



Democracy Under Siege: Georgia's Autocratic Takeover

Rule of Law Lab





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Executive Summary and Recommendations

Georgia's democracy is in crisis. Under Bidzina Ivanishvili and his Georgian Dream party, democratic institutions have been systematically eroded and repurposed to entrench a personalist regime.¹ Over the last decade, the Ivanishvili regime has tightened its grip on power through institutional capture, repressive laws, and coercive tactics.² Since 2024, the pace and severity of this authoritarian consolidation have intensified, with the regime enacting some of its most draconian anti-democratic measures to date. This report documents key elements of the regime's assault on democracy and the international response thus far, while also proposing recommendations for countering Georgia's autocratic takeover.

Following independence in 1991, Georgia experienced cycles of democratic reform and institutional fragility.³ The Rose Revolution of 2003 ushered in a wave of modernization and Western integration under Mikheil Saakashvili, but also centralized executive power.⁴ Ivanishvili's entry into politics in 2012 through his newly launched Georgian Dream party,⁵ amid growing discontent with Saakashvili's rule, marked a turning point. Though initially promising reform, Ivanishvili quickly entrenched control through Georgian Dream, maintaining *de facto* power even after formally stepping down as Prime Minister in late 2013.⁶

The ruling Georgian Dream regime has consolidated authoritarian control by manipulating elections; capturing the judiciary; politicizing the prosecution service; weaponizing state agencies; capturing the civil service and independent agencies; targeting opposition parties and leaders; suppressing protest; targeting civil society organizations and LGBTQI+ communities; replacing independent media with propaganda media; and restricting academic freedom. This report describes the key elements of this multi-pronged authoritarian strategy:

i. Manipulating elections: Georgia's 2024 parliamentary elections were marred by allegations of systemic irregularities,⁷ including "carousel" voting (a fraudulent scheme where individuals use fake voter credentials to cast multiple votes across various precincts),⁸ compromised vote secrecy,⁹ and the misuse of data to coerce voters.¹⁰ The U.S. public opinion research company, HarrisX, concluded that the final election results as reported by the Georgian Central Election Commission were "statistically impossible."¹¹ The European Parliament, which participated in the international election observation mission, further condemned the elections as neither free nor fair and called for a re-run.¹²

ii. Capturing the judiciary: The Ivanishvili regime has eliminated judicial constraints on the abuse of executive power by capturing both the ordinary courts and the Constitutional Court. The regime consolidated control over the ordinary judiciary by reconfiguring the High Council of Justice (HCOJ) to become the sole authority over judicial careers, with sweeping power over appointments, promotions, and disciplinary actions.¹³ Through the HCOJ, the regime coopted a network of elite judges, purged disobedient judges,¹⁴ and packed the ordinary courts with loyalists. A 2023 U.S. State Department Report observed that "[t]he independence of individual judges remained compromised through levers primarily within the judiciary by an influential group of judges pejoratively referred to as the 'clan,' on behalf of authorities. Such levers included problematic selection, appointment, and disciplinary processes; promotion processes; the lack of authority of individual courts to select their court chairs; manipulation of the randomized case assignment process; transferring judges from one court to another;

instructions on how to rule in specific court cases; and pressure.”¹⁵ The regime cemented the capture of the ordinary judiciary by using a thoroughly compromised process to pack the Supreme Court with judges loyal to the regime.¹⁶ In addition, the regime deployed a two-part strategy to take control of the Constitutional Court. It first used legislative measures to impede the court’s ability to examine contentious cases until the term of independent judges (including the court’s President and Vice President) expired.¹⁷ It then used defective court appointment rules and its control over the Parliament and Supreme Court¹⁸ to pack the Constitutional Court with the regime’s loyalists.¹⁹

iii. Politicizing the prosecution service: The prosecution service was restructured to appear independent, but remains tightly controlled by Ivanishvili through a loyal Prosecutor General and a rigid, Soviet-style hierarchy.²⁰ Prosecutors act as political enforcers, targeting critics²¹ and shielding allies.²²

iv. Weaponizing state agencies: The Ivanishvili regime has entrenched authoritarian control by weaponizing Georgia’s internal security apparatus. Two key institutions—the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) and the State Security Service (SSS)—form the backbone of this repressive machinery. Though the SSS is nominally independent from the executive, both agencies are staffed by loyalists and operate with no meaningful oversight, answering directly to Ivanishvili.²³ The SSS, in particular, has evolved into a sprawling surveillance and enforcement body.²⁴ The MIA, through its Department of Special Tasks, has led violent crackdowns on protesters.²⁵

v. Capturing the civil service and independent agencies: The Ivanishvili regime has transformed Georgia’s civil service into a loyalty-based system of political control. Initially framed as professionalization, reforms offered job security and benefits that had the

effect of binding officials to the ruling party.²⁶ After the 2024 protests, these protections were stripped, and mass purges targeted perceived dissenters.²⁷ Independent agencies like the Communication Commission²⁸ and National Bank²⁹ were brought under political control, completing the shift from a merit-based bureaucracy to a clientelist apparatus serving regime interests.

vi. Targeting opposition parties and leaders: During the 2024 parliamentary election campaign, Ivanishvili vowed to ban opposition political parties for unspecified crimes.³⁰ In May 2025, the Georgian Dream-controlled Parliament passed legislation expanding the power of the Constitutional Court (which is also captured by the ruling regime) to ban political parties while prohibiting them from reconstituting and indefinitely disqualifying their leaders from politics.³¹ Irakli Kobakhidze, Georgian Dream’s Prime Minister, has since announced that a lawsuit will soon be filed with the Constitutional Court to outlaw the “Collective National Movement,” which includes the “United National Movement,” the “Coalition for Change,” “Strong Georgia,” and the “Gakharia for Georgia” party.³² In addition, the Ivanishvili regime has drawn international condemnation for imprisoning several prominent opposition leaders for refusing to appear before a parliamentary commission tasked with probing alleged crimes by the former United National Movement government and other officials.³³

vii. Suppressing protest: The Ivanishvili regime has violently suppressed protests and enacted sweeping legislation imposing disproportionate penalties on demonstrators. New laws ban spontaneous assemblies, impose heavy fines on protestors, make public “insults” of authorities an administrative offence, and allow police to penalize demonstrators without court oversight.³⁴ These measures have been condemned by

the Venice Commission³⁵ and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).³⁶ In addition, the regime has engaged in surveillance, violence, and arbitrary detention to crush dissent, which have been widely documented and condemned by a range of international monitoring bodies, including the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe,³⁷ the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights,³⁸ and UN Special Rapporteurs.³⁹ Courts routinely rubber-stamp police actions,⁴⁰ creating a climate of fear aimed at deterring public mobilization.⁴¹

viii. Targeting civil society organizations:

