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GEORGIA IN THE RUN-UP TO PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

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Georgia in the Run-up to Parliamentary Elections

This issue looks at Georgia in the run-up to parliamentary elections scheduled for 26 October 2024. First, Koba Turmanidze describes the preferences of the Georgian electorate based on representative public opinion polls. Tatia Tavkheldidze then goes on to analyse the key contentious issue in Georgian pre-election politics, the foreign agent law. The remaining three contributions analyse pre-election debates. Lia Tsuladze describes the discursive strategy of the ruling political elites vis-à-vis the domestic opposition and the European Union. Ekaterine Basilaia analyses the reporting of two major TV broadcasters and, finally, Tamar Qeburia comments on the anti-colonialism discourse in Georgia.

Party Preferences among Georgian Electorates before the 2024 Elections

Koba Turmanidze (CRRC-Georgia)

This article describes party preferences of the Georgian population six months before the October 2024 parliamentary elections, widely regarded as determining the country's future autocratic or democratic direction. It shows that support for the ruling party and all opposition parties taken together are tied. While the two political camps get support across major demographic groups, a significant portion of voters are nonpartisan. Hence, opportunities for electoral success exist for the incumbent party and the opposition. However, much depends on the configuration of opposition parties, the general election environment, and access to resources to develop and carry out impactful electoral campaigns.

The Rationale for Reintroducing the Foreign Agent Bill in Georgia before the 2024 Parliamentary Elections

Tatia Tavkheldidze (University of Leipzig)

The reintroduction of the foreign agents bill, particularly targeting nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and independent media outlets, which occurred only months before the 2024 parliamentary election in Georgia, engendered inquiries into the underlying motivations of the governing party. Although it encountered significant resistance in March 2023, the government exhibited a readiness to risk civil discord by revisiting this contentious legislative agenda. This discourse suggests that the governing party perceives NGOs and independent media as formidable purveyors of social capital capable of mobilizing dissent against its authority. Consequently, the proposed constriction of NGO and media activities is ostensibly aimed at mitigating electoral turnover and fortifying the governing party's hegemony in the imminent parliamentary election.

Georgian TV Broadcasters' Coverage of the Foreign Agents Law

Ekaterine Basilaia (Center for Media, Information and Social Research, Georgian Institute of Public Affairs, Tbilisi)

As Georgia approaches its parliamentary elections, the information landscape has become a battleground of competing narratives and heightened tensions amidst a backdrop of government disinformation, polarization, and the initiation and adoption of the so-called "foreign agents" law. This study delves into the media coverage of two news broadcasters—the pro-government channel Imedi and the pro-opposition channel Mtavari Arkhi—regarding the introduction of the "transparency of foreign influence" or "foreign agents" law in April and May 2024. By analysing the narratives and arguments presented, this study reveals how each outlet framed the law and influenced public perception.

"We Have Been Hacked"—on the Use and Abuse of Anti-colonial Rhetoric in Georgia and Elsewhere

Tamar Qeburia (Ilia State University and University of Göttingen)

The reintroduction of Georgia's 'Russian Law', which mandates that organizations receiving substantial foreign funding must register, has ignited widespread protests and highlighted deep societal divisions. This law not only stifles democratic processes but also appropriates "anti-colonial" rhetoric to consolidate power, significantly undermining the fabric of civil society. This analysis situates Georgia's current political crisis within global dynamics, demonstrating how the political manoeuvres of the ruling party mirror broader global trends of authoritarian regimes hacking and instrumentalizing "decolonial" and "anti-imperial" rhetoric to legitimize repressive policies. This study discusses these parallels, revealing the profound impact on various societal groups while reshaping the political discourse.

Party Preferences among Georgian Electorates before the 2024 Elections

Koba Turmanidze (CRRC-Georgia)

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Abstract

This article describes party preferences of the Georgian population six months before the October 2024 parliamentary elections, widely regarded as determining the country's future autocratic or democratic direction. It shows that support for the ruling party and all opposition parties taken together are tied. While the two political camps get support across major demographic groups, a significant portion of voters are nonpartisan. Hence, opportunities for electoral success exist for the incumbent party and the opposition. However, much depends on the configuration of opposition parties, the general election environment, and access to resources to develop and carry out impactful electoral campaigns.

Introduction

The October 2024 parliamentary elections will be a watershed moment for determining Georgia's future. President Zourabichvili has called the elections a referendum between a "European, democratic, independent Georgia, or a Russian-led, authoritarian, and isolated Georgia" (Civil Georgia, 2024a). This assessment is primarily shared by most opposition groups and experts (Georgian Institute of Politics, 2024). The president has proposed a Georgian Charter to unite the pro-European opposition parties around fundamental principles and to act as a guarantor in leading them (Civil Georgia, 2024b). The president's initiative could help clarify the purpose of many Georgian parties, which have largely failed to present a coherent platform and win the hearts and minds of Georgian voters 12–12.

The upcoming elections are the most critical chance to save the fragile and ailing Georgian democracy. Georgia's democratic backsliding has been in existence for years, and according to a local watchdog, Georgia has already reached the definition of a captured state (Transparency International Georgia, 2023). The rhetoric of the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party has become increasingly antagonistic towards political opponents and civil society leaders and continuously less tolerant of the public's peaceful protest. Such change culminated in the introduction of Russian-style legislation in 2023, ostensibly to ensure the transparency of foreign influence, which the government had to retract after large-scale protests in Tbilisi and pressure from international actors. Nevertheless, referencing the fiercely demonstrated European orientation of the Georgian people, Georgia received EU-candidate-country status in December 2023, with nine steps to fulfil before accession negotiations begin. One of these steps is to ensure free, fair, and competitive elections, including those in 2024, and fully address recommendations of the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights for strengthening the democratic infrastructure of the

Georgian state (Delegation of the European Union to Georgia, 2023). Even with this conditionality, however, the Georgian Dream has been purposely sabotaging Georgia's European integration prospects, including by a surprise reprisal of the "Foreign Agents Law" in the spring of 2024 amid some of the largest demonstrations in Georgian history, adopting it after overturning the presidential veto.

The law on Transparency of Foreign Influence is set to severely limit the operations of civil society organizations and the media, which are the two remaining watchdogs that the ruling party still does not fully control. While the Georgian Dream was already expected to win the plurality of votes, owing to the opposition's weakness and the general apathy of voters who cannot find a party they feel close to, the legislation tilts the already uneven playing field even further in favour of the Georgian Dream.

The Georgian Dream reneged on a promise made in 2021 to lower the electoral threshold to 2% for the next two parliamentary elections to ensure greater political diversity in the Parliament instead of keeping the 5% threshold. This action, combined with the ban on preelection blocs, has increased the likelihood of wasting a large share of opposition votes, thus maintaining one-party dominance in the Parliament. Several additional recommendations of the Council of Europe's Venice Commission for further amendments to Georgia's electoral legislation related to constituency delimitation, restrictive candidate requirements, election commission formation, the misuse of official positions in campaigns, high donation limits, campaign finance regulation, media campaign regulations, electoral dispute resolution, recounts, annulments, and voter intimidation prevention have gone unaddressed (Venice Commission, 2024).

The uneven playing field described above and the high stakes of these elections make studying voting intentions as relevant as ever. This article looks at voters'

preferences in the most recent telephone survey conducted by CRRC-Georgia in late April and early May 2024. It also tracks people's party preferences for the past six months and shows which groups are more or less likely to vote for which party. The analysis does not pretend to approximate the election results of October 2024. Instead, it describes current public opinion and argues that in regard to voters' party preferences, opportunities for electoral success exist for the incumbent, as well as for the opposition, depending on the configuration of opposition parties, the general election environment, and access to resources to plan and manage meaningful electoral campaigns.

Many Votes Are up for Grabs

The Georgian population strongly believes that democracy is the best form of government (Caucasus Research Resource Centers, 2021). However, the lack of trust in institutions that uphold democracy, particularly political parties, is a pressing concern. The Caucasus Barometer reveals that parties are among the least trusted institutions in the country (Gilbreath, 2021). Moreover, people believe that parties do not reflect their views (Caucasus Research Resource Centers, 2023).

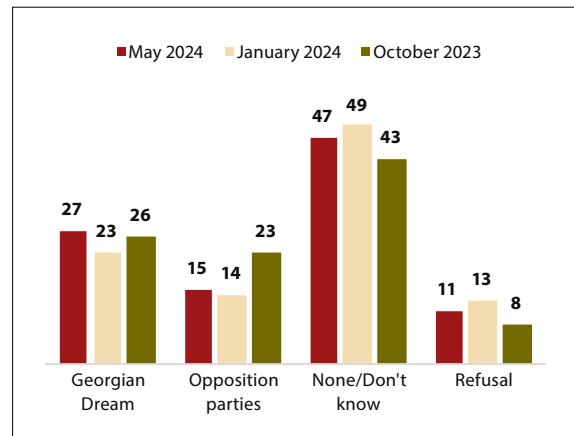
The high number of nonpartisans reflects this low level of public esteem for political parties. In CRRC surveys, partisanship is usually measured in two complementary ways, namely, asking respondents which party more closely represents their views and then asking which party they would vote for if elections were held either tomorrow or the following weekend. The two questions look at party support from two different angles; while the first captures people's identification with a party, the second indicates the combination of their emotional and strategic decisions if elections were held tomorrow.

With respect to party identification numbers for the past six months, significant trends remain stable; almost half of the people stated that neither party aligns with their views or that they do not know which party is close to them. Furthermore, approximately one in ten refused to answer, underscoring the distrust in the safety of disclosing their political preferences.

Another significant observation regarding the partisanship of Georgia's population concerns notable imbalance regarding party identification. While the ruling Georgian Dream party was reported to attract about a quarter of the population, identification with opposition parties was shown to be mainly fragmented and significantly lagging. On average, aggregate identification with all opposition parties was found to be considerably lower than the equivalent numbers for the Georgian Dream party. Moreover, most opposition parties were named by two to five percent of the population.

Party identification trends have not changed significantly over the past six months despite significant events, such as being granted EU-candidate status in late 2023 and mass protest actions occurring in the spring of 2024.

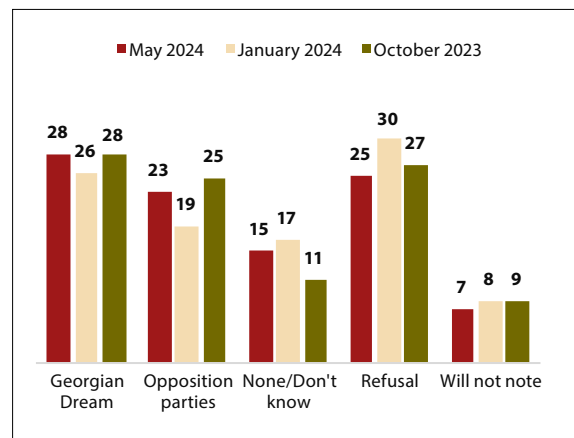
Figure 1: Party Identification. Which Party Is Closest to You? (%)



Source: CRRC Omnibus Surveys

While trends in voting intentions were found to largely follow party identification trends, the gap between the ruling party's expected vote and the opposition's expected vote was smaller. When asked the question, "How would you vote if parliamentary elections were held tomorrow?", about a quarter named the Georgian Dream party, while just as many selected one of the many opposition parties. Approximately a quarter of voters reported being uncertain regarding how they would vote, which is significantly lower than the number of nonpartisans identified via the party identification question. Notably, a small minority reported that they would not vote for any party or would not vote at all.

Figure 2: Party Vote. Which Party Would You Vote If Elections Were Held Tomorrow? (%)



Source: CRRC Omnibus Surveys

This observation sparks the question of how nonpartisans reported their future vote choice. Cross-tabulating party identification and future vote questions reveal a few significant trends. First, we can observe partisan loyalty; 86 percent of voters who consider the Georgian Dream party that which is the closest to them intend to vote for it. Similarly, 79 percent of voters who feel that one of the opposition parties is the closest party to them plan to vote for an opposition party in elections.

