

Authoritarian Backsliding in Georgia

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With the Rose Revolution of 2003, the Republic of Georgia was regarded as a bastion of democracy in the region. Liberal reforms implemented by Georgia's then-president Mikheil Saakashvili gave impetus to the development of democratic institutions and raised hopes for further democratization in the country. However, Saakashvili's government also utilized undemocratic and autocratic tools. In particular, there were still problems with free and fair elections, human rights issues and political repression of opponents. Therefore, under Saakashvili's rule, Georgia, was defined as a hybrid regime, or rather a competitive authoritarian regime, because both authoritarian and democratic institutions coexisted. While such regimes manage to establish democratic institutions and competitive elections, the principle of equal opportunities available to the parties in elections is violated in favor of the dominant party through state resources and manipulation of institutions.[\[1\]](#)

The Georgian Dream (GD) party, which formed a new government after winning the 2012 legislative elections, initially continued the existing political trajectory. However, over time, the party shifted towards authoritarianism. GD first removed its liberal coalition partners from power and then, after securing victories in two subsequent elections, concentrated power in its hands and gradually transformed into a dominant authoritarian party. This consolidation of power led to the weakening of democratic institutions and a reversal of democratization processes, which Dresden and Howard define as authoritarian backsliding. This article analyzes the phenomenon of authoritarian backsliding in Georgia. In the following sections, I will first discuss the theory of authoritarian backsliding and identify its indicators. Then, I

will examine how this backsliding has manifested in Georgia under the rule of the GD.

Backsliding toward authoritarianism

There are different forms and definitions of authoritarian backsliding, also called democratic backsliding or autocratization, in the literature. Authors describe authoritarianism in democratic and hybrid regimes as the result of the breakdown of democratic institutions or the reinforcement of authoritarian constraints.[\[2\]](#) According to Nancy Bermeo, “democratic backsliding can thus constitute democratic breakdown or simply the serious weakening of existing democratic institutions for undefined ends,” making it difficult for the opposition to challenge incumbents.[\[3\]](#) Andrey Cassani and Luca Tomini, on the other hand, define “autocratization as a process of regime change towards autocracy that makes politics increasingly exclusive and monopolistic, and political power increasingly repressive and arbitrary.”[\[4\]](#) Analyzing the same process in the competitive authoritarian regimes, Jennifer Raymond Dresden and Marc Morjé Howard consider this type of backsliding as deliberate regime change by incumbents. The authors define authoritarian backsliding “as a decrease in the competitiveness (or potential for competitiveness) of the electoral playing field due to increasing concentration of power in the hands of the incumbent executive relative to other actors.”[\[5\]](#)

According to Dresden and Howard, authoritarian backsliding results in the growth of incumbents’ formal and informal power, while the ability of actors and institutions to challenge executive power is constrained. This process involves the repression of opposition parties, suppression of media, and increased interference in civil society. In essence, authoritarian backsliding represents an attempt by incumbents to retain power by restricting civil society’s function, limiting political opposition and its potential, and weakening constraints on executive power, notably by

decreasing judicial independence.

Dresden and Howard identify four key democratic institutions affected by authoritarian backsliding: free and fair elections, civil liberties, the evenness of the political playing field, and constraints on executive power. Three of these components – unfair elections, civil liberty violations and uneven playing field – were previously established by Levitsky and Way as defining features of competitive authoritarian regimes; Dresden and Howard added the fourth component—constraints on executive power—and measure authoritarian backsliding in 4 spheres of competitive authoritarian regimes.

The deterioration of these components in competitive authoritarian regimes marks authoritarian backsliding. Specifically, elections can be rigged, the political playing field tilts further in favor of incumbents, violations of civil liberties intensify, and effective constraints on executive power diminish. Any significant negative change in one of these areas can signal the onset of authoritarian backsliding.

As can be seen already, Georgia is considered a competitive authoritarian regime. The situation in the four spheres mentioned above deteriorated under GD rule. To support my argument, I will analyze the changes in these four spheres: electoral fairness, level playing field, civil liberties, and constraints on the executive.