Ivanishvili's regime has passed Russia-styled "foreign agent" laws to stigmatize and destroy civil society. The Georgian Foreign Influence Act and the Foreign Agents Registration Act (GEOFARA) impose burdensome registration and reporting requirements for civil society organizations that receive foreign funding, with harsh penalties for noncompliance. While the Foreign Influence Act provides for a disproportionate fine,⁴² GEOFARA provides for such fines and up to five years of imprisonment.⁴³ Both have been widely condemned, including by the Venice Commission⁴⁴ and the International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law.⁴⁵ In June 2025, several Georgian NGOs received court orders issued by the Tbilisi City Court compelling them to provide, under threat of criminal liability (including two years in prison), a wide range of information, including sensitive personal data, to the Anti-Corruption Bureau, purportedly to inquire into possible violations of GEOFARA, the Law on Grants, and other legislation.⁴⁶ The targeted NGOs have refused to comply, denouncing the orders as unlawful and a violation of their duty to protect beneficiaries.⁴⁷ The Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, and Amnesty International

have all expressed concern that these intrusive inquiries are at odds with Georgia's human rights commitments.⁴⁸

ix. Targeting LGBTQI+ communities:

Georgian Dream has enacted anti-LGBTQI+ legislation banning "popularization" of non-heteronormative identities and restricting related speech and assembly.⁴⁹ These laws, condemned by the Venice Commission,⁵⁰ OSCE/ODIHR,⁵¹ and the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights,⁵² are designed to marginalize vulnerable groups and consolidate authoritarian control.

x. Replacing independent media with propaganda media:

The regime has turned Georgia's media landscape into a propaganda tool. Outlets loyal to Georgian Dream, like Imedi, dominate the airwaves, bolstered by state resources,⁵³ while independent media face financial strangulation, regulatory harassment, and criminal prosecution.⁵⁴ The Communications Commission has been weaponized to silence dissenting voices,⁵⁵ and the Public Broadcaster is under direct regime control.⁵⁶ Recent amendments to the broadcasting law have further entrenched regime control by prohibiting broadcasters from receiving foreign funding and expanding the powers of the Communications Commission to impose stringent content restrictions.⁵⁷ In June 2025, Georgian Dream filed lawsuits against opposition-aligned TV channels for using so-called anti-government language.⁵⁸ These tactics ensure near-total narrative dominance ahead of elections and during crises.

xi. Restricting academic freedom:

Universities and schools across Georgia have been brought to heel through politicized oversight, funding threats, and direct intimidation. Reports indicate that the National Centre for Education Quality Enhancement (NCEQE) has been used to punish institutions critical of the regime,⁵⁹ with

European accreditation bodies deciding to suspend it from their register due to concerns about lack of independence.⁶⁰ Academics and students face harassment, surveillance, and dismissal for dissent.⁶¹

The Ivanishvili regime's systematic dismantling of democratic institutions has been accompanied by its pivot towards closer alignment with Russia, China, and Iran.⁶² While the regime's repressive measures have drawn widespread international condemnation, a more forceful international response is urgently needed to counter Georgian Dream's authoritarian consolidation. A stronger, more coordinated international response is urgently needed to counter Georgian Dream's authoritarian consolidation.

In February 2025, the European Parliament passed a resolution refusing to recognize the legitimacy of the Georgian Dream government and calling for sanctions against Georgian Dream officials and leaders, including Ivanishvili.⁶³ However, while the EU suspended visa-free travel for Georgian officials,⁶⁴ EU sanctions against Georgian officials have been blocked by Hungary and Slovakia.⁶⁵

A handful of EU member states have imposed targeted sanctions on Georgian Dream officials. The Baltic states—Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia—alongside the Czech Republic and Germany, have imposed targeted sanctions, primarily travel bans, on Georgian political elites and officials linked to the repressive apparatus.⁶⁶

The United Kingdom has imposed travel bans and asset freezes on Georgian officials (although not including Ivanishvili) for their role in allowing serious human rights violations in response to legitimate protests in Georgia since 2024.⁶⁷ Canada announced that it would “sanction key individuals and also businesses, entities that are involved in either human rights violations or corruption” in Georgia.⁶⁸ Ukraine has also imposed asset freezes and travel bans on Georgian officials and businessmen, including on Ivanishvili.⁶⁹

In June 2025, following the enactment of Georgia's “foreign agent” law, Canada, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and the United Kingdom issued a joint statement expressing “deep concern,” describing the legislation as a “serious setback for democratic governance, civil liberties, and Georgia's stated European aspirations.”⁷⁰ In July 2025, following the European Parliament's adoption of a critical progress report on Georgia, the foreign ministers of European democracies and the EU High Representative issued a joint statement warning that they would “not hesitate to make use of the range of unilateral and multilateral tools” available to them “should Georgian authorities continue to take steps that erode Georgia's democracy and respect for human rights.”⁷¹ Georgian Dream's Political Council responded by describing that statement as “another blatant and unfair attack on Georgian people and Georgian democracy,” while accusing the EU of being run by the “deep state.”⁷²

In 2024, the Biden administration suspended the United States' strategic partnership with Georgia⁷³ and also imposed asset freezes and prohibitions on doing business with Ivanishvili and other top Georgian Dream officials.⁷⁴ In May 2025, the U.S. House of Representatives overwhelmingly passed a bipartisan bill, the “MEGOBARI Act,” aimed at imposing sanctions on those responsible for undermining democracy and human rights in Georgia.⁷⁵ That bill is currently pending in the U.S. Senate.⁷⁶

The fate of the MEGOBARI Act, along with the efforts of other governments and European and international bodies, will play a pivotal role in shaping the future of democracy in Georgia. As outlined below, this report calls for a significantly stronger international response to counter the Ivanishvili regime's consolidation of power and support the democratic aspirations of the Georgian people.

We call upon the Ivanishvili regime to:

1. Commit to a transparent roadmap for democratic restoration, including a political dialogue with opposition parties, civil society, and international partners, and a timeline for free and fair parliamentary elections.
 2. Immediately cease the use of state institutions for political repression, including halting arbitrary detentions, surveillance, restrictions on free expression, and mistreatment or intimidation of protesters, journalists, and civil society actors.
 3. Immediately release all political prisoners, including opposition leaders, journalists, and participants in protest rallies.
 4. Comply with judgments and recommendations issued by Council of Europe human rights bodies, including the European Court of Human Rights and the Venice Commission, as well as UN Special Rapporteurs and ODIHR.
 5. Restore electoral integrity by guaranteeing the independence of the Central Election Commission, enabling effective judicial oversight of electoral disputes, and inviting credible international election observers.
 6. Initiate meaningful reform to restore judicial independence, including by implementing transparent judicial appointments.
2. To the UK and other Governments: expand targeted sanctions (asset freezes and travel bans) against individuals and entities—including Ivanishvili, his businesses, and his enablers, as well as high-level Georgian Dream officials—responsible for undermining democracy and human rights in Georgia.
 3. Establish a joint sanctions coordination mechanism among like-minded states to ensure consistency and avoid enforcement gaps.
 4. Publicly link bilateral engagement and aid to compliance with democratic benchmarks, such as conducting free and fair parliamentary elections, repealing repressive laws, and restoring judicial independence.