The situation is more nuanced regarding nonpartisans and those who did not reveal their party identification in the survey. Among those who do not consider themselves close to any party, only a tiny minority (eight percent) reported being likely to vote for the Georgian Dream. In comparison, 23 percent reported being likely to vote for the opposition. Nevertheless, a plurality of the group (41 percent) reported being unsure about their future vote; 14 percent refused to answer, and 14 percent do not plan to vote.

The most puzzling group consists of those who refused to disclose their party identification; a majority (68 percent) of these individuals did not reveal their voting intentions either, whereas 21 percent reported being uncertain. Notably, no one in this group said that they would not vote, indicating that voters who do not reveal party identification may have party preferences.

Describing voters' party identification and intended party choice in hypothetical elections shows that party support has been relatively stable for the past six months. While the plurality is nonpartisan, some of this group will likely lean towards opposition parties. This group is also the least willing to vote. In contrast, people who hide their party identification are eager to vote but unwilling to show their future preferences. In the next section, we determine which demographic groups are more or less likely to support the ruling party and opposition parties and who are more or less likely to be nonpartisan.

Who Tends to Vote for Which Parties?

A demographic breakdown of party support helps determine which population segments are more likely to support the ruling party or help its electoral removal from power. Likewise, analysing nonpartisanship through a demographic lens may signal what groups should be targeted by political and civic actors to increase their political participation. The analysis below suggests that such groups are hard to determine since differences are not statistically significant, and even when they are, the effect size is usually small. This means that there are no significant differences in the demographic composition of partisan and nonpartisan groups in Georgia today. Consequently, Georgian political parties seem to be better off if they have catch-all platforms and cam-

paigns rather than policy promises tailored to specific groups within society.

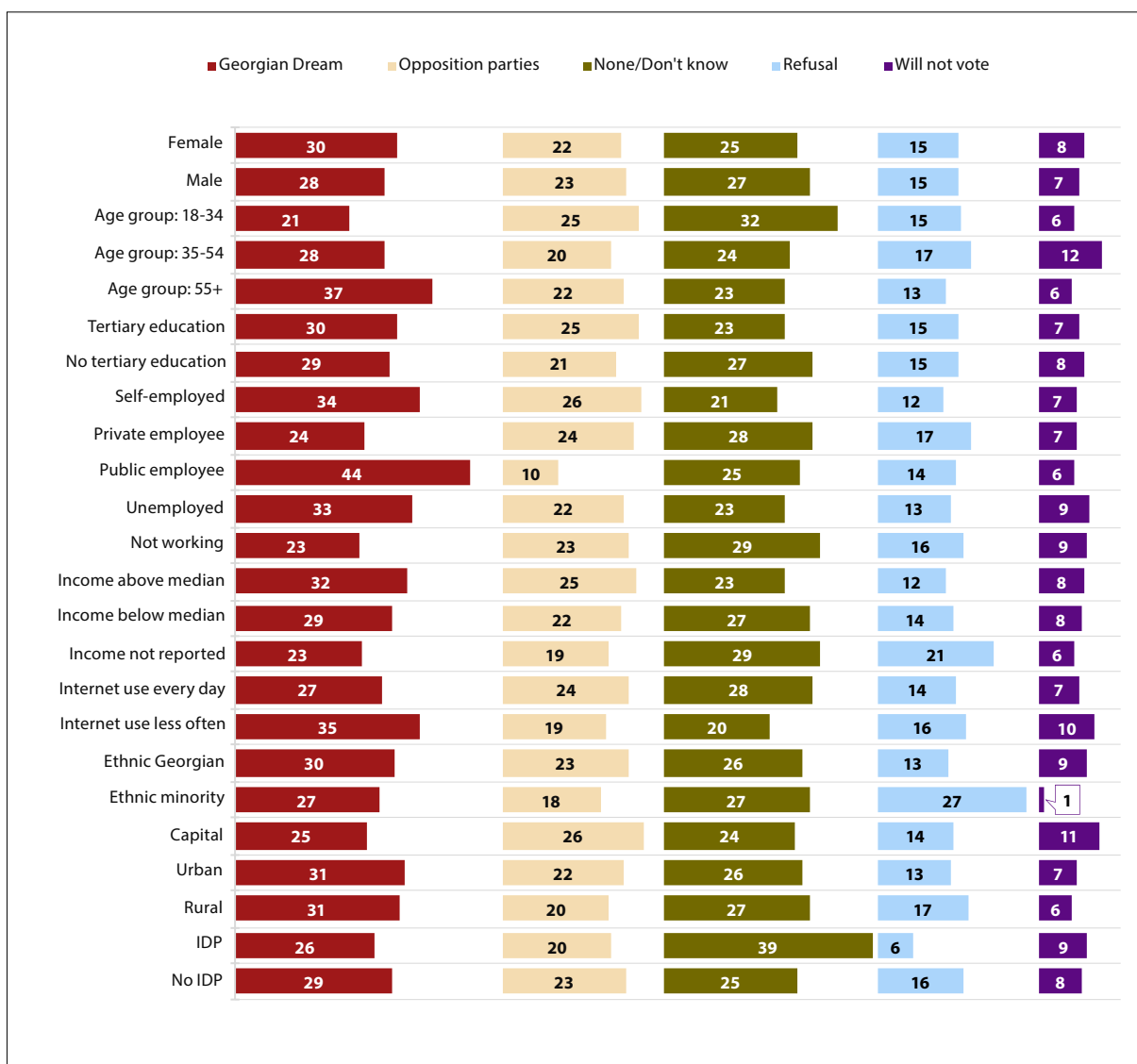
Considering the demographic profile of partisan voters, supporters of the Georgian Dream party and opposition supporters have more similarities than differences. With respect to the Georgian Dream supporters, the only noticeable differences are among the age groups and employment statuses. The older age group (55 and older) is 15 percentage points more likely than the youngest age group (18–34) to vote for the Georgian Dream party. Additionally, the Georgian Dream's electoral base seems solid among public sector employees; they are 20 percentage points more likely to vote for the Georgian Dream party than are private employees or those outside the active labour force. The opposition support seems to be uniform across different demographic groups. The only exception is employment status; employees of private employers, self-employed individuals, and people outside the labour force are 13–15 percentage points more likely to support the opposition than are public employees.

No statistically significant differences exist across demographic groups regarding voters who do not reveal their party support. The only exception is ethnicity; individuals belonging to an ethnic minority are 15 percentage points more likely to hide their party preferences. Similarly, most demographic groups are equally expected to be nonpartisan except for the youngest age group and people who have been forcefully displaced from their homes (IDPs); the age group between 18 and 34 is nine percentage points more likely to be nonpartisan. IDPs are 14 percentage points more likely to state that they either do not plan to vote for any party or do not know which party they will vote for.

In a decisive election, perhaps what matters most is understanding who will not vote. In this respect, most demographic groups are similar. However, the middle-aged group (35–54) is slightly (six percentage points) less likely to vote than the other age groups are. Moreover, ethnic minorities are eight percentage points less likely to vote than are ethnic Georgians (Figure 3 on p. 6).

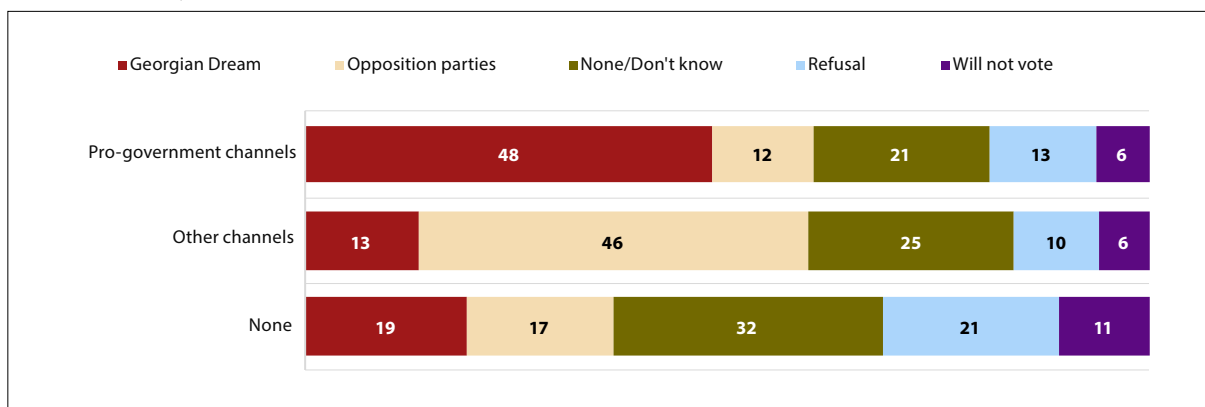
In addition to demographic variables, media consumption patterns correlate strongly with voters' intended voting decisions. The media has been the product and, simultaneously, the producer of political polarization in Georgia. Media polarization has become sharper and is based almost entirely on party political agendas in the context of the general decline in the freedom of media in the country (Zondler et al., 2023). Importantly, as media polarization has increased, so has clustering around the two major political parties, namely, the incumbent Georgian Dream party and the United National Movement party (former ruling party) (Keshelava et al., 2024) (Figure 4 on p. 6).

Figure 3: Party Vote across Demographic Groups (Predicted Probabilities of Logistic Estimates)



Source: CRRC Omnibus Surveys

Figure 4: Party Vote across TV Channel Audiences (Predicted Probabilities of Logistic Estimates)



Source: CRRC Omnibus Surveys

As the above chart shows, voting intentions go hand in hand with which TV channel people watch. For this analysis, the audiences of the three pro-governmental channels (Imedi TV, Rustavi 2, and POSTV) are grouped and contrasted with those who watch any other channel. In contrast, the third group does not watch any TV channels. Almost half of the voters who watch a pro-government channel reported planning to vote for the ruling party. Likewise, people who reported watching any other channel reported strongly leaning towards voting for one of the opposition parties. The majority of the group that does not watch TV either reported being nonpartisan (32 percent) or refused to reveal a party preference (21 percent). The findings suggest that TV channels, while remaining the primary source of information in the country, provide limited possibilities for reaching voters beyond partisan lines.

Conclusions

Less than six months before the decisive elections, the Georgian electorate remains fragmented. While the expected votes for the incumbent and all other parties are considered on par at approximately a quarter of voters each, this balance is entirely imaginary. Considering the five percent threshold in parliamentary elections, unless most opposition parties increase their electoral base several times over, many opposition parties are unlikely to make it to parliament. Since the current electoral system further favours the largest party, the current draw present between the ruling party and the aggregated opposition support most likely suggests the ruling party's advantage.

About the Author

Koba Turmanidze has 20 years of experience in managing research and development projects. His core competencies include quantitative research methods, including experimental design and analysis. He has been leading CRRC-Georgia since 2007. Previously, he worked in civil society organizations and civil service, teaching comparative politics and research methods courses at Tbilisi State University. Koba authored several peer-reviewed publications on political behaviour, social media analysis, and political stability in the South Caucasus. He earned a PhD and MA in Political Science from Central European University (Budapest, Hungary), an MPA from American University (Washington, DC), and a diploma in History from Tbilisi State University (Tbilisi, Georgia).

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The survey results also suggest that political parties can attract more support. While every third voter is undecided about which party will be his or her choice on election day, parties have opportunities to develop meaningful programs and attract more supporters. Indeed, attracting undecided voters goes beyond party programs and is strongly related to access to resources, including the media. As the analysis shows, polarized media strongly aligns with political camps and preaches to the converted. Hence, political forces must find additional resources to reach undecided groups.