Unfair elections

In competitive authoritarian regimes, the authorities may reduce the competitiveness of elections and undermine their fairness in formal and informal ways. For example, the incumbents may disqualify mainstream opposition party candidates, pressure or prevent them from legally campaigning, or rig and manipulate the outcome of elections. A significant increase in any of these in comparison with the previous

electoral period is considered an indicator of authoritarian backsliding.

In the last few years, there has been a serious regress in the fairness of elections in Georgia. Having won three consecutive parliamentary elections (2012, 2016, 2020) and currently heading for a fourth victory in the 2024 parliamentary elections, the Georgian Dream (GD) party has already established a dominant authoritarian party system.[\[6\]](#) Nonetheless, elections remain competitive in Georgia, and as recent results indicate, the opposition still has a chance to succeed. While GD secured 115 seats in the 2016 parliamentary elections, this number fell to 90 in the 2020 election.[\[7\]](#) Conversely, opposition parties increased their seat share from 27 to 56 in the previous parliamentary election. Consequently, as the opposition's electoral strength grows, the GD government increasingly interferes in elections to ensure victory, thus exhibiting more authoritarian tendencies.

Due to this type of electoral interference, despite winning 56 seats in the 2020 parliamentary elections, the opposition parties initially refused to enter parliament as a protest against the rigged results. However, following an agreement mediated by the European Union, the boycotting parties later agreed to take their seats. Complaints made by the opposition—including intimidation, pressure on voters, vote buying, misuse of administrative resources, and unequal opportunities—were reflected in the final report by the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission, which was deployed to a limited number of polling stations.[\[8\]](#) Additionally, allegations of vote buying in the 2018 presidential and 2020 parliamentary elections were supported by findings from two international organizations operating in Georgia.[\[9\]](#) Verified documents cited in leaked reports by a former deputy head of security services showed that in exchange for voting for GD, the ruling party granted concessions to individuals such as revoking conditional sentences, granting early prison releases, reinstating suspended driving licenses, requalifying

charges in ongoing criminal cases, or postponing military service.

Unequal opportunities

Equal opportunities in elections means that the ruling party and its competitors have equal access to media and financial resources, while state institutions playing the role of arbiters in the process maintain their independence and impartiality in relation to both parties. Examples include the ruling party receiving more media coverage during the election period, while opposition parties struggle to access a wide range of media sources. Additionally, opposition parties may be denied access to necessary financial resources, whereas the ruling party benefits from greater financial capacity and the use of state resources for party purposes. Furthermore, the Central Election Commission (CEC) and local election commissions may be filled with individuals who are aligned with the ruling party. This creates an uneven playing field, giving the ruling party a significant advantage and making it easier to defeat a limited opposition.

Unequal opportunities in Georgia – the use of state resources in favor of the ruling party and unequal financial opportunities – were noted by the international election observation mission in reports on the 2018 presidential,[\[10\]](#) 2020 parliamentary[\[11\]](#) and 2021 local elections.[\[12\]](#) Additionally, this year, GD has largely abolished the independence of the Central Election Commission (CEC) through legislative changes. On 20 February 2024, amendments to the election code transferred the right to nominate CEC members from the president to the speaker of the parliament, thereby granting GD significant control over the appointment of CEC members.[\[13\]](#) Furthermore, additional amendments abolished the deputy position in the CEC elected by the opposition party, allowing the body to make decisions by a simple majority without the participation of the 9 opposition members. Consequently, both legal (amendments to the Electoral Code)

and illegal (election fraud, use of state resources in favor of the ruling party) interventions by GD to influence election results have resulted in a sharp inequality of electoral opportunities, significantly reducing the transparency and fairness of the elections.

