-237811>.

²⁷ "ECtHR Confirms Expulsion of a Judge from the Judicial System Over Her Dissenting Views," Transparency International – Georgia, November 11, 2024, <https://transparency.ge/en/post/ecthr-confirms-expulsion-judge-judicial-system-over-her-dissenting-views/>.

²⁸ Longhurst and Sabou, eds., "Eastern Partnership Index 2023."

participation in international organizations, meetings with EU member states' leaders, and other initiatives, as well as undermining the legitimacy of the presidency and steering the country toward isolation.²⁹

On February 8, 2024, during an address to Parliament, the president mentioned that a major obstacle to democratic consolidation in Georgia is the lack of distinction between the ruling Georgian Dream party and the government. She also pointed out that Parliament has ceased to act as a body overseeing and holding the government accountable, and has instead become an instrument for implementing partisan policies. The short-lived attempt at coalition governance in 2012–2013 has reverted to a one-party, monolithic model following the 2020 elections.³⁰

The president's critical remarks provoked a strong reaction from the ruling party, including mutual criticism exchanged between her and the Prime Minister.

Relations between the president and the government further deteriorated following the government's unsuccessful attempt to impeach her in October 2023. On October 16, 2023, the Constitutional Court of Georgia declared that President Salome Zourabichvili had violated the country's Constitution by traveling to three EU member states without the government's approval.³¹ With this decision, the Constitutional Court affirmed its readiness to enforce the agenda of the ruling political party. However, a motion of impeachment failed in the Georgian Parliament on October 18, 2023, as the ruling Georgian Dream party could not gather enough votes to remove her from office.

Following this outcome, the President has consistently vetoed legislation she deemed incompatible with the EU integration process.³² In response, Parliament has exercised its authority to override her vetoes in all instances.

²⁹ RFE/RL's Georgian Service, "Georgian Parliament Fails to Impeach President Over EU Visits," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, October 18, 2023, www.rferl.org/a/georgia-president-zurabichvili-impeachment-debate-eu-visits-parliament/32642711.html.

³⁰ "2024 Annual Address of the President to Parliament," Archive Website of the President of Georgia, February 6, 2024, https://zourabichviliarchive.info/index.php?m=206&appeals_id=385.

³¹ "The Impeachment of the President Did Not Take Place," *Radiotavisupleba*, October 18, 2024, <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/32642769.html>. - in Georgian

³² Nini Gabritchidze, "Georgian President Breaks with Ruling Party in Bid to Boost EU Prospects," *Eurasianet*, June 23, 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/georgian-president-breaks-with-ruling-party-in-bid-to-boost-eu-prospects>; Nini Gabritchidze, "Georgian President to Go on Veto Streak," *Eurasianet*, February 24, 2023, <https://eurasianet.org/georgian-president-to-go-on-veto-streak>; "Parliament to Override President's Veto on Election Code Amendments, Speaker Vows," *1TV Georgia*, March 19, 2024, <https://1tv.ge/lang/en/news/parliament-to-override-presidents-veto-on-election-code-amendments-speaker-vows/>; "President Vetoes GD's Controversial 'Offshore' Law," *Civil Georgia*, May 3, 2024, <https://civil.ge/archives/603854>; Pjotr Sauer, "Georgian Parliament Overrides Veto by President on 'Foreign Influence' Law," *The Guardian*, May 28, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/may/28/georgian-parliament-overrides-presidents-veto-on-foreign-influence-law>; "Zourabichvili Refuses to Sign Georgian Queer Propaganda Law," *OC*

A Not-so-“Shadow President”

The developments of recent years validate the assessments made by the President. It has also become evident that the ruling party, Georgian Dream, serves the interests of its founder and “Honorary Chairman,” Bidzina Ivanishvili. In December 2023, amendments to the party’s charter granted the Honorary Chairman the authority to nominate the Prime Minister. Ivanishvili quickly exercised this power, replacing the Prime Minister in early 2024.³³

Furthermore, Ivanishvili retains control over the state by appointing individuals loyal to him to lead key institutions. This includes the appointment of the Minister of Internal Affairs and the Head of the State Security Service, as highlighted by Georgian non-governmental organizations. This arrangement enables Ivanishvili to exercise near-absolute control over the state without holding any formal accountability, as parliamentary review and voting procedures are structured to safeguard the ruling party’s interests, making political will a decisive factor in shaping events.³⁴

In 2023, the process of de-democratization became particularly apparent through the following decisions and legislative changes made by the Georgian authorities: amendments to the laws on “The National Bank of Georgia” and “The Electoral Code of Georgia.”