Recommendations to Governments

1. To the U.S. Government: continue and expand targeted sanctions (asset freezes and travel bans) against individuals and entities—including Ivanishvili, his businesses, and his enablers, as well as high-level Georgian Dream officials—responsible for undermining democracy and human rights in Georgia.

Recommendations to the European Union and its Member States

1. Introduce coordinated EU sanctions, including through the use of EU Global Human Rights Sanctions, against individuals and entities—including Ivanishvili, his businesses, and his enablers, as well as high-level Georgian Dream officials—responsible for undermining democracy and human rights in Georgia.
2. To EU member states: expand targeted sanctions (including travel bans and asset freezes) against individuals and entities—including Ivanishvili, his businesses, and his enablers, as well as high-level Georgian Dream officials—responsible for undermining democracy and human rights in Georgia.

Recommendations to the Council of Europe

1. Maintain the conditions attached to the Georgian parliamentary delegation's credentials and refuse full participation rights unless and until the regime demonstrates compliance with Council of Europe standards on democracy and human rights.
2. Mandate the Venice Commission to conduct a full, composite legal review of recent repressive legislative changes including, inter alia, those affecting civil society, independent media, protest rights, and judicial independence.
3. Deploy a Special Rapporteur or Monitoring Mission to assess the human rights situation on the ground and report regularly to the Parliamentary Assembly.
4. Support Georgian civil society's access to the European Court of Human Rights by ensuring the Committee of Ministers monitors and encourages the enforcement of the court's judgments and interim measures.

Recommendations to UN bodies and other multilateral institutions

1. The UN Human Rights Council should mandate a Special Rapporteur or fact-finding mission to investigate violations of civil and political rights in Georgia, particularly since 2024.
2. Relevant UN Special Rapporteurs should monitor ongoing threats in the areas of their mandate, and act promptly to communicate concerns to Georgia.
3. Multilateral lending institutions (including The European Investment Bank, The World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank) should suspend sovereign lending to Georgia while conditioning resumption on the authorities clearly meeting governance and rule of law benchmarks.

I. Introduction

Over the past decade, Georgia’s democracy has come under sustained attack, following an increasingly familiar playbook: leveraging democratic institutions to gain power, then systematically manipulating them to entrench control. The irregularities of the October 2024 Georgian parliamentary elections, the mass protests that erupted following Georgian Dream’s suspension of EU accession talks, and the regime’s sweeping crackdown on dissent, have brought this trajectory into sharper international focus. Many of the most repressive measures now in place—including new laws targeting protest, civil society organizations, independent media, and LGBTQI+ communities—have been initiated since 2024. However, the underlying process of authoritarian capture has been underway for many years.⁷⁷

This report documents the key elements of authoritarian consolidation under the rule of Bidzina Ivanishvili’s Georgian Dream party and the state of international efforts to counter it. It examines both the restructuring of state institutions and the tools of political control used by the Ivanishvili regime. As the analysis will show, despite declining public support, the ruling regime continues to maintain power through institutional manipulation and systematic repression.⁷⁸ Georgia’s trajectory under Ivanishvili mirrors patterns observed in other authoritarian regimes, where leaders entrench their rule by capturing democratic institutions and dismantling checks on executive power—paralleling developments in Russia under Vladimir Putin, Hungary under Viktor Orbán, and Türkiye under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.⁷⁹

While there has been widespread international condemnation of Georgian Dream’s repressive tactics, greater international pressure is essential to counteract Georgia’s ongoing authoritarian consolidation.

II. Forging Democracy: Post-Soviet Georgia

Georgia's post-Soviet political development has been marked by cycles of democratic aspiration and institutional fragility. Following its declaration of independence from the U.S.S.R in 1991, Georgia experienced a turbulent transition. The brief presidency of Zviad Gamsakhurdia ended in a coup, and the subsequent rule of Eduard Shevardnadze (1992–2003) was characterized by weak institutions, limited accountability, and persistent corruption.⁸⁰ These conditions created public demand for reform and alignment with democratic norms. In line with these aspirations, in April 1999 Georgia joined the Council of Europe and signed and ratified the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).⁸¹

The Rose Revolution of 2003, one of the first “color revolutions” in Eurasia,⁸² was a pivotal moment for Georgia. Thousands of protestors took to the streets of Tbilisi to protest electoral fraud by President Shevardnadze, who sought to install an unlawfully elected parliament.⁸³ This exposed widespread discontent with the country's stalled democratic progress.

Mikheil Saakashvili, of the party United National Movement (UNM), won the Presidential election in January 2004.⁸⁴ His government pursued aggressive state-building policies, economic development, and integration with the West.⁸⁵ It also implemented anti-corruption measures and modernized public services, drawing international attention and domestic support.⁸⁶ However, these reforms were accompanied by growing executive branch dominance and a weakening of institutional checks on executive power. Georgia's pro-Western orientation also provoked increasing hostility from Russia.⁸⁷

Following the 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit, where Georgia was promised eventual NATO membership, Russia invaded Georgia to disrupt its increasing Western alignment and to halt its democratic and institutional progress.⁸⁸ The war

marked a turning point in Saakashvili's presidency. In its aftermath, he further centralized power in the executive branch, to the detriment of democratic institutions. Although Georgia remained formally committed to democratic principles—partly due to its reliance on Western support⁸⁹—public dissatisfaction grew. Mass protests in 2009 and 2011 signaled rising discontent with the government's authoritarian tendencies.