The incumbent has traditionally enjoyed a significant resource advantage over the opposition (Transparency International Georgia, 2020), which is unlikely to change. However, paradoxically, the ruling party's attack on democratic institutions may create new opportunities for a fair electoral outcome; the unprecedented large-scale protests against the Transparency of Foreign Influence Law have arguably mobilized the public against the Georgian Dream party and made them adamant about making their voices heard. This could change the status quo of voter apathy and frustration (German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2024). Arguably, a new civil society has emerged and, in part, has become more decentralized, democratic, and political and thus more challenging to squash by going after individual CSOs and leaders (Civil Georgia, 2024c). The mobilization of the members of this new civil society to increase voter participation and electoral accountability will likely determine the course of Georgia's democratic development.

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ANALYSIS

The Rationale for Reintroducing the Foreign Agent Bill in Georgia before the 2024 Parliamentary Elections

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Abstract

The reintroduction of the foreign agents bill, particularly targeting nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and independent media outlets, which occurred only months before the 2024 parliamentary election in Georgia, engendered inquiries into the underlying motivations of the governing party. Although it encountered significant resistance in March 2023, the government exhibited a readiness to risk civil discord by revisiting this contentious legislative agenda. This discourse suggests that the governing party perceives NGOs and independent media as formidable purveyors of social capital capable of mobilizing dissent against its authority. Consequently, the proposed constriction of NGO and media activities is ostensibly aimed at mitigating electoral turnover and fortifying the governing party's hegemony in the imminent parliamentary election.

Introduction

The October 2024 parliamentary election in Georgia holds significant weight for the ruling party, Georgian Dream, as it will determine its continued tenure in power. Several months earlier, in April 2024, the gov-

ernment revisited the contentious "foreign agent bill," which mandates that NGOs and independent media entities that receive over 20% of their funding from foreign sources must register as organizations with foreign affiliations. Since these entities are unwilling to declare

themselves as working for foreign interests, they are compelled to reject funding primarily originating from the EU and USA, leaving them struggling to maintain their operations or face closure.¹

This situation is particularly noteworthy because the government previously and unsuccessfully attempted to introduce the bill in March 2023. This initiative sparked large-scale protests outside the parliament, compelling the ruling party to withdraw it (Al Jazeera 2023). Despite the social unrest it previously incited, the government chose to reintroduce the bill. This decision not only provoked substantial social mobilization against it but also attracted criticism from European Union institutions, which deemed it an obstacle to Georgia's European aspirations (Politica 2024). Consequently, some EU member states have called for the restriction of Georgia's visa-free regime (Kyiv Independent 2024), and the United States Senate has prepared legislation to sanction Georgian government officials who promoted the foreign agent bill (New Voice of Ukraine 2024).

Under these circumstances, it is pertinent to question why the Georgian government would jeopardize the country's European future immediately after it acquired EU candidate status, its strategic partnership with the United States, and significant public support to hastily pass this legislation right before parliamentary elections. Considering the previous public outcry against this law and the fact that 82% of Georgians advocate for European integration (CRRRC), any actions perceived as contrary to EU integration could lead to a loss of electoral backing.

Amidst numerous speculations, the predominant rationale appears to stem from the ruling party's fear of electoral loss, which is driven by the influence of NGOs and opposition media in galvanizing social capital and increasing voter turnout against them. Consequently, by implementing this legislation, the government aims to assert control over these entities, curtailing their impact and stifling electoral mobilization against the ruling faction. This strategy serves as a means for the ruling party to consolidate absolute authority after the election, even at the cost of impeding EU integration and harming the country's democratic integrity.

Effects of Regulatory Measures on NGOs and Independent Media and Their Indirect Influence on Democratic Electoral Processes

The effectiveness of NGOs and independent media serves as a critical indicator of civil society's growing influence on policy formation. On the one hand, NGO activities are seen as altering traditional mechanisms

of political authority, prompting governments to relinquish some degree of policy-making autonomy. This shift reflects heightened accountability to an empowered civil society, represented by NGOs capable of mobilizing the public for political reasons (Memoli 2021; Richvalsky et al. 2019; Schoenefeld 2020). On the other hand, the media is viewed as a tool for achieving specific political goals. Robust, independent media in developing and transitional societies can promote the development of democracy and political pluralism, thereby empowering civil society and ensuring governmental accountability (Kumar 2006; Macedo and von Staveren 2014).

The influence of NGOs and independent media poses a significant threat to undemocratic governments, particularly during political elections, since both entities can increase electoral participation and mobilize the electorate against the incumbent administration. This potential for heightened voter engagement and opposition mobilization can lead to electoral turnover, jeopardizing the ruling party's ability to secure sufficient votes for re-election.

In fragile democracies, the government's indecisive power often arises from a passive civil society, wherein citizens frequently overlook their capacity to hold the government accountable and effect change through elections (Sardamov 2005). During such periods, voter apathy is prevalent, driven by the belief that individual votes are inconsequential to collective outcomes. This perception that a single vote cannot influence electoral results discourages individuals from participating in elections (Munier 2021).

In such contexts, governments invest significant resources in mobilizing their supporters to ensure their active participation in elections, thus consolidating their electoral success (Marx et al. 2022). Conversely, individuals who harbour doubts about the efficacy of their votes in effecting political change often abstain from voting, thereby inadvertently bolstering the government's grip on power. However, NGOs and independent media can disrupt this dynamic through various means. NGOs may orchestrate public awareness campaigns to enlighten voters about pertinent campaign issues, giving them factual information to inform their electoral choices (ACE Encyclopaedia). Independent media outlets, in turn, play a pivotal role in educating the electorate about the significance of voting, reinforcing the notion that even a solitary vote holds substantial weight and that collective individual action can precipitate electoral turnover (van Erkel et al. 2018).

Drawing upon their aforementioned capacities, NGOs and independent media have the potential to

1 'Draft Law of Georgia on Transparency of Foreign Influence', International Center for Not-for-profit Law, 22 February 2023, [02.2023-Georgia-Draft-Foreign-Agents-Law-updated.pdf](https://www.icnl.org/draft-foreign-agents-law-updated.pdf) (icnl.org) (accessed 12 May 2024).

shape public opinion in manners congruent with the political agendas of specific opposition factions, thereby amplifying voter backing for these parties. Moreover, NGOs can function as electoral watchdogs, ensuring the integrity of electoral processes by identifying and redressing instances of vote-buying or other forms of electoral malpractice, including voter coercion. In this regard, independent media serves as a crucial conduit for disseminating such information to the public and engaging civil society members. This function becomes particularly important in nations where the democratic order faces existential threats (Civil Society Foundation 2010).

Hence, when restrictive laws are implemented, they constrain NGOs and independent media outlets. Indirectly, the ultimate political outcome is the silencing of civil society and the consolidation of absolute governmental authority. This phenomenon is illustrated by countries in which such restrictive laws have been enacted, such as Russia. In these contexts, the NGO sector and independent media are weakened, voter turnout tends to be low, and free and fair elections are not guaranteed. Over the twelve years since the enactment of Russia's foreign agent law, it has become a tool for repressing independent media and the NGO sector, leading to the expansion of authoritarian control within the country. During this period, the law has been instrumental in causing self-censorship and prompting a mass exodus of domestic and international outlets from Russia, as well as forcing NGOs to operate clandestinely. The targeting of the leading human rights NGO Memorial and its subsidiaries exemplifies the law's abusive nature; 170 organizations were labelled foreign agents and faced closure, as they were required to include in their publications that their content was created to fulfil the functions of a foreign agent (Salaru 2022).

In the aftermath of the bill's enactment, 62 percent of Russians reported having difficulty disentangling the associations between "foreign agents," "spies," and the "fifth column." This confusion played directly into the state's hands, as it allowed authorities to blur the distinction between criminal conduct and legal activities, thereby justifying increased oppression. Consequently, Russian authorities granted the executive branch unlimited power, effectively rendering the rule of law fictitious. This consolidation of power ensured Vladimir Putin's electoral victories, despite allegations of election fraud (Krupskiy 2023).

Another pertinent example involves several African countries. According to Kendra Dupuy and Aseem Prakash (2020), 16 African states that enacted such laws experienced similar outcomes. Utilizing data from Afrobarometer, Dupuy and Prakash observed that these countries had decreased voter turnout and a lack of electoral turnover following the implementation of these

restrictive laws. Specifically, they identified two mechanisms linking these laws to the voting behaviours of African citizens. First, citizens perceived these regulations as indicative of democratic regression, leading them to view voting as futile. Second, these laws weakened NGOs and independent media, thereby diminishing the social capital these institutions help produce, irrespective of the regime type.

These observations elucidate the rationale and objectives underlying the Georgian government's pursuit of the foreign agent bill. Nonetheless, a salient inquiry emerges concerning the ruling party "Georgian Dream's" fears regarding the prospect of electoral defeat in the 2024 parliamentary elections, particularly in light of the influential civil society. This raises the following question: what are the apprehensions of Georgian civil society and the overall preelection environment that have compelled the government to employ such measures as a last resort?

Pre-election Concerns and Prospects of the Georgian Ruling Party

It has been asserted that the victory of the Georgian Dream in the 2012 elections represented a response from the Georgian populace to the preceding administration led by the United National Movement, reflecting widespread discontent with the previous regime. The current ruling party was elected to govern with the mandate of the Georgian majority, tasked with guiding the nation towards prosperity while avoiding the errors of their predecessors (Macfarlane 2012).

However, during this period, the government has been implicated in multiple transgressions, including human rights violations, which have been brought to light by nongovernmental organizations and independent media outlets (Amnesty International 2023). Nevertheless, the government has utilized the opposition party, the United National Movement, as a scapegoat to remind the Georgian populace that, in the absence of the Georgian Dream party, the former ruling party might regain power. This strategy has been prominently demonstrated in the context of political polarization within the country. As Stefan Meister (2021) noted, both major parties, Georgian Dream (GD) and the United National Movement (UNM), have a vested interest in this polarization because it helps mobilize their electorates and leaves no room for competitors. The prevailing polarization seems to give the ruling party an advantage in the imminent parliamentary elections, particularly given the 5% electoral threshold. Consequently, it is plausible that only the opposition party of the Georgian National Movement, positioned as the second most supported party following the Georgian Dream, will attain parliamentary representation. Nonetheless,

the prospect of an empowered civil society potentially reshaping electoral dynamics remains a salient concern for the government.

The vulnerability of the ruling party lies in the understanding that Georgian civil society cannot be perpetually manipulated through the demonization of the primary opposition. In the era of Generation Z, young Georgians who have electoral sway are rallying behind Georgian democratic values and the European future of their nation. Current events in the country demonstrate that Generation Z predominantly supports the development of empowered NGOs and independent media outlets for the advancement of European-style democracy within Georgia, highlighting that they do not constitute an electoral support base for the current government (Samkharadze/Lebanidze 2023).

Reflecting on the preceding parliamentary elections of 2020, it becomes evident that although the Georgian Dream secured victory with 48 percent of the vote, the electoral contest was fiercely contested. Notably, in the majoritarian elections, candidates affiliated with the ruling Georgian Dream managed to secure victory in only 14 out of the 30 majoritarian constituencies during the initial round, necessitating runoff elections in the remaining 16 majoritarian constituencies (Jakovljevic 2020). Moreover, asserting that the elections were rigged and consequently did not faithfully represent the political will of Georgian citizens, the opposition called for the immediate nullification of the election results and advocated for the scheduling of snap elections instead. This led to thousands rallying against the election outcomes. Previous experiences have taught the government that relying solely on public discontent towards the main opposition party cannot ensure victory in forthcoming elections.

Another part of the government's quandary is the emergence of a coalition among opposition parties. Despite the recent efforts by the Georgian president to instigate the formation of a coalition comprising all opposition parties to unite against the ruling party (Benson 2024), such a development was arguably foreseeable. Smaller parties, constrained by previous electoral results that render them incapable of surpassing the 5% threshold, have little recourse but to join the coalition.