National Bank

In 2023, amendments were introduced to the law on the National Bank of Georgia, sparking criticism from the opposition, experts, and even the International Monetary Fund (IMF).³⁵ Critics argued that these changes effectively diminished the role of the National Bank’s board as an independent oversight body. On February 23, 2023, Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili vetoed the amendments; however, on June 13, Parliament overrode the veto. Interestingly, the impact of these changes became evident just a few months later.³⁶

Until September 2023, Georgia’s banking sector was considered fully compliant with U.S. and EU sanctions against Russia, including strict controls on money transfers by Russian citizens, the exclusion of sanctioned banks from SWIFT, and

Media, October 2, 2024, <https://oc-media.org/zourabichvili-refuses-to-sign-georgian-queer-propaganda-law/>.

³³ Transparency International – Georgia, “Oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili – the Real Ruler of Georgia and the Architect of Georgia’s pro-Russian Shift,” May 29, 2024, <https://transparency.ge/en/post/oligarch-bidzina-ivanishvili-real-ruler-georgia-and-architect-georgias-pro-russian-shift>.

³⁴ Transparency International – Georgia, “Oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili – the Real Ruler of Georgia and the Architect of Georgia’s pro-Russian Shift.”

³⁵ The Georgian president has vetoed the ruling party’s controversial central bank reform bill and pledged to exercise her power again as she continues to distance herself from the government’s policies. Gabritchidze, “Georgian President to Go on Veto Streak.”

³⁶ “Chairman of the Parliament Approves Amendments to the NBG Law,” *Civil Georgia*, June 20, 2023, <https://civil.ge/archives/549004>.

other restrictions. However, on September 14, 2023, a Georgian citizen—a former official with ties to the ruling party—was added to the U.S. sanctions list.

Following the decision by the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), the National Bank of Georgia initially restricted the sanctioned individual's access to bank assets and financial transactions.³⁷ Later that month, however, the acting president of the National Bank issued and enforced an order stating that, under the Georgian Constitution and the presumption of innocence, international sanctions could not be applied to Georgian citizens unless they were found guilty in a court of law. This decision enabled the sanctioned individual to transfer ownership of all their real estate and movable property to family members within a single day.³⁸

Many Georgian experts and politicians interpreted this as clear evidence of political influence by the ruling party. The move raised concerns about the independence of the National Bank of Georgia and triggered the resignation of three vice presidents within the institution.³⁹

Overall, this incident threatened the sustainability and credibility of Georgia's financial system. However, decisive actions by key stakeholders—particularly the country's leading commercial banks—helped safeguard the integrity of Georgia's financial infrastructure and prevented a potential crisis.⁴⁰

Election Code Amendments

On February 20, 2024, the Parliament of Georgia approved amendments to the Election Code, changing the procedure for electing the chairperson and professional members of the Central Election Commission (CEC). The new amendments abolished the position of deputy chair of the CEC, traditionally reserved for an opposition representative, and lowered the number of parliamentary votes required to elect the CEC chairperson to a simple majority of all members.⁴¹ A year earlier, in June 2023, Parliament passed significant changes to the Election Code, transferring the authority to appoint the chairperson and seven members of the

³⁷ U.S. Department of the Treasury, Office of Foreign Assets Control, "Russia-related Designations, Designations Updates, and Designations Removals; Issuance of Russia-related General Licenses," September 14, 2023, <https://ofac.treasury.gov/recent-actions/20230914>.

³⁸ "National Bank Makes U-Turn, Shields Sanctioned Partskaladze," *Civil Georgia*, September 19, 2023, <https://civil.ge/archives/559915>.

³⁹ "UPDATE: Three NBG Vice-Presidents, Advisor Resign," *Civil Georgia*, September 20, 2023, <https://civil.ge/archives/560007>.

⁴⁰ "National Bank Makes U-Turn, Shields Sanctioned Partskaladze;" Elene Dobordjini-dze, "TBC, BoG to Comply with International Sanctions," *1TV Georgia*, September 20, 2023, <https://1tv.ge/lang/en/news/tbc-bog-to-comply-with-international-sanctions/>.

⁴¹ "Parliament Passes Amendments to CEC Staffing Rules," *Civil Georgia*, February 20, 2024, <https://civil.ge/archives/583340>.

CEC from the president to the Speaker of Parliament.⁴² These changes have raised concerns about increasing the ruling party's influence over the CEC, potentially undermining its independence and impartiality.