Amid rising political tensions, billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, a Georgian national with French citizenship who made his fortune in Russia, entered Georgian politics. He launched the Georgian Dream party,⁹⁰ which sought to recalibrate Georgia's foreign policy by normalizing relations with Russia.⁹¹ Georgian Dream won the parliamentary elections in October 2012, a result widely interpreted as a public rebuke of Saakashvili's rule, particularly in light of a prison torture scandal uncovered shortly before the elections that forced the government to confront accusations of widespread abuse in the country's prison system.⁹²

Ivanishvili held the office of Prime Minister between October 2012 and November 2013, before formally stepping down. Yet he is widely considered to have stayed in *de facto* control of Georgia following his resignation, due to his reported control over Georgian Dream and political appointments.⁹³ For example, Georgian Dream's party rules grant Ivanishvili sole authority to nominate the party's Prime Ministerial candidate.⁹⁴ More generally, his influence has permeated every aspect of the party's decision-making.⁹⁵

Ivanishvili has consolidated a personalist regime⁹⁶ while transforming Georgia, by 2024, into an electoral autocracy.⁹⁷ In doing so he has drawn on the “playbook” employed by populist authoritarian leaders like Viktor Orbán of Hungary.⁹⁸

III. Anatomy of Authoritarianism in Georgia

The ruling Georgian Dream regime has consolidated authoritarian control by manipulating elections; capturing the judiciary; politicizing the prosecution service; weaponizing state agencies; capturing the civil service and independent agencies; targeting opposition parties and leaders; suppressing protest; targeting civil society organizations and LGBTQI+ communities; replacing independent media with propaganda media; and restricting academic freedom. Each of these elements is analyzed below.

i) Manipulating Elections

In post-Soviet Georgia, manipulated elections were long the primary gateway for leaders to establish dominance.⁹⁹ Under the 1995 Constitution, achieving full political authority required success in three distinct electoral contests: presidential, parliamentary, and local self-government.

However, after Georgian Dream's sweeping victory in the 2016 parliamentary elections, the ruling party used its parliamentary supermajority to pass constitutional amendments in 2017–2018, abolishing direct presidential elections under the pretext of transitioning to a parliamentary system.¹⁰⁰ The parliamentary election has now become the key to controlling Georgia's power structure.

When Ivanishvili took office as Prime Minister in 2012, the electoral framework for parliamentary elections allowed multiparty competition but favored the ruling party through systemic distortions.¹⁰¹

The historic electoral system, known as the "parallel vote," comprised single-member districts, often dominated by the ruling party, paired with a proportional representation component.¹⁰²

Under that system, a party's total number of seats comprised the sum of seats won from single-member districts plus those allocated through proportional party lists. This arrangement awarded the winning party a disproportionate number of parliamentary seats relative to its proportional vote share, as seats from single-member districts were added to its proportional mandate.

Pressure for reform forced Ivanishvili to adopt a more proportional electoral system in 2020, relinquishing some of this structural advantage.¹⁰³ A fully proportional system took effect in 2024.¹⁰⁴

However, as Georgian Dream's initial broad popular support waned, the regime turned to more overt manipulation. This began in the 2020 parliamentary elections. The final report of the Limited Election Observation Mission of the ODIHR termed the elections competitive, but noted "pervasive allegations of pressure on voters and blurring of the line between the ruling party and the state," including "the excessive presence of party affiliated observer groups, who at times interfered in the process" at the polling stations visited.¹⁰⁵ The National Democratic Institute was more critical, noting "alleged irregularities in results protocols, widespread reports of potentially intimidating behavior...delays in the publication of results and persistent perception of pre-election abuses."¹⁰⁶ Eight opposition parties rejected the election results, alleging widespread electoral fraud, while seven parties unsuccessfully challenged the final results in court.¹⁰⁷ Opposition parties who received parliamentary seats chose to renounce their seats and boycott parliament.¹⁰⁸

It was only through an EU-led mediation effort between Georgian Dream and opposition parties in 2021 that the opposition took up their parliamentary seats, though even then the two

largest opposition parties, Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM), and European Georgia, refused to join the agreement.¹⁰⁹ Georgian Dream unilaterally reneged from the agreement about two months after its signing.¹¹⁰

The 2024 parliamentary elections cemented the ruling regime's shift to more overt electoral manipulation.¹¹¹ HarrisX, a leading U.S. public opinion research company, which conducted an exit poll of over 12,000 Georgian voters, concluded that the final election results as reported by the Georgian Central Election Commission were "statistically impossible" when compared to the results of HarrisX's robust exit poll.¹¹² In addition, other quantitative academic analysis has also suggested large scale electoral manipulation.¹¹³

This electoral manipulation involved a range of techniques. First, control over voter ID verification machines likely facilitated "carousel voting," a fraudulent scheme where individuals used fake voter credentials to cast multiple votes across various precincts.¹¹⁴ These suspicions were bolstered by apparent irregularities, most significantly a notable gender imbalance in some polling stations, where the number of male voters recorded on election day exceeded the number of registered male voters.¹¹⁵

Second, there were "frequent instances of compromised vote secrecy," as found by OSCE/ODIHR.¹¹⁶ There were a significant number of incidents in which unknown individuals or party representatives were observed tracking voters in and around polling stations, and in which cameras were found to be monitoring polling booths.¹¹⁷ This monitoring created pressure on voters mobilized by the Ivanishvili regime to remain loyal and cast their ballots for Georgian Dream while deterring opposition-inclined voters from voting for their preferred candidate.¹¹⁸ Research indicates that voters who are coerced into voting for someone other than their preferred candidate tend to do so under the belief that their ballots are not secret.¹¹⁹

Third, it has been credibly reported that the Ivanishvili regime identified voters' profiles using big data harvested from state databases and compiled from the reports of the State Security Service, in order to target them with incentives or threats, to ensure that they voted for Georgian Dream.¹²⁰ The harvesting and use of data in the manner alleged would represent a gross violation of human rights and the Georgian Personal Data Protection Law.¹²¹

The OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission also identified flaws in the handling of post-election complaints. In its final report, it stated that "election commissions and courts undermined the right to due process, failed to provide an effective remedy, and did not comprehensively address widespread concerns about the integrity of election results."¹²² The overall scale of the electoral irregularities, which were not remedied, led to the European Parliament adopting a resolution condemning the elections "for being neither free nor fair" and demanding a re-run.¹²³

ii) Capturing the Judiciary

Georgia's judicial system is structured around a network of ordinary courts, comprising magistrate courts, district courts, courts of appeal, and the Supreme Court, which serves as a court of cassation on points of law. Additionally, a specialized Constitutional Court handles constitutional judicial review. Ordinary courts are overseen by the High Council of Justice (HCOJ), a constitutional body consisting of nine judicial members and six non-judicial (political appointee) members. The High Council has authority over judicial appointments and dismissals, the nomination of Supreme Court justices (subject to parliamentary election by a three-fifths majority), and for discipline, accountability, and the overall administration of the judiciary.