In light of these considerations, the apprehension of the Georgian government should be directed towards

the potential impact of the enlightening campaigns conducted by NGOs and independent media outlets in Georgia against the government, which could sway the opinions of a substantial portion of the Georgian populace, leading them to refrain from supporting the ruling party. Georgian society grapples with the anguish of a dearth of political alternatives, a sentiment vividly portrayed in the statistical research conducted by the Caucasus Research Center. The findings revealed that 62 percent of Georgians perceive no political party as representing their interests, with only 19 percent viewing the Georgian Dream as closely aligned with their political leanings (CRRC 2023).

Consequently, there is an approximately 80 percent segment of the Georgian populace that could be mobilized against the ruling party with the assistance of NGOs and independent media outlets. However, the government's enactment of restrictive laws aimed at stifling the NGO sector and independent media serves to thwart the mobilization of a significant number of civilians in elections, thereby safeguarding its electoral incumbency.

Conclusion

Adopting laws that suppress NGOs and independent media outlets transcends the principles of good governance. Such legislation is typically found in countries with fragile democracies, where authoritarian tendencies are evident. Thus, it is plausible that this law was introduced in Georgia before the parliamentary elections to circumvent an electoral defeat against a coalition of opposition parties within a fair election environment. Election victories are achieved not solely by specific political parties but rather through the mobilization of civil society. NGOs and independent media outlets play a crucial role in this process. The government likely fears that approximately 80 percent of undecided Georgian voters, who could be mobilized by NGOs and independent media against the government, might pose a significant threat. Therefore, the government's decision to adopt the foreign agent bill appears to be a strategic move to silence criticism and weaken civil society, thereby minimizing the possibility of an electoral turnover.

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ANALYSIS

The Georgian Ruling Party's Discursive Confrontations with Domestic and Foreign Actors

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Abstract

This paper discusses the Georgian ruling party's discursive confrontations with the country's strategic partners (especially the EU) and domestic actors (political opponents, NGOs, and Georgian youth, especially Gen Z). The author argues that although the ruling party boasts about its achievements on the way to Georgia's Europeanization, its pro-European aspirations have been questioned by domestic actors since 2014 and by the EU since 2021. Furthermore, the ruling party's discursive confrontations with both domestic actors and the EU have intensified since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, when Georgia refused to join the EU's sanctions against Russia, and peaked in April 2024, after the reintroduction (for the third time) of a draft law targeting civil society and independent media. The latter clearly indicates the ruling party's normative and discursive disengagement from the EU and the shift of its political vector towards Russia.

Discursive Confrontations with the EU and GD's "Pragmatic Politics"

In light of Georgia's ruling party—"Georgian Dream" (GD), which holds constitutional majority—reintroducing the legislative initiative "On Transparency of Foreign Influence" in April 2024, the question of whether the country is faithful to its European trajectory has again been raised. Indeed, this question was first raised a decade ago, in November 2014, when small pro-European parties left the ruling coalition of GD, claiming that the country's Euro-Atlantic course was endangered. The ruling party became defensive and announced that a few minor parties leaving the coalition was not an indicator of the shift in the GD's foreign policy course (Tsuladze et al. 2016). This question was raised again in June 2019, after a member of the Russian Duma occupied the Speaker's seat in the Parliament of Georgia during the interparliamentary Assembly of Orthodoxy, which led to immediate public protest (the so-called "Gavrilo Night") and cost parliamentary speaker Irakli Kobakhidze his position.

In recent years, Georgia, which was considered a leader of the association trio in terms of implement-

ing EU reforms, has demonstrated a visible backslide. Despite their promises, the authorities have failed to introduce judicial and electoral reforms. The more the EU required the implementation of respective reforms, the more the ruling party critiqued its strategic partner. In July 2021, GD withdrew from President of the European Council Charles Michel's document, which aimed to eliminate political polarisation in Georgia, and this was the first time that the EU openly stated that Georgia's ruling party was deviating from the European course (Tsuladze et al. 2023). This discourse became even more prominent in March 2022, after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, when Georgian authorities refused to join the EU's sanctions against Russia and labelled their domestic political opponents who were openly condemning Russia as "war parties", simultaneously targeting their Western opponents and accusing them of their attempts to "drag Georgia into the war" (ibid.).

In fact, GD started pursuing what the then leader and current prime minister of the ruling party Irakli Kobakhidze calls "pragmatic politics" (Interpressnews 29.01.2023). This term implies "flirting" with both the

EU and Russia or rather persuading the EU that Georgia firmly follows its European path while concurrently increasing Georgia's economic dependence on Russia (European Values Center for Security Policy 2021) and even reproducing the Russian authorities' anti-EU/anti-Western rhetoric. The latter can be traced through GD's depiction of liberal values as threatening the country's sovereignty on the one hand (Civil.ge 12.05.2023) and the EU/West as a place of moral decay on the other hand (for example, former prime minister Irakli Garibashvili's speech at the Conservative Political Action Conference in Budapest (Agenda.ge 04.05.2023)). The latter has been identified as the most widespread propagandistic "master narrative" disseminated by Russia in Central and Eastern Europe (Rebegea 2019). In fact, the above vision has translated into the ruling party's recent initiative to introduce a draft law banning "LGBT propaganda" (Georgian Public Broadcaster 18.03.2024).

These blame games against the EU further escalated in June 2022, when the EU refused to grant Georgia candidate status and set 12 recommendations for Georgian authorities to implement. In response, the ruling party started criticising the EU for pursuing double standards, that is, readily setting its conditions though being reluctant to reward Georgia (Tsuladze et al. 2023). This process culminated in the ruling party initiating the so-called "foreign agents" law in March 2023, which was withdrawn within three days because of massive public protests and pressure from Western partners. Although GD promised to never put this law on the agenda again, in April 2024, it reintroduced the same bill with a somewhat modified title ("On Transparency of Foreign Influence"). While the new version also avoided the term "agent", it clearly had the same meaning and intended impact as the earlier version and again sparked public outrage.

This reintroduction of the bill invoked even more massive and continuous public protests and was highly criticised by strategic partners from the EU and the US (Civil.ge 17.04.2024). In response, the ruling party's critique of Georgia's strategic partners also increased, with GD officials either refusing to negotiate with EU/US officials (for instance, GD did not attend the meeting with the EC Director General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Gert Jan Koopman in Tbilisi on May 1, 2024 and declined the US senior leaders' invitation to discuss the strategic partnership with Georgia, stressing that it was "not in conformity with the spirit of partnership" (Civic.ge 02.05.2024)) or blaming an imaginary "global war party" that, in the words of the founder of GD and its honorary chair Bidzina Ivanishvili, controls the EU and NATO and plans to trigger a revolution in Georgia using local "radical opposition" and NGOs (Civil.ge 29.04.2024).

Thus, we can state that *Georgia's ruling party clearly demonstrates both normative and discursive disengagement from the EU and a shift of its political vector towards Russia*, as GD leaders have never mentioned Russia as a threat to Georgia's security or sovereignty in their official speeches. Furthermore, they have consistently stated that the initiated bill "on transparency of foreign influence" is not "the Russian law" (as claimed by protesters) but rather tailored after the respective US (as GD officials stated in 2023) or EU (as GD officials stated in 2024) law and that it is called the Russian law with the goal of misleading society (for instance, Kobakhidze's public announcement (Interpressnews 16.02.2023)). However, the pragmatic politics of GD were reactivated in this context. Despite a harsh critique of Georgia's Western allies, the ruling party's honorary chair has promised the public that Georgia will become an EU member by 2030 (Civil.ge 29.04.2024). Indeed, when 70–80% of citizens have been steadily supporting Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration (as demonstrated by CRRG Georgia surveys since 2009), the ruling party has to adjust to the aspirations of its electorate.

Attacking Domestic Actors: Political Opponents, NGOs and Gen Z

In addition to attacking its Western allies and especially the EU, the ruling party has also intensified its attacks against domestic actors, whether political opposition, NGOs or younger generations, especially Gen Z, which became the symbol of the protests both in 2023 and in 2024.

Although verbal attacks against the ruling party's political rivals (especially the United National Movement (UNM) as the former ruling party and currently the largest oppositional party) started with GD's rise to power, they have intensified throughout its rule. This was especially visible during preelection campaigns, when GD displayed banners representing UNM leaders with slogans "No to UNM! No to Evil! No to Betrayal!" around the Georgian cities/towns. Later, leaders of other political parties and even the former public defender Nino Lomjaria (who was nominated for the Sakharov Prize of 2023 for Freedom of Thought) were represented on similar banners with the collective names "UNM" and "Traitors without a Homeland" (Tsuladze 2023). In fact, since 2012, GD has instrumentalized "the politics of fear" as its major discursive strategy (Wodak 2015), constantly questioning whether the citizens "wanted to go back to those bloody 9 years" when the UNM was in power.

In July 2021, when opposition parties, alongside EU officials, started accusing GD of deviating from the European course, the ruling party reversed this blame and started claiming that opposition parties were

responsible for deviating from the European course (Tsuladze et al. 2023). Later, after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, GD intensified its verbal attacks against its political opponents, calling them "war parties." This attack peaked during the government-organised rally in Tbilisi on April 29, 2024, when in his public speech, the GD's honorary chair collectively labelled the ruling party's political opponents "radical opposition" and "agents", claiming that they were controlled by the Western "global war party" (Civil.ge 29.04.2024).

In addition to political opponents, GD's major target includes civil society and especially NGOs that are funded by various Western foundations. NGOs such as Transparency International Georgia (TI Georgia), the Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA), the Civil Society Foundation (the former Open Society Georgia Foundation), the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, and others, which have emphasized that Georgia is a "captured state" governed by the billionaire oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, have been highly criticised by the ruling party for years. An attempt to restrict their activities was made a decade ago (in January 2015), when Bidzina Ivanishvili announced that "NGOs undermined the country's image." Although he did not hold a political position at that time, 45 NGOs immediately referred to the government asking to abstain from attacking them, as "Bidzina Ivanishvili's statement about NGOs was not the position of an individual citizen but the one of the state's informal governor" (Netgazeti.ge 02.02.2015). As expected, the abovementioned declaration by NGOs was ignored, and in a couple of years (April 2017), the parliament started discussing a draft law on banning the NGOs that received international funding (Tsuladze 2021). In fact, this was the first attempt to introduce the law on the transparency of foreign influence.

After this legislative initiative failed, the ruling party waited for a proper moment to reintroduce it. This moment arrived after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, when the ruling party's instrumentalization of the politics of fear gained a new force, as GD started threatening the citizens with the Russian invasion and representing itself as a guardian of peace. Presumably, the ruling party hoped that the "grateful" citizens would have appreciated its attempts to eliminate political and civil "agents" who were against GD's "non-irritation politics" towards Russia and would have supported the so-called "foreign agents" law. However, massive protests on March 7–9, 2023, forced GD to withdraw the bill and promise to never reintroduce it. However, this promise lasted for only one year, and this time, the ruling party was even more vocal in demonising local civil society and NGOs. Alongside political opponents

("radical opposition"), NGOs are represented as being controlled by the "global war party", provoking a revolution in Georgia (Civil.ge 29.04.2024); hence, it is necessary to prevent NGOs' actions by introducing the law against "foreign agents". Thus, the ruling party's discursive strategy has shifted from politicising local NGOs and labelling them "UNM satellites" (Tsuladze, Macharashvili, and Pachulia 2018) to directly accusing them of planning a revolution, which is another vivid example of the politics of fear.

Finally, one of the main targets of the GD is Gen Z, which has become the symbol of the protests against the "Russian law" last year and again this year. Despite the ruling party's attempts to politicise these young people and label them governed by the UNM, they effectively self-organised and refused to be guided by opposition parties; they were wearing special masks to protect themselves from tear gas used by the authorities to disperse the protesters, and they even danced under the water currents targeting them. It can be argued that out of the three main opponents discussed in this subchapter, the ruling party is most cautious (and afraid) of Gen Z, as it seems these young people even enjoy being involved in protests. The more the authorities used force against them, the more consolidated the young people became and the more prepared they were to face the so-called robocops' attacks.