The limited participation of the opposition in election commissions, combined with unchecked power within these bodies, has significantly eroded trust and legitimacy in the electoral process. This concern was particularly relevant ahead of the parliamentary elections scheduled for October 26, 2024 – the first to be held under a fully proportional system in Georgia. For the first time, electronic voting infrastructure was introduced in most polling stations for voter identification, ballot counting, and the establishment and transmission of preliminary results.⁴³

A Challenged Parliamentary Oversight

Parliamentary oversight and democratic control have never been effective within Georgia's governance structure. The ruling party has consistently maintained control over legislative processes, limiting the opposition's participation in lawmaking and oversight activities.⁴⁴ This ineffective practice of oversight can primarily be attributed to three factors: a lack of political will, the highly polarized environment in Parliament—which the ruling authorities have historically found advantageous to maintain—and inadequate regulations within the parliamentary rules of procedure, which fail to ensure effective mechanisms for democratic control.

Strengthening the accountability of state institutions and enhancing democratic oversight are critical requirements for Georgia's accession to the European Union and deeper cooperation with NATO. The European Commission has consistently noted in its reports that the intense tension and polarization between the ruling political forces and opposition parties undermine the proper functioning of parliamentary procedures.⁴⁵ To address these challenges, the European Union has, for years, supported the institutional strengthening of the Georgian Parliament. By providing resources and building capacities, the European Union

⁴² "Parliament Passes Amendments to Electoral Code Altering CEC Election Process," *Civil Georgia*, June 13, 2023, <https://civil.ge/archives/547872>; "President Vetoes Electoral Code Amendments," *Civil Georgia*, June 26, 2023, <https://civil.ge/archives/549806>.

⁴³ "Live Blog: Georgia's Disputed October 26 Elections," *Civil Georgia*, December 5, 2024, <https://civil.ge/archives/635419>.

⁴⁴ Transparency International Georgia, "Performance Assessment of the Parliament 2023," July 10, 2024, <https://transparency.ge/en/post/performance-assessment-parliament-2023>.

⁴⁵ European Commission, "Georgia 2024 Report, Accompanying the Document 'Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions 2024 – Communication on EU Enlargement Policy'," Commission Staff Working Document, Brussels, October 30, 2024, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/7b6ed47c-ecde-41a2-99ea-41683dc2d1bd_en?filename=Georgia%20Report%202024.pdf.

has sought to enhance Parliament's ability to ensure effective accountability and oversight, which is essential for advancing Georgia's democratic development and Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

As a result, following changes to the parliamentary rules of procedure in 2017, the frequency of summoning representatives of the executive branch to committee hearings, organizing parliamentary discussions in the format of interpellation or "Minister's Hour," and requiring regular reports from ministers has increased compared to previous years. The Parliament has also conducted several thematic inquiries during the reporting period. However, despite some progress, the accountability and transparency of the executive authority still have significant flaws. For example, debates held in the "Minister's Hour" format have proven largely uninformative, as officials left most questions unanswered.⁴⁶

Furthermore, many international and local observers believe that, even though regulations were changed to simplify procedures for creating a parliamentary investigation commission at the opposition's initiative, the majority can still block such initiatives by boycotting the registration required for voting.⁴⁷ In April 2023, a temporary investigative commission proposed by minority representatives in Parliament—intended to investigate corruption and other wrongful practices within the judicial system—failed to be established, as the ruling majority did not check in to the parliamentary session.

One of the most restrictive factors limiting effective oversight is the ruling party's authority to initiate and fast-track draft laws, ensuring their swift adoption in Parliament. In contrast, legislative proposals submitted by opposition parties are often neither scheduled for debate nor included in the legislative agenda.⁴⁸ The ruling majority frequently obstructs the discussion on opposition-initiated legislative proposals by delaying their consideration in committees. This often results in the withdrawal of such proposals if the parliamentary session expires before they are reviewed.

As highlighted in the European Commission's 2023 report, it is alarming that the emergency procedure to pass legislation continued to be used, even in areas relevant to EU commitments. This included institutionally sensitive matters, such as the adoption of the law abolishing gender quotas.⁴⁹ The Georgian President also addressed this issue during her 2023 annual speech in Parliament.⁵⁰ She emphasized that many laws passed under the expedited procedure—including

⁴⁶ European Commission, "Georgia 2024 Report."

⁴⁷ "Government Fails the Creation of an Investigative Commission to Study Corruption in the Judicial System," *Sakartvelos Ambebi*, April 18, 2023, <https://sakartvelosambebi.ge/en/news/government-fails-the-creation-of-an-investigative-commission-to-study-corruption-in-the-judicial-system>.