Ivanishvili inherited a judiciary dominated by the Supreme Court Chief Justice and the judges of the HCOJ. Initially, he aimed to dismantle these entrenched judicial elites, but they retained control over the HCOJ and rank-and-file judges.¹²⁴ A pivotal shift occurred after a late 2013 meeting between Ivanishvili and Levan Murusidze, a judge who was then the secretary of the HCOJ. Following this meeting, Ivanishvili abruptly changed his stance, praising the HCOJ as an organization that had done bad things but was now doing good things.¹²⁵ This narrative became central to Georgian Dream's defense of judicial elites, often referred to as "clansmen," portraying them as victims turned diligent performers.¹²⁶

Subsequent "waves" of judicial reforms,¹²⁷ backed by international donors, further strengthened the HCOJ's dominance. Georgian Dream camouflaged these "reforms" as implementing the "European model of the judicial council," under which an independent, transparent council, comprising a majority of judges (elected by peers) alongside independent lay members,¹²⁸ has responsibility for overseeing the judiciary, thereby ensuring judicial independence. In reality, in Georgia these reforms have been used to entrench a judicial oligarchy¹²⁹ that now wields virtually unchecked authority over the entire judicial branch via the HCOJ.

Indeed, the judicial "clansmen" and political appointees in the HCOJ now command a qualified majority to control all key decisions relating to the appointment, assignment, compensation, promotion, and discipline of judges.¹³⁰ A 2023 U.S. State Department Report observed that "[t]he independence of individual judges remained compromised through levers primarily within the judiciary by an influential group of judges pejoratively referred to as the 'clan,' on behalf of authorities. Such levers included problematic selection, appointment, and disciplinary processes; promotion processes; the lack of authority of individual courts to select their court chairs; manipulation of the randomized

assignment process; transferring judges from one court to another; instructions on how to rule in specific court cases; and pressure."¹³¹

Ivanishvili and the HCOJ have also systematically packed the Supreme Court. As OSCE/ODIHR has reported, between 2019-2021, "Georgia appointed twenty Supreme Court judges to lifetime posts in processes that were assessed by ODIHR to lack integrity, objectivity and credibility."¹³²

Capturing the Constitutional Court proved more challenging. Historic reports on the Constitutional Court, such as one from the Venice Commission's World Conference on Constitutional Justice in 2010, found that despite its relatively short existence since 1995, the Constitutional Court was "a major institution within the separation of powers...which ensures the constitutional balance..."¹³³

It has taken a mix of legislative measures and the exploitation of structural lacunae to undermine the Court's independence and efficacy. In the summer of 2016, just before parliamentary elections, legislative amendments altered the court's procedural rules to diminish the influence of the court's president and empower regime-friendly minority judges in chambers.¹³⁴ Additionally, quorums for full court decisions were raised to six of the Court's nine judges, a measure that the Venice Commission "strongly recommended" against.¹³⁵ The raised quorum enabled small numbers of regime-aligned judges to obstruct contentious cases until the terms of independent judges, including the court president and chamber president, expired.

Following these expirations, Ivanishvili leveraged his parliamentary majority and control over the Supreme Court to appoint vetted loyalists (including Supreme Court judges) to the Constitutional Court, thereby securing its allegiance.¹³⁶ After the regime had secured a comfortable majority on the Constitutional Court, that court invalidated some of the raised quorum provisions because they were no longer

needed to obstruct contentious cases.¹³⁷ The close alignment of the Constitutional Court's leadership with the regime's legal elites was illustrated by the April 2025 appointment of Merab Turava—former President of the Constitutional Court—as Deputy Justice Minister in the Georgian Dream government, just weeks after his judicial term ended.¹³⁸

The judicial branch now serves as a cornerstone of Ivanishvili's rule, with the judicial oligarchy ensuring its alignment with the regime's interests. Ordinary courts have become predictable enforcers of targeted legal repression against the regime's political opponents¹³⁹ and mass-scale repressive measures against protesters.¹⁴⁰ Similarly, the Constitutional Court has been a key enabler of the regimes repressive measures, allowing human rights violations to persist under legal cover by indefinitely delaying decisions on controversial cases beyond the nine-month legal time limit for considering complaints;¹⁴¹ impeaching the Georgian President, Salome Zourabichvili on the regime's command;¹⁴² and denying its jurisdiction over electoral disputes to avoid resolving complaints about the 2024 parliamentary election, in a manner the OSCE/ODIHR found “undermined...due process” and “failed to provide an effective remedy.”¹⁴³

iii) Politicizing the Prosecution Service

Ivanishvili inherited a prosecution service embedded within the executive branch and overseen by the Minister of Justice. Under the guise of “depoliticization,” he restructured the service into an independent institution led by the Prosecutor General, a figure shielded from meaningful oversight¹⁴⁴ and accountable only through loyalty to Ivanishvili himself.¹⁴⁵

The prosecution service retained its Soviet-era hierarchical structure and continues to operate under a strict bureaucratic chain of command, with all prosecutors answerable solely to the

Prosecutor General.¹⁴⁶ By appointing loyalists to this role, Ivanishvili secured firm control over the service, complementing his dominance of the judiciary.

This dual grip has allowed Ivanishvili to transform Georgia's criminal justice system into a tool for personal domination, while maintaining a veneer of institutional legitimacy. In recent developments, the regime launched a criminal investigation alleging sabotage against several organizations that help protestors, including by organizing crowdfunding campaigns for protestors unable to pay unaffordable fines imposed on them. The bank accounts of these organizations were frozen.¹⁴⁷ In a longer-running example, the alleged use of the criminal justice system against ex-President Saakashvili has been well-documented, including his conviction *in absentia* in 2016, his subsequent imprisonment upon his return to Georgia in October 2021,¹⁴⁸ and his sentencing to two further sentences in 2024 of nine and four-and-a-half years each.¹⁴⁹ In July 2015, Interpol decided not to pursue red notices against him despite requests from Georgia, as it considered the political elements of the case prevailed over the legal elements;¹⁵⁰ moreover, in 2023 the European Parliament passed a resolution calling for Saakashvili's release due to his deteriorating health in detention.¹⁵¹

Beyond the targeted prosecution of political opponents and critics, Ivanishvili has also weaponized the system against former allies, including Giorgi Bachiashvili, his former investment fund manager, whom he has accused of theft.¹⁵² Bachiashvili, who fled Georgia after the Ivanishvili regime charged him with embezzlement, has alleged that he was “kidnapped from abroad” without access to his lawyers and forcibly returned to Georgia as “Ivanishvili's personal prisoner.”¹⁵³

Meanwhile, Ivanishvili shields loyalists, as evidenced by the case of his close ally and former prosecutor general, Otar Partskhaladze. After the U.S. sanctioned Partskhaladze for subversive

activities as an agent of Russia's FSB,¹⁵⁴ Georgia's State Security Service only informally questioned him, and the Prosecution Service found no basis for legal action.¹⁵⁵

iv) Weaponizing State Agencies

Key institutions within the executive branch enforce state control. These include the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA), a government ministry overseeing law enforcement; the State Security Service (SSS), a nominally independent statutory body handling national security; and specialized units within separate government agencies, such as the Revenue Service's investigative unit under the Ministry of Finance which targets financial crimes,¹⁵⁶ and the Special Penitentiary Service under the Ministry of Justice, which manages the prison system. A key component of the MIA is the Department of Special Tasks, which, according to Amnesty International, was implicated in organizing the "violent crackdown" on demonstrators.¹⁵⁷