It is also obvious that the protests have surpassed ethnic and regional boundaries, as this time, Georgian youth have been joined by young people representing the Armenian and Azerbaijani ethnic minorities with the slogan "Armenians and Azerbaijanis in solidarity with Georgians. This affects us all!". In addition, young people have organised protests in other cities/towns of Georgia, such as Batumi, Kutaisi, Zugdidi, Telavi, Gori, and Borjomi. Furthermore, people from different regions of Georgia have joined the protesters in Tbilisi, and a Facebook group, "Keep" ("Daitove"), has even been created to host the protesters arriving from the regions and was joined by approximately 170 000 people within a week.

Notably, the young people's main motto is "Homeland, Language, Unity", which is a somewhat modified version of the triad "Homeland, Language, Religion" voiced by Ilia Chavchavadze, the founding father of the Georgian nationalist movement against Russia in the 19th century. In fact, GD attempted to instrumentalize this modification against the young people and depict them as betraying their religion. This is evident from the fact that Ilia's triad became the slogan of the government-organised rally on April 29, 2024, and all the speeches by GD officials manipulated nationalist discourses, stressing the importance of protecting national values and sovereignty (Civil.ge 30.04.2024).

However, young people challenged the ruling party's attempts by collectively celebrating Easter on May 5, 2024, on the main avenue of Tbilisi, in front of the Kashueti church, with a slogan "Homeland, Language, Unity, Religion" that was surrounded by Georgian and EU flags (Civil.ge 05.05.2024). Furthermore, Gen Z has started calling for their parents to join them directly from protest actions. Thus, in contrast to the ruling party's attempts to portray protesters as partisan, to discredit young people for abandoning traditional and religious values and to draw a dividing line between older and younger generations, young people do their best to prevent the translation of the existing affective polarisation (Iyengar et al. 2019) from the political into the societal one by distancing themselves from political parties, not allowing GD to manipulate nationalist discourses, and calling for "unity" so that their parents and grandparents stand with them.

Conclusions

This paper has discussed Georgia's ruling party's discursive confrontations with the country's Western allies (especially the EU) and domestic actors (political opponents, NGOs, and Georgian youth, especially Gen Z). It has highlighted the GD's growing discursive and normative disengagement from the EU. The author has argued that this confrontation started a decade ago, became visible when the ruling party withdrew from Charles Michel's document in July 2021, and intensified after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. It further escalated in March 2023 and April 2024, fol-

lowing the ruling party's (re)initiation of the so-called "foreign agents" law.

Alongside the ruling party's growing confrontation with the EU, its confrontation with three major domestic actors—opposition parties, NGOs and Georgian youth—has also intensified. In these discursive struggles with both Western and domestic actors, the main strategy utilised by GD is the politics of fear, which labels domestic opponents "war parties" and Western opponents the "global war party". The latter is portrayed as controlling even the EU and NATO and accused of using domestic political opposition and NGOs to provoke a revolution in Georgia.

Consequently, the importance of introducing the "foreign agents" law is justified by the need to prevent the "agents" (that is, the ruling party's opponents) from enacting their revolutionary plans. In its efforts to discredit domestic opponents, especially young people, as the core of protests in 2023 and 2024, GD has both politicised them collectively as "UNM" and instrumentalized nationalist discourses to portray them as disloyal to traditional and religious values. Despite these blame games directed towards Western and domestic actors, the ruling party pursues what it calls "pragmatic politics", targeting both of them. Alongside "flirting" with Russia and reproducing its anti-EU/anti-Western messages, GD tries to persuade the EU that Georgia firmly follows its European path, and while threatening the citizens with the "global war party" that controls the EU and NATO, GD promises to ensure EU membership for Georgia by 2030.

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Georgian TV Broadcasters' Coverage of the Foreign Agents Law

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Abstract

As Georgia approaches its parliamentary elections, the information landscape has become a battleground of competing narratives and heightened tensions amidst a backdrop of government disinformation, polarization, and the initiation and adoption of the so-called “foreign agents” law. This study delves into the media coverage of two news broadcasters—the pro-government channel *Imedi* and the pro-opposition channel *Mtavar Arkhi*—regarding the introduction of the “transparency of foreign influence” or “foreign agents” law in April and May 2024. By analysing the narratives and arguments presented, this study reveals how each outlet framed the law and influenced public perception.

Introduction

The “Foreign Agents” law

On April 3rd, seven months before the parliamentary elections, the ruling Georgian Dream Party announced the reintroduction of the “Transparency of foreign influence” or “foreign agents” law. A few days after the introduction of the draft law, thousands of people in Georgia protested, demanding the revocation of the law. The law was adopted by the Georgian parliament on May 28 after overriding a presidential veto. This legislation, which targets civil society organisations and independent media, is aimed at suppressing critical voices, and was passed with the support of Georgian Dream members. The law mandates the creation of an “agents of foreign influence” registry, where media outlets and NGOs receiving 20 percent or more of their annual revenues from outside the country or from “foreign powers,” will be registered. According to the law, a “foreign power” could include foreign governments, foreign citizens, legal persons not established under the Georgian legislation, a foundation, an association, a corporation, a union, or any other type of organisation established under a foreign state or international law.¹ In their speeches, Georgian Dream politicians repeatedly voiced their criticism towards NGOs and media receiving Western (i.e., the U.S. and EU) funding, accusing them allegedly sabotaging the ruling party and causing unrest in the country (civil.ge, 09 February, 2024).

While the Georgian Dream party justified the law as a measure against so-called foreign influence, critics warned that the law aligned Georgia with Russia and was aimed at suppressing independent voices, especially before the elections (Georgian Institute of Politics, 2024). After the law was first introduced in 2023, local civil society organisations and media labelled it as a “Russian law”. In response to Georgia’s democratic backsliding,

the U.S. imposed sanctions on certain Georgian politicians and private persons without publicising their identities (civil.ge., 6 June, 2024). EU officials warned that the law threatened Georgia’s path to joining the EU. In addition, experts have long warned about the authoritarian tendencies of the Georgian Dream and raised concerns about the transparency of upcoming elections and the Georgian Dream’s intentions to lead Georgia’s European integration. On April 29, Honorary Chairman and the founder of the GD, Bidzina Ivanishvili alleged that certain “global forces” attempted to force Georgia’s confrontation with Russia, and the “foreign agents” law was meant to expose those “dark linkages” (civil.ge., 29 April, 2024).

Georgia’s Media Landscape

Once considered vibrant, the Georgian media landscape has suffered tremendous degradation in recent years due to government pressures. Media professionals, especially those representing critical outlets, face serious challenges while performing their duties. Local and international organisations have emphasised a series of problems faced by media representatives, such as physical safety threats, illegal surveillance by the state, and various financial and other types of pressure on critical and independent outlets. The main broadcast media outlets remain highly partisan in their editorial approach, and there is limited space for genuine discussion, with the exception of some smaller online outlets (NDI, 2024). In recent years, media polarisation has increased as a result of the government’s oppressive policies and rhetoric towards its critics and embracing of anti-Western rhetoric (Kandelaki et al., 2024; IREX, 2023, 2022). Irrespective of these challenges, a handful of critical and independent media manage to bring alternative voices to the public. As identified in the literature, semi-authoritarian states do not need to exert total control over the media, as

1 <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/6171895?publication=0>

such control could “undermine any claims being made about media freedom” (Schatz, 2009).

Analytical Framework

The analytical framework of this study revolves around the theories of disinformation and propaganda, framing, and media agenda setting. Disinformation refers to false, inaccurate, or misleading information that is designed and disseminated intentionally to cause public harm and even threaten democracy and human lives (Kapantai et al., 2020; Colomina et al. 2021). In authoritarian states, disinformation campaigns are generally conducted by governments to maintain stability and control (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018). Through disinformation and propaganda, autocratic regimes construct a favourable image of themselves while undermining democratic principles, influencing election outcomes, and instrumentalising legacy media and social networks (Boese et al., 2022). A study by the Media Development Foundation (Kintsurashvili, 2024) revealed that in 2022, the Georgian Dream party, together with its affiliate political group, the People’s Power, used the same tactics for manipulating threats as Kremlin-affiliated actors did. According to the report, the anti-Western propaganda relied on the use of the following messages and frames: fears of revolution, erosion of threat perception, the threat of encroaching the “sovereign democracy,” democracy and democratic institutions as a threat, threat of losing identity, and Russia as the Third Rome, as a security guarantor, and as a guarantor of economic prosperity.

Media agenda-setting and framing theories play important roles in explaining which issues are offered to the public and how they are presented. Media agenda-setting theory highlights the role of mass media in shaping public perception and discourse by presenting certain issues frequently and prominently and offering the public the opportunity to think about them (Coleman et al., 2009). In countries with weak democratic institutions and state-controlled media, governments may actively set agendas using the media to sway public opinion (Field et al., 2018). While setting the agenda, the media frames events, which means highlighting various aspects of a topic to promote particular interpretations (Entman, 2007).

Methodology

For this article, we selected the coverage of the introduction, discussion, and adoption of the “foreign agents” law by two national broadcasters: *Imedi TV* and *Mtavari Arkhi*. Television remains the main source of information for Georgian voters, with 76 percent of Georgians receiving their news from TV according to IRI’s 2023 study. *Imedi TV* is a pro-government outlet (IREX,

2023), whereas *Mtavari Arkhi* is a critical, pro-opposition channel. Both media are mentioned as the most trusted sources of news and political information in the IRI survey and have a sizable social media presence and following.

This analysis is based on the media monitoring of evening prime-time news programs between April 3 and May 31. The stories that appeared in the first 30 minutes of each program were studied. A total of 349 stories (130 from *Mtavari Arkhi* and 219 from *Imedi TV*) were collected and analysed. A qualitative thematic analysis and a quantitative analysis of the sources (politicians) either mentioned or directly quoted and the tone with which each source was presented in the coverage was carried out. Using Deephouse’s (2000) approach, the researchers categorised the tone towards each actor as positive, neutral, or negative based on the evaluative language used by journalists or sources.

Coverage of *Imedi TV*

The analysis of *Imedi TV* revealed the following disinformation narratives: civil society as a threat, opaque donor funding, Georgian law equivalent to Western law, destructive opposition, damaging and ineffective protest, Western interference against state sovereignty, and identity and traditional values. These narratives were used to legitimise and normalise the law repeatedly and prominently, and those who criticised it were discredited. These narratives were also intertwined and frequently combined to construct a favourable picture of the “foreign agents” law.

Civil society as a threat: Civil society sector/non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were mentioned as untransparent, inadequate, and as threats to the country and national interest. In the coverage, both journalists and sources frequently claimed that the NGOs received the funding to destabilise the country. For example, the story on April 8 with the headline “Fighting for black money” emphasised that seven NGOs have spent more than USD 80 million, of which the content and activities totalling USD 70 million are unclear. In addition, journalists and sources (GD party members) frequently linked NGOs with opposition parties, thus discrediting their reputation as independent actors. For example, a story that was aired on April 4 with the headline “NGOs and opposition waiting for a lifeline” alleged that the NGOs gathered at the Open Society Foundation and planned protests to escalate the situation and urged the West for help. Notably, as resistance mounted, the discrediting language used against NGOs increased. For example, if in the early days the NGOs were accused of “plotting unrest,” as protests and Western criticism later intensified, journalists and Georgian Dream members accused NGOs of plotting a “revolution,” and pushing

the country towards the brink of war with Russia. These narratives were used to discredit critical voices and portray them as enemies of the state rather than legitimate actors in the democratic process.

Opaque (Western) donor funding: Another narrative that was used to promote the law was that foreign donor organisations had unclear and subversive motives that were against the public and national interest. The journalists and sources on *Imedi TV* suggested that donor support from the West came with “strings attached,” to undermine Georgia’s autonomy. The narrative that donor funding was untransparent and used for nefarious purposes was used to reinforce the perception that Western economic involvement was harmful and manipulative. While donors were portrayed as “problematic” actors across the news stories in connection with the opposition and NGOs, several stories also focused on them specifically. For example, the story aired on April 5, “Opposition narrative of the NED leader,” alleged that the head of the National Endowment for Democracy, a private, non-profit organisation and one of the donor organisations supporting independent media, voiced narratives similar to those of the Georgian opposition when he criticised the law. Donors were directly and indirectly accused of attempting to draw Georgia into the war with Russia.