⁴⁸ European Commission, "Georgia 2024 Report."

⁴⁹ European Commission, "Georgia 2024 Report."

⁵⁰ "President Grills Ivanishvili and GD in Final Address to Parliament, Offers to Mediate United Opposition Platform," *Civil Georgia*, February 6, 2024, <https://civil.ge/archives/580747>.

those concerning surveillance, the abolition/reorganization of the State Inspector's Service, and amendments to judicial appointment procedures—do not serve to strengthen the country's democracy or improve citizens' well-being. The laws on Foreign Influence Transparency, as well as those on "Family Values and the Protection of Minors," serve as examples of promoting discrimination, stigmatization, and censorship against civil society, the media, and the LGBTQ community.

Overall, parliamentary oversight mechanisms in the Georgian Parliament remain limited, and the inefficient application of parliamentary procedures has effectively reduced the legislature to a "rubber-stamp body" for the ruling political party. This dynamic is particularly evident in the context of democratic oversight of the security sector.

Capture of Security Sector Oversight and Management

The oversight of the security sector—including the State Security Service, the Ministry of Defense, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA)—remains highly problematic due to the reasons described above: limited political will, obstructive practices by the ruling majority, and a severely limited role for the opposition. The effectiveness of mechanisms such as interpellation and ministerial hours can be deliberately undermined through procedural and political obstacles, and has been in the past.⁵¹ The confidentiality of key documents and activities, such as the statutes of certain security service departments, further restricts effective oversight. As a result, many operational details of these agencies remain classified, raising concerns about unchecked power and potential human rights abuses.

This lack of transparency has allowed significant changes to bypass committee discussions and go largely unnoticed by the public. For instance, media reports have highlighted the termination of international training programs previously supported by the United States and the European Union within the MIA Special Tasks Department. More broadly, the weak oversight of MIA Special Tasks Department Units—including Police Special Forces and Crowd Control Units—has been linked to the excessive use of force during the dispersal of protests in 2022, 2023, and even December 2024. Additionally, some observers have criticized the deployment of Police Special Forces, who are primarily trained for counterterrorism, in dispersing protests.⁵²

In addition, in the activities of the so-called *Group of Trust*, which is solely tasked with the oversight and supervision of security sector institutions, the role

⁵¹ Democracy Research Institute (DRI), "Parliamentary Oversight of the Security Sector and Ongoing Challenges 2024," [https://www.democracyresearch.org/files/321ENG Oversight%202024.pdf](https://www.democracyresearch.org/files/321ENG%20Oversight%202024.pdf).

⁵² "Former MIA Official Reveals MIA and Special Tasks Department Methods of Protests Handling," *Civil Georgia*, December 19, 2024, <https://civil.ge/archives/646141>.

of the opposition remains limited as well.⁵³ An opposition representative cannot bring an issue to the plenary session for discussion without the approval of the chair of the Group of Trust, who is a member of the majority. Moreover, the majority often obstructs and delays the process of selecting an opposition candidate for the Group of Trust – a process that requires a so-called security clearance from relevant state institutions, which frequently extends until the end of the parliamentary term. As a result, the Group of Trust often lacks the legally required number of opposition members. The Parliament of Georgia is also deprived of the ability to assess the activities of the Group of Trust, as the Group is not obligated to provide detailed reports to Parliament on its activities.

On June 8, 2023, the European Commission highlighted the challenges related to the democratic oversight of Georgia's security sector and, in its annual Enlargement Package, urged the Georgian authorities to strengthen parliamentary oversight of the relevant agencies.⁵⁴

It is expected that appointing opposition parties to chair several important committees would significantly improve parliamentary oversight. This recommendation has been made by the European Commission and local non-governmental organizations, aiming to strengthen parliamentary control for years, but has never been included on the Parliament's agenda.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

Overall, Georgia headed into the October 26, 2024, elections with an unprecedented consolidation of power by the ruling party, heavily influenced by oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili's interests. Ivanishvili had emerged as the sole source of authority, establishing unilateral, informal governance. He, along with the Georgian Dream Party acting on his behalf, effectively subordinated the judiciary and executive branches, paving the way for potential full control through a parliamentary majority. This centralization was further reinforced through legislative changes designed to restrict and undermine the freedoms of civil society and the media.

Furthermore, the process of de-democratization in Georgia has a direct impact on the country's defense and security policies, military capabilities, and its ability to navigate an increasingly volatile regional security environment. These concerns are particularly pressing due to the heightened regional tensions in the South Caucasus, driven by the aftermath of the recent Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict and the broader security implications of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. This shift can have lasting effects on morale and operational readiness, weakening Georgia's ability to maintain professional standards and respond effectively to security threats that could jeopardize national defense.