Historically, internal security functions were managed by a distinct state agency. During President Saakashvili's tenure, however, these functions were consolidated, with the State Security Ministry being merged into the MIA. In a strategic move to "coup-proof" its repressive machinery, the Ivanishvili regime split the State Security Service (SSS)¹⁵⁸ from the MIA early in its tenure,¹⁵⁹ thereby creating two institutionally distinct pillars of authoritarian control. Both entities—the MIA and the SSS—remain staffed by loyalists from Ivanishvili's inner circle, ensuring their alignment with his interests.¹⁶⁰

While formally an independent body accountable to Parliament,¹⁶¹ the SSS operates with no meaningful oversight or accountability.¹⁶² Its statutory functions are scattered across various legislative acts including anti-corruption enforcement, anti-terrorism, and counterintelligence.¹⁶³ In practice, however, its reach extends far beyond these domains, encompassing a mass electronic surveillance

program, supervision of the civil service—including the public education system—and the orchestration of election manipulation efforts.¹⁶⁴ Specialized SSS units also monitor and exert influence over the Georgian Orthodox Church, other religious organizations, opposition political parties, and civil society groups, consolidating the regime's grip on all facets of public life.¹⁶⁵

Since 2024, key figures within this repressive apparatus, including the former Minister of Internal Affairs Vakhtang Gomelauri and his deputies, and the former Head of the Department of Special Tasks Zviad Kharazishvili and his deputies, have faced multiple international sanctions, including under the U.S. Magnitsky Act, due to their roles in violent crackdowns marked by gross human rights violations.¹⁶⁶

v) Capturing the Civil Service and Independent Agencies

Following the Rose Revolution, Georgia witnessed a significant enhancement in state capacity, as the capacity and professionalism of the civil service grew.¹⁶⁷ However, ensuring the political neutrality of the service has remained a persistent challenge, with public institutions being frequently vulnerable to partisan influence.¹⁶⁸

Upon assuming power, Ivanishvili introduced a series of reforms ostensibly aimed at strengthening the civil service, including robust legislative guarantees of job security and enhanced benefits for continued service and professionalism for public servants.¹⁶⁹ Rather than fostering independence, however, these measures have functioned to entrench a system of clientelism, binding civil servants more tightly to the ruling elite.

The methods of obtaining control over the civil service hardened after November 2024. A wave of mass repression against individuals protesting the regime's suspension of Georgia's accession to the EU accelerated the regime's efforts to purge the civil service of perceived disloyalty.¹⁷⁰

Legislative amendments stripped away key job security protections and reduced competency requirements for mid-tier management positions, signaling a clear shift in priorities: loyalty over competence.¹⁷¹

Parallel to this, independent agencies—such as the Communications Commission and the National Bank—fell under the regime’s sway, a process enabled by its control of qualified majorities in the unicameral parliament. The Communications Commission, tasked initially with regulating telecommunications, has been repurposed as a tool for media suppression by exploiting its broad regulatory powers to impose disproportionate financial sanctions, or even suspend broadcasting licenses, of outlets that criticize government policies.¹⁷² The Commission’s “effective independence...remains to be ensured,” according to a 2023 report of the EU Commission.¹⁷³ This makes it particularly vulnerable to political influence, allowing the ruling party to apply regulations selectively against media organizations that do not align with government narratives. Similarly, the National Bank has been instrumentalized to shield regime figures from international sanctions, with loyalist appointees steering its policies to protect the ruling circle rather than the public interest.¹⁷⁴

vi) Targeting Opposition Parties and Leaders

During his 2024 parliamentary election campaign, Ivanishvili had promised to ban opposition political parties for unspecified crimes.¹⁷⁵ Despite its manipulation of the elections, Georgian Dream did not gain sufficient parliamentary seats for the supermajority needed to pass constitutional amendments with the effect of banning Georgia’s main opposition parties.¹⁷⁶

In May 2025, however, the Georgian Dream Parliament amended the Organic Law on Political Associations of Citizens and the Law on the Constitutional Court.¹⁷⁷ The revised law now expands the Court’s power to ban political

parties while prohibiting them from reconstituting and indefinitely disqualifying their leaders from politics.¹⁷⁸ The same month, Irakli Kobakhidze, Georgian Dream’s Prime Minister and party chairman, announced that a lawsuit would soon be filed with the Constitutional Court to ban the “Collective National Movement” comprised of the “United National Movement,” the “Coalition for Change,” “Strong Georgia,” and the “Gakharia for Georgia” party.¹⁷⁹ According to Kobakhidze, evidence in support of the lawsuit would be gathered by a parliamentary investigative commission established by the Georgian Dream Parliament to probe alleged crimes by opposition parties.¹⁸⁰ The Ivanishvili regime has already imprisoned several opposition leaders for refusing to appear before this commission.¹⁸¹

vii) Suppressing Protest

The Ivanishvili regime has suppressed protest—and, consequently, the rights of free association and expression—through legal restrictions on protest and violent crackdowns on protestors.

The cornerstone of legal restrictions is the Code of Administrative Offences,¹⁸² long used to arbitrarily prosecute protestors for vaguely defined charges unrelated to the exercise of freedom of assembly, such as petty hooliganism and disobedience of police orders.¹⁸³

Since November 2024, however, the Georgian Dream Parliament has escalated its legislative assault by enacting new protest-specific offenses and restrictions on assembly,¹⁸⁴ including a blanket ban on face coverings, a requirement of immediate notification for spontaneous assemblies, a general prohibition on holding assemblies inside closed spaces or buildings without the owner’s prior written agreement, a prohibition on erecting temporary structures, and intensifying penalties for existing offenses such as road blocking.¹⁸⁵ In addition, it enacted amendments that made public “insults” of the authorities an administrative offense.¹⁸⁶

In an urgent opinion, OSCE/ODIHR found that “several of these amendments raise serious concerns about their compliance with international human rights standards, particularly Article 21 of the ICCPR and Article 11 of the ECHR” and that “some,” including “severe administrative or criminal sanctions, should be removed or reconsidered entirely.”¹⁸⁷ The Venice Commission, meanwhile, found that “the law-making process can be regarded as fundamentally flawed”; criticized several provisions in the new rules as “vague,” noting the lack of clarity created a risk of “abuse”; and found “the necessity and proportionality...of various restrictive measures... have not been adequately justified...” and “were likely to have a chilling effect.” Thus, “the amendments appear to be incompatible with the principles of lawfulness, necessity, and proportionality.”¹⁸⁸