Georgian law is equivalent to Western law: In the coverage of *Imedi TV* journalists, the government and Georgian Dream representatives referred to the draft law as the “Transparency Law” and emphasised the Georgian government’s motivation to set European standards of transparency and accountability. For example, the journalist recited each word from the Prime Minister’s address released on his official Facebook page on April 3 as the government reintroduced the law. An excerpt from the Prime Minister’s official reads: “When you are right and your intention is not to ruin anything, transparency and accountability are important to avoid mistakes. For me, it is transparency, which means being European, and the lack of it means not being European.” Here, having the “intention to ruin” alludes to civil society organisations, independent media, and the opposition, and demeans and discounts their intentions. In addition, the station ran stories that claimed that the EU had adopted or was in the process of adopting similar laws. For example, a story with the headline “Transparency law in Europe” spoke about the EU initiative “to establish directives with regard to third-state influence” in 2022–2023. The journalist alleged that Denmark, Latvia, and Slovakia discussed transparency legislation in connection to NGOs. The law was also described as an analogue of the U.S. Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), when journalists and government officials claimed that the Georgian law is similar to FARA (“An American lie”, May 7).

Destructive opposition. The opposition parties are frequently portrayed as destructive forces and referred to as “radicals,” with the United National Movement and its current and former members receiving the most negative attention. The opposition parties are presented as chaotic, lacking arguments with respect to the law, inciting people to take to the streets, stoking unrest, orchestrating revolution and dragging the country into war with Russia. For example, a story with the headline “198 steps to revolution” (May 7) reveals how different opposition parties, guided by Gene Sharp’s book—“198 steps to revolution”, were training young people in Georgia to overthrow the current government. One of the sources, a representative of Khalkhis Dzala (People’s Power), connected these actions to dragging Georgia into war with Russia after Ukraine. In one of its stories, *Imedi TV* journalists, who parroted the wording of Khalkhis Dzala and other GD representatives, referred to the opposition’s decision to join forces before elections, led by the President of Georgia, as the “local war charter” aimed at “conspiring against Georgia, destructing Georgian politics, and pre-election campaign” (May 27).

Damaging and ineffective protest: Despite large-scale protests in Tbilisi attended by more than one hundred thousand people regularly, *Imedi TV* did not follow the protests and minimised their significance. The channel often portrayed the protestors as disorganised or driven by misinformation. Public figures who openly supported protests were discredited as being “unaware of the law.” For example, on April 10, a journalist presented the position of one of the actors regarding the law at the end of his theatrical performance and labelled it “a political weaponization of arts and culture”. The journalist subsequently connected such a decision to the actor’s lack of knowledge of what was written in the draft law.

In their coverage, the journalists systematically referred to protests as “protests against transparency.” They presented the protesters as disruptive by focusing on their clash with law enforcement and portrayed the misconduct of the protestors as violence. They also emphasised the “strange appearances” of protest participants and used discrediting language to stigmatise them by highlighting their alleged ignorance of the reasons behind their participation in demonstrations. For example, in a story with this headline, “Violence and detained protesters” on May 9 focused on the presentation of the protesters’ clash with the police and emphasised only the protesters’ actions. There was no mention of the abuse of police force. The channel uncritically transmitted the government’s decision to set up a database of the so-called radicals and “violent people” in a story with the headline “Database of bullies” (aired on May 8).

In its reporting, *Imedi* attempted to further minimise the importance of public dissent by attempting to link

the protests with opposition parties, NGOs, and Western-backed subversive efforts. For example, the story from May 14 with the headline “Manipulating schoolchildren” discredited the rallies against the law in the city of Batumi for alleged “manipulation and misleading of schoolchildren,” accusing the opposition parties of threatening schoolchildren by bringing them to the demonstration.

Western interference against state sovereignty: Throughout May 2024, *Imedi*'s coverage included numerous stories framing Western sanctions and diplomatic pressure as attacks on Georgia's sovereignty. The sanctions and recommendations did not receive any attention. The stories depicted the U.S. and the EU's discussions as attempts to blackmail the Georgian government, suggesting that these foreign powers sought to manipulate Georgian politics through economic and political threats, subverting the Georgian government's image before the elections as well as push Georgia to open “the second front”. For example, a story with the headline “Call for revolution” broadcasted on May 16 portrayed the Foreign Ministers of Lithuania, Estonia, and Iceland's decision to appear at the demonstration in Tbilisi as “undiplomatic” and alleged that one of their goals was to allude to a revolution. In its stories, *Imedi TV* aired the Georgian Prime Minister's allegations against one of the EU commissioners, Oliver Varhelyi, about “blackmail and death threat” in connection with the “foreign agents” law. One of the stories ran with a headline, “The EU commissioner threatening with liquidation” (May 23). In another example, a story (aired on May 3) on *Imedi TV* alleged that former U.S. Ambassador Kelly Degan's criticism of the law and of the Georgian government was “an attempt to preemptively create negative attitudes towards the government and elections.” In another story, former U.S. Ambassador Degan was discredited for an alleged attempt to orchestrate revolution during her tenure in Georgia (*Imedi*, May 3). This came in response to the U.S. foreign policy adviser's call to reconsider the law in connection to Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. The rhetoric against the U.S. became harsher after the proposal of the so-called “MEGOBARI Act,” which included sanctions against some of the Georgian politicians and other persons for “injuring Georgian democracy.”

State sovereignty was most often mentioned in connection with Western recommendations or sanctions. Both journalists and officials juxtaposed state sovereignty against Western criticism of the law and government politics and made claims about political pressure from the EU and U.S. (e.g., “Blackmail and pressure from the West”, *Imedi TV*, May 6; “Blackmail and bargain”, *Imedi TV*, May 21; “Harsh meddling in internal affairs”. *Imedi TV*, May 22).

Government officials also talked about the so-called “global war party,” which, according to the Georgian Prime Minister, has “a considerable influence on the U.S. and the EU officials” (May 13) allegedly dictates the rules, and is pushing Georgia towards opening a “second front” and starting the war with Russia (May 22). It must be mentioned that opening a “second front” and Georgia drawn into the war with Russia has been a dominant disinformation narrative of the Georgian Dream Party since 2022 or after Russia's invasion in Ukraine.

Identity and traditional values: The stories on *Imedi TV* frequently linked Western influence to threats against “traditional” Georgian values. The stories connected the activities of NGOs and independent media to advancing the LGBTQ+ agenda, portraying these efforts as foreign attempts to erode Georgian cultural identity. For example, in a story with the headline “Public discussion against LGBTQ+ propaganda” (April 24), although anticipated constitutional changes aimed at discussing these changes in connection with the protection of family values and children were presented, they were also very much relevant to the already initiated law against foreign influence. On *Imedi TV*, journalists and government representatives framed liberalism as a threat to Georgian identity, emphasising the importance of protecting Christianity and traditional values. This encompasses the presentation of “LGBTQ+ propaganda” as a serious threat to the nation against which the Georgian Dream has initiated the draft law on “foreign agents.”

Figure 1 on p. 26 shows that the broadcaster mostly relied on (i.e., mentioned and direct) the Georgian government, Prime Minister, and Chair of the Parliament, and members of the Georgian Dream Party, mostly portraying them with a positive or neutral tone. The United National movement (UNM), which received the most attention in terms of mentions among the opposition parties, received mostly negative coverage. The political opposition is also frequently referred to as “radicals”.

Coverage of *Mtavari Arkhi*

Mtavari Arkhi's coverage during the monitoring period focused heavily on delegitimising the law as a threat to Georgia's democratic future and Euro-Atlantic integration. *Mtavari Arkhi* referred to the law as the “Russian Law” and framed the initiation, discussion, and adoption of the law through the following frames: Russian influence, the government as an anti-democratic and repressive actor, protesters as freedom fighters, Western criticism, sanctions and Georgia's isolation from the West, and economic consequences of the law.

Russian influence: The draft law was referred to as the “Russian Law” on *Mtavari Arkhi*, and there was no

mention of “transparency” in the channel’s coverage of the law. The channel highlighted that the law’s provisions were similar to the law adopted in Russia years ago, which had been used to suppress civil society and restrain dissent. This framing aimed to highlight the threat of increased Russian influence in Georgia. For example, in a story with the headline “We are losing the EU with the adoption of this law” (April 5), the journalist equates the law with events from the Soviet past, reminding the audience about how the Soviets labelled critics as “enemies of the state and the people.” In addition, the channel’s journalists emphasise that the law was hailed by Kremlin’s propagandists, thus further strengthening the similarity of the law with that initiated by Kremlin several years ago. Both journalists and politicians debunk the law by drawing parallels with similar laws in other countries with alleged pro-Russian governments. The coverage included warnings from Russian opposition figures who were affected by similar laws in Russia, suggesting that Georgia could face similar repression.

Government as anti-democratic and repressive force:

The Georgian government was frequently painted as having “hostile” intentions towards NGOs and the media for its decision to reintroduce the law. *Mtavari Arkhi* frequently criticised the government for attacking its Western partners, exacerbating diplomatic tensions. Statements from Georgian officials criticising Western diplomats were highlighted to illustrate this growing divide. The law was frequently referred to as undermining Georgia’s democratic aspirations, both by journalists and sources. *Mtavari Arkhi* exposed the government’s attempt to use administrative resources and its employees to promote the law (e.g., April 11). The journalists further debunked the government’s attempt to present the law as in the “national interest,” instead referred to such framing as propaganda and manipulation of public opinion and an “insolent decision” to blackmail its Western partners (April 5). The politics of the Georgian Dream are equated with Russian politics across the stories. When speaking about the government and the Georgian Dream party, journalists frequently refer to it as a party ruled by an “oligarch,” as “Ivanishvili’s” party, or the “Russian dream.” The government’s intention to create a database of “violent people” was aired on *Mtavari Arkhi* as an initiative against the Georgian people and a repressive measure against freedom of expression in a story with the headline “Government’s black list” (May 8). In addition, the government’s claim about an alleged “global war party” and “the second front” has been debunked on the channel as “a propagandistic absurd” and “a conspiracy.”

Protesters as freedom fighters: *Mtavari Arkhi* provided significant coverage of protests against the law,

broadcasting live from the protests and giving ample airtime to the protestors. The channel portrayed the protests as legitimate expressions of public dissent and aligned their demands with broader democratic values. The protestors were juxtaposed against the government as pro-European forces against Russian politics. Journalists frequently referred to protests as “unprecedented unity” of the Georgian people. The channel addressed the various issues associated with the protests, including the detention and sanctioning of protesters in courts, and emphasised the protest scale and its significance. For example, the story aired on May 7 with the headline “No to Russian law” and another story titled “Violent campaign” aired on May 8 raised concerns about a series of “threat campaigns” against protest participants. These stories alleged that the government was behind these activities, which included calling protesters on their phones from unidentified numbers to threaten them as well as physically assaulting protestors in the streets and arresting them in their homes. Stories about the protests featured representatives of NGOs, activists, and public figures.

Western criticism, sanctions, and Georgia’s isolation from the West: *Mtavari Arkhi* heavily focused on the coverage of Western recommendations by presenting the discussions and commentaries of U.S. and EU officials. The coverage suggested that by adopting the law, Georgia was isolating itself from its Western allies and moving closer to Russia. This was supported by references to statements and reports from Western leaders and organisations criticising the law. The channel frequently highlighted criticisms from Western officials and diplomats such as NATO Secretary General and German Chancellor, the EU Ambassador to Georgia, and others, who claimed that the law undermined Georgia’s European integration. For example, a story on April 5 with the headline “Russian law separates us from Europe” elaborated on how the law was perceived as a deviation from the European path. The government was frequently reprimanded for not fulfilling its obligations with respect to the nine steps outlined by the EU before the country could start accession negotiations (April 11). Another story with the headline “We are losing the EU candidate status with the adoption of this law” (April 5) questioned the government’s intentions to lead Georgia’s European integration.