⁵³ Transparency International Georgia, "Performance Assessment of the Parliament 2023."

⁵⁴ European Commission, "Georgia 2024 Report."

Georgia's democratic decline endangers its security partnerships with the West. NATO and the European Union emphasize democratic governance as a prerequisite for military cooperation, intelligence-sharing, and strategic support.

As the authors complete this article, the situation in Georgia remains unresolved following the parliamentary elections on October 26, 2024. While mass demonstrations dominate the main artery in Tbilisi, the Georgian Dream party is setting up its government to return to "business as usual."

The aftermath of Georgia's parliamentary elections underscored the inevitable consequences of de-democratization. As discussed in this article, this process has been marked by the erosion of democratic institutions, systemic failures in upholding the rule of law, and a lack of resistance to authoritarian tendencies. Following the elections, Georgia experienced an unprecedented consolidation of power by the ruling party, which was supported by its parliamentary majority. The ruling party's claim to victory, with 54 % of the vote, was rejected by opposition forces, who refused to take their seats in parliament. Moreover, the October 26, 2024, elections were widely perceived by the public as unfair and unfree, signaling an impending political crisis.⁵⁵

Protests intensified after the newly appointed prime minister announced a halt to EU accession negotiations until 2028 and rejected EU budget support.⁵⁶ The government responded with violent crackdowns, employing excessive police force, arbitrary detentions, and restrictions on the media and civil society.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Ghia Nodia, "Georgia's Battle for Freedom," *Journal of Democracy*, Online Exclusive, December 2024, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/georgias-battle-for-freedom/>; Alexander Atasuntsev, "As Georgians Protest Election Results, What Next?" Commentary, *Carnegie Politika*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 30, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/10/georgia-elections-results>; "Parliament Calls for New Elections in Georgia," Press Releases, European Parliament, November 28, 2024, www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20241121IPR25549/parliament-calls-for-new-elections-in-georgia; Transparency International Georgia, "Misuse of Administrative Resources in Parliamentary Elections 2024 – Interim Report," 21 October, 2024, <https://transparency.ge/en/post/misuse-administrative-resources-parliamentary-elections-2024-interim-report>; Civil Georgia, "Live Blog: Georgia's Disputed October 26 Elections;" Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, "International Election Observation Mission Georgia – Parliamentary Elections, 26 October 2024; Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions; Preliminary Conclusions," October 27, 2024, www.oscepa.org/en/documents/election-observation/election-observation-statements/georgia/statements-11/5100-2024-parliamentary-2/file; Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, "Observation of the Parliamentary Elections in Georgia (26 October 2024)," Election Observation Report, Doc. 16079, November 28, 2024, <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/33924/html>.

⁵⁶ Felix Light, "Protesters Clash with Georgian Police over Government's EU Application Delay," *Reuters*, November 28, 2024, www.reuters.com/world/europe/georgia-says-it-will-not-enter-eu-membership-talks-until-2028-snob-brussels-2024-11-28/.

⁵⁷ Thomas Mackintosh, Maia Davies, and Rayhan Demytrie, "Police Use Water Cannon as Georgia EU Protests Erupt for Second Night," *BBC News*, November 30, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c62jp68p315o>; "Police Force Protesters from

Since December 2024, tactics have included tear gas, water cannons, illegal raids on opposition offices, and the use of masked officers in unmarked uniforms, fostering impunity and making accountability nearly impossible. These actions, followed by undemocratic legislative amendments, further eroded public trust and distanced Georgia from its Euro-Atlantic aspirations. Both the European Union and the United States suspended key partnerships and financial support, citing democratic backsliding and corruption.

Amid growing international isolation, concerns about closer ties with Russia escalated. President Salome Zourabichvili condemned the policies of Georgian Dream, emphasizing their divergence from democratic and pro-European paths and warning of the threats these pose to Georgia's sovereignty and integration into the European Union and NATO.⁵⁸

At this point, it seems unlikely that the ruling Georgian Dream party will yield to national and international public pressure. The rule of law, though flawed in its application, the comprehensive capture of the security and law-enforcement sectors, and the lack of unity among the opposition have enabled the party's rise and continue to protect it. It takes years, if not decades, to build a democracy – and only months, if not weeks, to tear it down.

Disclaimer

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⁵⁸ "BREAKING: U.S. Suspends Strategic Partnership with Georgia," *Civil Georgia*, November 30, 2024, <https://civil.ge/archives/639985>.

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