By January 2025, police gained the authority to impose 5,000 Georgian Lari fines for any protestors said to be blocking a road,¹⁸⁹ a power used frequently and arbitrarily against protestors,¹⁹⁰ and one that was previously reserved only for courts.¹⁹¹ The size of this fine is several times higher than Georgia’s average monthly wage. Police CCTV cameras monitor and identify protestors in real time, further contributing to the chilling effect on protest, and breaching rights to privacy and freedom of assembly.¹⁹²

In practice, judicial proceedings for these offenses, and for judicial review of fines, are a sham.¹⁹³ This Soviet-style inquisitorial system sees judges and police collaborating to rubber-stamp convictions.¹⁹⁴ Judges routinely base rulings solely on police testimony, refusing to consider or take steps to respond to defense statements about beatings, torture and other ill-treatment—and despite contradictions and falsities exposed during cross-examination.¹⁹⁵

Administrative detention trials follow a similar pattern. In December 2024, Parliament extended the maximum administrative detention period to 60 days and legalized preventive detention.¹⁹⁶

Greater scope for detention has amplified concerns about susceptibility to torture, given the regime’s documented use of torture and inhuman and degrading treatment in specially designed minivans used to transfer detainees from protests to detention facilities.¹⁹⁷

The use of violent crackdowns against protesters is by now well documented. In a joint January 2025 statement, several UN Special Rapporteurs referred to, “credible reports that the police fired rubber bullets, used water cannons, pepper spray and other chemical irritants indiscriminately against ... demonstrators. Hundreds of people were reportedly injured, with an unusually high proportion suffering serious head and facial injuries.”¹⁹⁸ The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk also stated that “the use of unnecessary or disproportionate force against protesters and media workers is extremely worrying.”¹⁹⁹ Meanwhile the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) condemned “the brutal use of force against demonstrators.”²⁰⁰

Police have excused visible signs of abuse with unsubstantiated assertions that the injuries were the result of a need to subdue resistance.²⁰¹ Judges routinely dismiss detainee claims of torture without further investigation when torture is alleged during trials, even when detainees bear clear marks of physical maltreatment.²⁰² Following a joint mission to Tbilisi in December 2024 to document evidence of police brutality, the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims, the Independent Forensic Expert Group, and the World Organisation Against Torture, published preliminary findings stating that the pattern of injuries “suggests a coordinated policy and practice of systematically torturing and ill-treating protesters and supporters, often after they are already under the physical control of the police.”²⁰³

viii) Targeting Civil Society Organizations

Echoing Russia's playbook, the Ivanishvili regime has aimed to stigmatize and penalize civil society organizations in Georgia through the use of "foreign agent" laws.

In 2023, the regime countered robust civil society mobilization—demanding democratic reforms and rule-of-law advancements for EU accession—with a "foreign agents bill."²⁰⁴ The bill was withdrawn amid protests. However, it resurfaced and was enacted as the "Foreign Influence Act" (colloquially known as the "Russian law") in May 2024,²⁰⁵ ahead of parliamentary elections in October. At the time, President Zourabichvili vetoed the bill but was subsequently overruled by a further parliamentary vote, following which the Speaker of the Georgian Parliament signed it into law after Zourabichvili refused to do so.²⁰⁶

International bodies have been vocal in their criticisms of the Foreign Influence Act. In an urgent opinion, the Venice Commission concluded that its restrictions upon freedom of expression, association and privacy are incompatible with European and international human rights standards, and strongly recommended repealing the law.²⁰⁷ OSCE/ODIHR made similar findings, noting that the disproportionate fines the law provides for "were liable to become an instrument for suppressing dissent."²⁰⁸ Several UN Special Rapporteurs likewise communicated concerns to the Georgian government regarding the law's "expected destructive effect on civil society in Georgia."²⁰⁹

The Foreign Influence Act was challenged by a coalition of civil society organizations, although the Constitutional Court refused to provide suspensive interim relief. Nevertheless, its enforcement was delayed following protests regarding the illegitimacy of the October 2024 election results. That month, an application challenging the Foreign Influence Act was filed before the ECHR by the Georgian Young Lawyers'

Association and other civil society organizations; in March 2025, the Court communicated the application to Georgia.²¹⁰

In March 2025, a second law, the "Foreign Agents Registration Act" (GEOFARA),²¹¹ modeled on the U.S. Foreign Agents Registration Act, was passed. GEOFARA requires individuals and entities to register with the Anti-Corruption Bureau as "foreign agents" if they are "acting at the order, request, or under the direction or control of a foreign principal" to engage in a broad set of covered activities, including "political activities in Georgia . . . for the benefit of or in the interest of a foreign principal."²¹² Such individuals and entities considered to act in the interest of a foreign entity, due for example to foreign funding, are required to submit detailed reports of their activities and finances to the Anti-Corruption Bureau.²¹³ Additionally, such persons must also "conspicuously" mark their public statements as produced by a "foreign agent," and provide two copies of any public statement to the Anti-Corruption bureau no later than forty-eight hours after its distribution.²¹⁴

Non-compliance with the onerous and vaguely specified duties now risks up to five years' imprisonment, rather than merely administrative sanctions such as fines.²¹⁵ As the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL) has commented, GEOFARA exploits the vague terms of the U.S. FARA, while ignoring that "the U.S. FARA has been enforced in a significantly more limited manner than has been proposed for its use in Georgia." So, for example, only 5 percent of registrants under U.S. FARA are NGOs, though many U.S. NGOs and media organizations receive foreign grants and other support.²¹⁶ ICNL therefore expressed concern that the GEOFARA's "broad and vague provisions may be used to target the activities of Georgian civil society and citizens."²¹⁷

Amendments to the Law on Grants,²¹⁸ adopted in April 2025, significantly strengthen the regime's control over foreign funding. Amongst key measures, all donors must now obtain prior government approval to issue grants; issuing grants without such approval is strictly prohibited. Exceptions are limited to grants issued by sports federations, associations, or committees, and individual study and research scholarships and fellowships awarded abroad.²¹⁹ The ICNL concluded that the new measures, if adopted, would "exceed...the requirements in Russia."²²⁰ In June 2025, after being informed by the Georgian Dream regime that the procedure for grant approval had not been finalized, the British embassy cancelled several planned grants to Georgian civil society organizations for voter education and citizen electoral monitoring in Georgia's forthcoming local elections.²²¹

The Georgian Dream regime also established the State Grants Management Agency through a resolution adopted on February 20, 2025.²²² The State Agency aims to support public organizations registered in Georgia by issuing state grants. These grants, funded through appropriations in Georgia's State Budget Law, will be allocated based on government-approved priority areas and programs, to finance initiatives aligned with the regime's priorities. The State Agency therefore forms an important part of the regime's aim: not only to dismantle the civil society infrastructure funded by foreign democracy promotion programs, but also to use government funds to establish a network of government-organized NGOs in a cleared civic space.²²³