This frame presented Western sanctions from the U.S. and EU against the Georgian government as imminent, as indicated by statements from Western diplomats and officials warning about the negative impact of the law on Georgia’s international relations. For example, on May 6, a report discussed the increasing likelihood of international sanctions and the revision of the strategic relationship with the U.S. On May 21, a report highlighted the

Georgian government's rejection of an American proposal—the “MEGOBARI Act”—that would ease visa restrictions on Georgians visiting the U.S. and provide a preferential trade regime and improved military support to the country on the condition that the government withdrew the “foreign agents” draft bill. Regarding the potential suspension of visa liberalisation with the EU, the coverage frequently emphasised how it would affect all Georgian citizens. During the news reports, some Western actors called on the government of Georgia to maintain state sovereignty against Russian intervention. Georgia's isolation from the West was reinforced by highlighting the change in Georgia's foreign policy priorities (e.g., May 23) and its increased interest in relations with China.

Economic consequences of the law: The economic consequences of the law are a recurrent theme, with reports predicting severe negative impacts on Georgia's economy. *Mtavari Arkhi* highlights the potential economic repercussions of the law, including the results of the threat of sanctions from the U.S. and EU. The coverage discusses how these sanctions could lead to financial instability, including the devaluation of the Georgian Lari and a decrease in foreign investments. The mention of a potential suspension of visa liberalisation and the impact on international aid and infrastructure projects underscores the broad economic risks associated with the law. For example, on May 16, a news story discussed a crisis in the Georgian banking and financial systems, attributing it to the adoption of the law. Another story on May 29 highlighted the negative impact of the law on international cooperation and investments.

Pro-European opposition. A group of opposition parties is presented as pro-European actors striving to lead the country towards the EU and fighting the Rus-

sian law. The president of Georgia, Salome Zourabichvili, who vetoed the “foreign agents” law, was portrayed positively by the channel. The opposition was frequently given voice to comment on various issues, ranging from protest actions to Western recommendations and sanctions. For example, the President's initiative calling on the pro-European opposition to sign a Georgian Charter was framed as Georgia's European future against the so-called Russian regime, aspiring to lead Georgia into fulfilling the EU's nine steps to start access negotiations (May 27).

Figure 2 on p. 27 shows the amount of time dedicated to the mentions or direct voices of different politicians. Government officials and members of the Georgian Dream party were portrayed negatively.

Conclusion

The coverage of the Transparency of Foreign Influence Draft Law by *Imedi TV* and *Mtavari Arkhi* reveals starkly contrasting narratives. *Imedi TV*'s coverage supports the government's stance, portraying the law as necessary for transparency and sovereignty while discrediting protests and NGOs, and conspirators allegedly working in Western interest. These aspects were in congruence with anti-Western propaganda messages highlighted by the Media Development Foundation (Kinsturashvili, 2024). In contrast, *Mtavari Arkhi* frames the law as a Russian-style measure to suppress free speech and civil society, highlighting public dissent and Western criticism. These differing perspectives reflect the perniciously polarised information environment in Georgia and the degree of government disinformation. This analysis provides insight into the state of voter informedness and the broader struggle for democracy and European integration in Georgia.

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Figure 1: Imedi TV Channel. Actors (Mentioned vs Direct) and Tone (Assessment), Coverage in Minutes

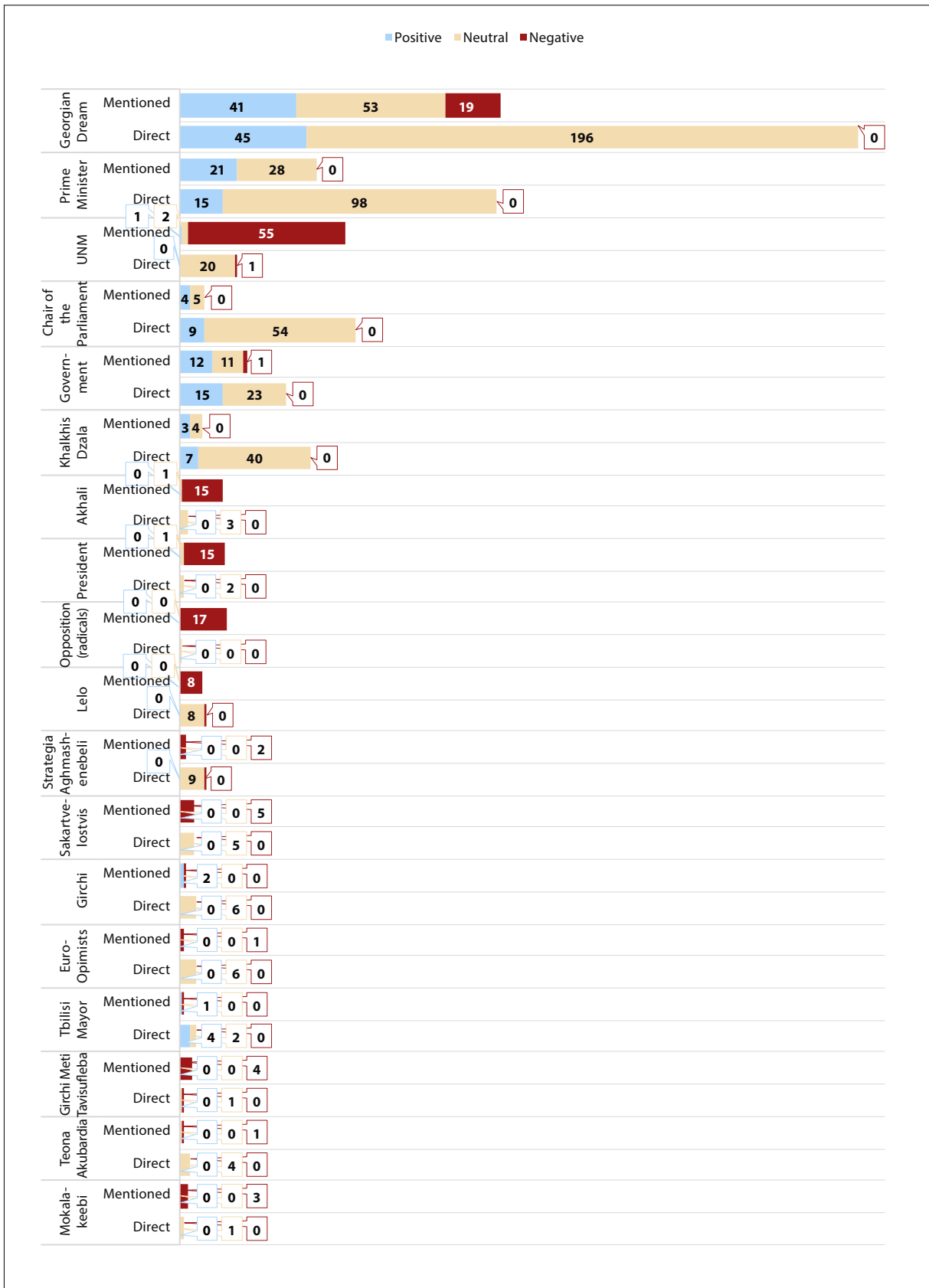
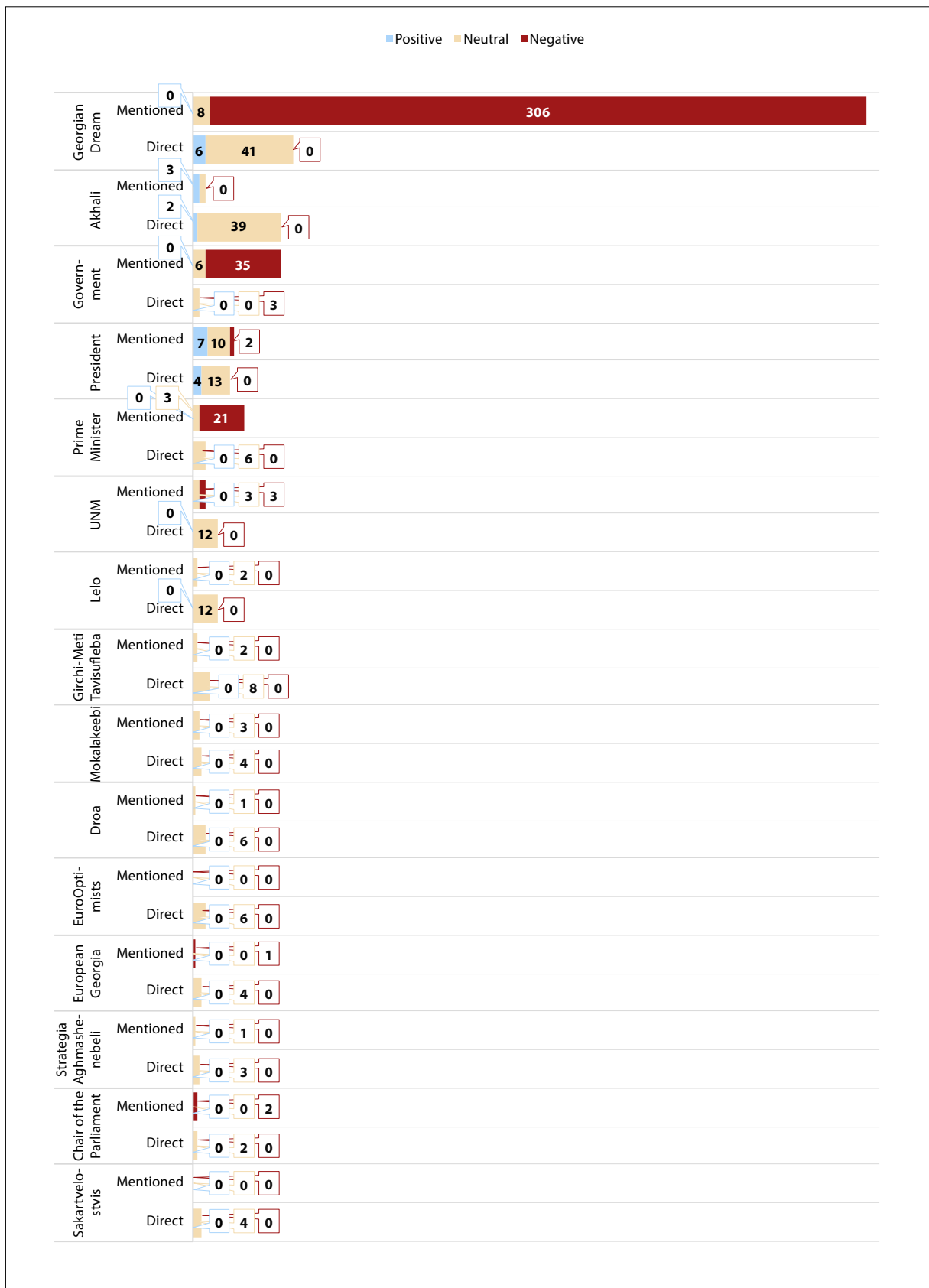


Figure 2: Mtavari Arkhi TV Channel. Actors (Mentioned vs Direct) and Tone (Assessment), Coverage in Minutes



COMMENT

“We Have Been Hacked”—on the Use and Abuse of Anti-colonial Rhetoric in Georgia and Elsewhere

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Abstract

The reintroduction of Georgia’s ‘Russian Law’, which mandates that organizations receiving substantial foreign funding must register, has ignited widespread protests and highlighted deep societal divisions. This law not only stifles democratic processes but also appropriates “anti-colonial” rhetoric to consolidate power, significantly undermining the fabric of civil society. This analysis situates Georgia’s current political crisis within global dynamics, demonstrating how the political manoeuvres of the ruling party mirror broader global trends of authoritarian regimes hacking and instrumentalizing “decolonial” and “anti-imperial” rhetoric to legitimize repressive policies. This study discusses these parallels, revealing the profound impact on various societal groups while reshaping the political discourse.