Violation of civil liberties

Civil liberties commonly encompass fundamental rights such as freedom of expression, media, and assembly. Instances of violent attacks on individual activists and politicians, pressure on the media, and violations of the right to assemble restrict the function of civil society, which plays a crucial role in government oversight. Historically, Georgia has had one of the strongest and most dynamic civil societies in post-Soviet space. However, recent years have seen a systemic increase in repression and arbitrariness, along with the strengthening of authoritarian tendencies. Examples include the arrest of Gigi Rurua, the former head of the opposition TV channel Rustavi 2, in 2019;[\[14\]](#) the jailing of Nika Melia, the leader of the opposition party United National Movement, in 2021;[\[15\]](#) and the arrest of Nika Gvaramia, director of the newly created opposition-minded TV channel Mtavari, in 2022.[\[16\]](#)

We can also observe the emergence of radical right-wing forces allegedly linked to the government and consequently an increase in violent attacks against civil society, its values, and GD's political opponents. In 2021, one such attack on the LGBT movement left 53 journalists injured, and one killed.[\[17\]](#) The year 2023 specifically marked a surge in physical attacks against members of civil society, politicians, and activists. These incidents have continued with the number of victims reaching 30 in the last three months.[\[18\]](#) The attackers have gone unpunished. Additionally, the government approved a controversial "foreign agents" bill,[\[19\]](#) requiring media and NGOs receiving more than 20 percent of their funding from abroad to register as "pursuing the interests of a foreign

power.” The general consensus is that the law will serve as a tool for the government to restrict NGO and media activities, neutralize and control civil society, and suppress freedom of expression overall.

Control over the judiciary

Constraints on executive power ensure that other state institutions can oversee government administration, limiting its authority according to the principle of separation of powers. However, incumbents can remove such constraints and acquire unchecked power by amending the Constitution or reducing judicial independence, which reviews laws passed by the government and ensures the compliance of government activities with the Constitution.

Starting in 2015, the Georgian Dream (GD) party initiated a systematic effort to undermine the independence of the judiciary and bring it under its control.[\[20\]](#) The party, both directly and through a network of influential judges known as the “clan network,” filled nearly all judicial institutions with judges aligned with GD and its affiliated clans.[\[21\]](#) Initially, GD collaborated with the judges of Georgia’s High Council of Justice—the governing body of the country’s judicial system—to grant the Council the authority to nominate candidates for the positions of chairman and members of the Supreme Court. As a result, GD appointed a total of 20 judges to the Supreme Court (14 in 2019 and 6 in 2021) based on the Council’s recommendations.’’[\[22\]](#) Both stages of these appointments faced criticism from international organizations due to concerns over transparency and trust in the process, and were viewed as increasing the influence of the clan network within the judiciary.[\[23\]](#)

The independence of the judicial system was further eroded by the 2021 amendment to the *Law on Administrative Courts of Georgia*.[\[24\]](#) This amendment removed the one-term limit for judges of the High Council of Justice, granted the Council

decision-making authority by simple majority, and expanded its powers, thereby increasing the Council's administrative control over the judiciary. Changes such as allowing the High Council of Justice to transfer judges to other courts without their consent and restricting judges' freedom of expression under the guise of impartiality are viewed as attempts to undermine judicial independence. These amendments are reportedly being used to pressure impartial and independent judges. Georgia's international partners and various international organizations have criticized these changes, highlighting their detrimental impact on judicial independence and the increased influence of the High Council of Justice over judges.[\[25\]](#)

In addition, GD also largely controls the Constitutional Court. Of the 9 court judges, 5 are linked to the ruling party and the clan. Three of them were elected by the party through the parliament and two judges by the Plenum of the Supreme Court,[\[26\]](#) which was itself appointed by GD and controlled by the clan. Thus, by taking control of the country's judicial institutions and the High Council of Justice through the clan, GD was able to take away the independence of the judiciary and seriously reduce its control over the branch of government.

Conclusion

Despite hopes for further democratization under GD rule, the opposite has occurred since 2012. Analysis of the political developments during this period indicates that the ruling party's actions to reduce electoral competitiveness and fairness, weaken judicial independence, and suppress civil liberties were part of a deliberate strategy to undermine opposition resistance and maintain its grip on power. This suggests that Georgia is experiencing authoritarian backsliding and is transitioning from a competitive authoritarian system to a more closed authoritarian regime. While not every instance of authoritarian regression results in a fully closed system, the erosion of democratic

institutions and the entrenchment of authoritarian practices increase the risk of a violent power transition.

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