Introduction

Protests and unrest erupted in Georgia shortly after the Georgian Dream party, which has governed the country since the democratic elections of 2012, resurrected the controversial “foreign agents law”, which is officially titled the Law of Georgia On Transparency of Foreign Influence. This law mandates that media, non-commercial, and nongovernmental organizations register as foreign-influenced entities if they receive more than 20% of their income from other countries. Its latest amendment, which was introduced during the third reading of the law, further exacerbated the existing controversies surrounding the “foreign agents law.” This amendment added a provision that mandates not only the subjugation of personal data but also the collection of secretive information about each citizen, which could include details about their political worldview, national and ethnic identity, religious beliefs, and sexual life. Widely denounced as the “Russian law” because of its similarities to legislation used by the Kremlin to stifle dissent, this law has encountered fierce resistance from a broad cross-section of society. This includes central and independent trade unions, regional and online media agencies, and leading leftist groups, such as the Khma movement, the May Student Movement, the Young Greens of Georgia and the Guardians of the Rioni Valley—the group that led unprecedented grassroots movement against the construction of the Hydroelectric Power Plant—which highlights the law’s unpopularity across diverse sectors of Georgian society.

Although numerous NGOs and media organizations in Georgian society have long been criticized for adopting overtly partisan or technocratic approaches to politics, choosing to cooperate on relatively minor reforms at the expense of ignoring larger realities of political and economic inequality, the pro-

posed law, in its current form, poses a far-reaching threat that extends far beyond these organizations. This law impacts all types of nonmainstream, smaller, and grassroots groups working on social, educational, regional, environmental, human rights, disability rights, and women’s rights issues. Thus, the repercussions will affect regional media outlets, workers’ unions, student movements, educational and human rights associations, and other vulnerable collectives that may be unfairly stigmatized and harmed, ultimately undermining the very fabric of Georgian civil society.

On April 28, the First Republic Square in Tbilisi became the epicentre of another significant protest on the twentieth day of massive street mobilization and civic unrest. Robert Margishvili, a member of the Metro Drivers’ Independent Trade Union, stood before the assembled crowd. “You probably don’t expect me to delve into the legal intricacies of this law, or to compare it with FARA or similar Western laws,” he began, “frankly, I’m not qualified to discuss what I don’t know and what isn’t my direct concern.” Instead, Robert shifted the focus to a more personal narrative:

“I am here to talk about the heartache and disappointment that the working class has endured. We are being ripped away from our lives, our families, and our daily pursuits. We are suffocated by social problems that have plagued us for over 30 years. It’s not the fault of one individual; the entire political class must be held accountable—whether it’s today’s politicians, yesterday’s, or those from even earlier.

How is it that we—working people, the majority of this country, have no power to influence our political

climate? Aren't we also citizens of this country? Don't we possess civil rights? More importantly, why do the political elites seek to strip us of these rights? Why are we perceived as a threat? The answer is simple: no one has pursued grassroots mobilization and self-organization like we have. We, the independent trade unions, have mastered the techniques of bottom-up mobilization, and we stand ready to teach you, other citizens, how to mobilize and organize."

The Ruling Party's Rhetoric

The most striking irony lies in the way the ruling party and its propaganda apparatus frame the enactment of this law and its far-reaching consequences. Specifically, the rhetoric evoked by the ruling elites bears an eerie resemblance to the narratives and ideological expressions traditionally found in progressive leftist circles, especially those advocating for anti-imperial and anti-colonial causes. Many statements could be cited as exemplars of this newly embraced rhetoric. However, the most notable include a statement from Bidzina Ivanishvili, the honorary chair of the governing Georgian Dream party, that was delivered at a pro-government rally. There, he invoked the words of Indian anti-colonial leader Jawaharlal Nehru, albeit with his own interpretation: "I would like to recall the words of the Indian leader, Jawaharlal Nehru, with a slight amendment: "There is no greater enemy of one's own country than a pseudo-elite nurtured by a foreign country." A pseudo-elite nurtured by a foreign country has several key characteristics. They have no homeland; they do not love their country or their people because they do not really consider them to be their own." Another significant declaration came from Tbilisi's Mayor, Kakha Kaladze, who is also one of the leaders of the Georgian Dream Party: "We are a sovereign state, an independent country, and our ancestors fought precisely to be independent. ... Georgia is not a province or state of any country. We are an independent country, we have a constitution, and everyone should be kind and respect our statehood and the Georgian people."

Beneath the guise of this resurgent illiberal and anti-Western discourse, governmental authorities, in principle, are peddling a narrative that this law is essential for shielding national sovereignty from perceived Western threats. Hence, in doing so, they co-opt and miniaturize critical discourses that were once the domain of progressive leftist groups, repurposing them to advance their own authoritarian agenda. In their recent pronouncements, these authorities have contended that these external influences not only erode Georgia's autonomy but also endanger its unique cultural identity, subjecting it to the homogenizing forces of Western cultural dominance.

The Societal Context

Paradoxically, these progressive leftist groups who once criticized the status quo now find themselves confronting a distorted mirror image of their own argumentations, hacked by the very powers they once opposed. Concurrently, for decades, these authorities have slavishly adhered to Western norms, not only importing material goods, technologies, and consumer products but also embracing cultural norms of 'whiteness,' free market ideologies and the principles of private ownership and individualism. These top-down imposed principles, coupled with the politics of neoliberalization—first championed by the 'Rose Revolution' government and subsequently advanced by Ivanishvili's administration—have exacerbated working-class struggles, privatized national wealth, and left many without a basic income. As a result, half of the population in Georgia has had to migrate to other countries in search of a decent livelihood, while the remaining half is subjugated to a targeted social protection system—a scheme that has been widely criticized as the mechanism of governmental control for allocating electoral votes and ensuring loyalty. However, beneath the veneer of a new 'decolonial turn', the current government has hacked the language of criticism, leaving progressive opposition to struggle with a shallow discourse about sovereignty, national interest, and anti-Western interventionism. These concepts have been twisted to justify creeping authoritarianism while reducing material hardship and class struggle to mere issues of identity or cultural displacement in a broader game of power and control.

The Hacking of Anti-colonial Rhetoric

Admittedly, the hacking of anti-colonial and anti-imperial rhetoric by authoritarian regimes is a global phenomenon and is not unique to the Georgian context. For instance, Russia, a long-recognized imperial power, has been waging old-style territorial and power wars against Ukraine, camouflaging its aggression under the mantle of anti-imperialism, allegedly to combat the spectre of 'Western hegemony.' Similarly, overtly authoritarian regimes such as Orban's Hungary have hacked 'decolonial' rhetoric to advance their neo-colonial agendas, while figures such as Donald Trump, an embodiment of American corporate excess who has been accused of multiple abuses, craft electoral strategies centred on social justice, conservative values, and workers' rights, exploiting these themes despite their own contradictory personal and political background. In their examination of the roots and reasons for the resurgent turn towards illiberalism, Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes demonstrated that the increase in authoritarian chauvinism and xenophobia, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, cannot be reduced to only global ideolog-

ical shifts or economic reforms. Instead, this increase stems from post-Communist countries' frustrations and inability to emulate the ambiguous and ever-changing standards of "Western normality." They note, "Pursuing economic and political reform by imitating a foreign model has steeper moral and psychological downsides than many had originally expected. The imitator's life inescapably produces feelings of inadequacy, inferiority, dependency, lost identity, and involuntary insincerity." In response to these rising frustrations, the political regimes in Central and Eastern Europe have actively hacked and corrupted the notion of "normality," which appeared to be quite problematic in itself, by inverting the meanings of "open society," "sovereignty," and "liberalism" into their very opposites.

In her keynote lecture on "History Hacking and Down Time" at the 2023 Budapest Conference, Holly Case explored the analogous phenomenon of hacking within the context of historical conceptualization, where the analytical approach of historicization and its very methodological basis, in her analysis, represent both the means and the subject of hacking. While addressing the mechanism of hacking, she notes, "If you can detect the patterns and see how they work and what they mean, you can hack the system—getting it to do what you want to do or what you think it needs to do anyway." She terms this process "operationalization," which involves transforming historically acquired insights into an operation that constitutes the technology for "flattening" the complexities of the past into manageable protocols, thus "turning processes into procedures and durations into gestures." However, as Case astutely observes, the process of hacking represents a double-edged sword that "does not serve just one master." When insights, once transformed into understanding, are reapplied to the historical body of materials, the outcomes can be unpredictable. This ambiguity, she notes, allows historical events to unfold in unexpected ways, often defying methodological or technological precision. Thus, as Case argues in her keynote, hacking also holds subversive potential. Especially when an insight is operationalized into a method and applied on a growing scale of historical material, the likelihood of unpredictable results and contingent effects increases. Within these infinite possibilities for outcomes, new logics or understandings surface, thus catalysing democratizing effects. Hence, in the process of gleaning insight from historical inquiry, turning it into an operation or method, and feeding it back into the historical body of material, the technology of hacking transforms into a hacked technology, opening up new possibilities for progressive change.

The political hacking of discursive or critical language operates in a similar vein. It involves extracting critical insights that echo widely shared political sen-

timents and then transforming these into a political technology to be reintegrated into the political process for deciphering societal patterns to rule or control the masses. However, when this mechanism of reapplication is used on a larger scale—repeated, reiterated, and multiplied—it opens an infinite channel for novelty while also gradually losing its original potency. Specifically, the more this political method is applied in the form of rhetoric, political discourse, or lines of argumentation, the less effective it seems to become.

For instance, considering the current political events unfolding in Georgia, the more the Georgian Dream party speaks of national sovereignty, the more it appears that society is on the verge of losing its sovereignty and freedom; the more it claims to represent the interests of the majority, the more it seems to have lost touch with the majority of the people. In these repetitions and scaling-ups of their discourse, new ideas about national sovereignty, national interests, and desirable political order begin to be articulated, discussed and shaped.

Outlook

I experienced a similar sense of witnessing the reinvention and rebirth of political understanding while attending a gathering of independent trade union representatives discussing the need for collective action. Amidst the current political turmoil, these leaders sought to redefine the role and function of trade unions, shaking off the shackles of Soviet-era legacies that had long plagued Georgia's trade unions. For too long, mistrust, political technocracy, and the stigma of being relics of the past hindered their progress. However, as they reflected on the current political landscape, they saw an opportunity to reintroduce the concept of trade unions as a powerful catalyst for bottom-up mobilization, grassroots activism, and cross-societal solidarity. While the majority of business representatives supported the ruling party and endorsed the introduction of the "Russian law," trade union representatives clearly saw where their allegiance lay. "Now we have a real chance," declared a representative from the Labor Trade Union, "for the wider society to finally understand where we stand. This is our chance to demonstrate what workers' solidarity truly means and what working-class people genuinely want."

Under this "new normal," in which critical discourses and the language of the oppressed have been hacked by the ruling elites, being disembowelled and laden with empty signifiers, the grievances of the oppressed remain the uncorrupted spark to follow. Or, as one of the messages scrawled on a vast white sheet and draped from a bridge by an anonymous group of young people in Tbilisi stated, 'We will ignite the spark of riot to light the labyrinths of oppression.'

Returning to Robert Margishvili's impactful statements, whether adopted or withdrawn, the so-called "Russian Law" offers no improvements to the daily struggles and material conditions of working people. However, what it does achieve is the expansion of opportunities for direct action and the revitalization of the essential roles played by trade unions and students—who also

stand for unprotected workers toiling under precarious conditions—as well as other professional unions. These groups, which have historically been the driving forces behind societal change, progress, and solidarity, are the principal agents who can convert the technologies of hacking into hacked technology for substantive change.

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