In June 2025, several Georgian NGOs received court orders issued by the Tbilisi City Court compelling them to provide, under threat of criminal liability (including two years in prison), a wide range of information, including sensitive personal data, to the Anti-Corruption Bureau, as part of an inquiry into possible violations of the Foreign Agents Registration, the Law on Grants, and other legislation.²²⁴ The targeted NGOs refused to comply, denouncing the orders

as unlawful and a violation of their duty to protect beneficiaries.²²⁵ The Council of Europe's Human Rights Commissioner and Amnesty International have expressed concern that these intrusive inquiries violate Georgia's human rights commitments,²²⁶ including under Articles 8, 11, and 13 of the European Convention on Human Rights.²²⁷ The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child urged the Georgian government to suspend enforcement of the order against one NGO, Sapari, which works to safeguard the rights of minors.²²⁸

ix) Targeting LGBTQI+ Communities

LGBTQI+ individuals in Georgia have long faced systemic marginalization and a wholesale denial of fundamental human rights. In 2024, the Ivanishvili regime proposed a constitutional amendment against "LGBTQI+ propaganda," mimicking similar discriminatory laws passed in Russia and Hungary, further embedding this stigmatization. Though the amendment failed, its implementing laws were enacted, including, for example, the "Family Values and Protection of Minors" Law.²²⁹

This law, *inter alia*, defines "male" and "female" based solely on "pregenital genetic characteristics" and "biological sex" (Article 2). It prohibits "popularization"—defined as portraying positively or neutrally—concepts such as not identifying with any sex, identifying with a sex different from one's biological sex, same-sex relationships, or incest (Article 3). Adoption is banned for same-sex couples and individuals identifying as non-heterosexual (Article 5). Sex change surgeries and related medical procedures are prohibited (Article 6). The law also imposes content restrictions in broadcasting, education, direct communication with minors, and public assemblies in respect of the ban on "popularization" (Articles 8-10). Additionally, it prohibits recognizing sexual orientations or gender identities other than those aligned with biological sex in official records and documents (Article 7), while mandating the

use of biological sex in workplace relations and communications (Article 11). The implementing laws also amended various other statutes, erasing “gender” from legislation and replacing it with “sex” or “male and female.”²³⁰

In an urgent opinion on the draft constitutional law, the Venice Commission noted that the key provisions of the law did not comply with European and international standards and “the mere proposal of adopting this text risks to (further) fuel a hostile and stigmatizing atmosphere against LGBTQI+ people in Georgia.”²³¹ OSCE/ODIHR reiterated this same point when considering content-based restrictions on protest.²³² The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights asked members of Georgian Parliament to refrain from adopting the law given its perpetuation of stigma, including through equating sexual orientation and gender identity with incest.²³³ The EU called on Georgian authorities to “entirely reconsider this legislative package.”²³⁴

The regime has consolidated majority support by painting the small LGBTQI+ minority as a threat controlled by the “deep state” of Western governments, while claiming that Georgian Dream is the only effective means of “protecting” society from this threat. To this end, the regime’s focus in the 2024 election on choosing “family values” (as represented by Georgian Dream) demonstrates how stigmatizing the LGBTQI+ minority is central to Georgian Dream’s electoral strategy.²³⁵

x) Replacing Independent Media with Propaganda Media

While initially permitting a degree of media pluralism, the Ivanishvili regime has steadily tightened its grip on Georgia’s information space, amplifying its propaganda machinery. The regime has done this by strategically nurturing loyal outlets, whilst undermining independent voices.

The regime’s primary propaganda tool is the private TV broadcaster Imedi, which is managed by Irakli Rukhadze, a longtime business partner

and trusted associate of Ivanishvili.²³⁶ Imedi functions as the central component in the regime’s media strategy, with its programming consistently reinforcing Georgian Dream party positions with greater scope and impact than other outlets. Imedi and other loyal outlets, heavily subsidized by regime funds,²³⁷ operate without reliance on market revenues, granting them anti-competitive resilience. Meanwhile, opposition-aligned media face crippling restrictions on advertising revenue, a tactic that has drained their resources, forced some off air,²³⁸ and pushed others to the brink of closure. Online media, often sustained by foreign grants, are now targeted by “foreign agents” legislation, threatening their survival.²³⁹

Another move towards media control occurred by consolidating control over the Georgia Public Broadcaster. Ivanishvili appointed a close ally first as director and later as chairman of the board of trustees, ensuring alignment with the regime’s narratives.²⁴⁰

Recent amendments to the broadcasting law have further entrenched regime control by prohibiting broadcasters from receiving foreign funding and expanding the powers of the Communications Commission to impose stringent content restrictions.²⁴¹ In June 2025, Georgian Dream filed lawsuits against Pirveli, Formula, and Mtavari—opposition-aligned TV channels—for using anti-government language.²⁴²

Finally, during recent protest crackdowns, there was an upsurge in the targeted prosecution of independent media managers. Notably, Mzia Amaglobeli, head of the major online media outlet Netgazeti, was arrested and faces a criminal sentence for allegedly slapping a police chief who verbally assaulted her during her detention.²⁴³ The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights described her situation as “a matter of life and death,” and called for her immediate release,²⁴⁴ as did the International Federation of Journalists.²⁴⁵

xi) Restricting Academic Freedom

The Ivanishvili regime has systematically eroded academic freedom in Georgia's education system through institutional manipulation, legislative measures, and direct intimidation, aiming to align schools and universities with its political agenda and suppress dissent.

The regime has sought to use the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE) to undermine the autonomy of higher education institutions. A notable example is the 2013 suspension of the Agricultural University's authorization,²⁴⁶ led by regime critic and former government minister Kakha Bendukidze, which was reversed only after student protests. More recently, in September 2024, Ilia State University—known for its intellectual independence and campus activism—faced an arbitrary evaluation downgrade. Despite receiving top marks from expert reviewers in June 2024, it was granted only conditional authorization. After a protracted dispute, the university secured six-year unconditional authorization from the NCEQE in March 2025.²⁴⁷ The NCEQE's credibility has suffered because of such actions, culminating in its suspension from the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) due to independence violations, including the conflicting dual appointment of its director as Deputy Education Minister.²⁴⁸ Higher education institutions are also affected by GEOFARA, and impending grant restrictions, which threaten their financial and intellectual independence by potentially blocking foreign funding and programs said to be incompatible with the regime's agenda.²⁴⁹

Beyond institutional tactics, the regime has employed direct violence and intimidation to silence dissenting voices. In June 2024, student activist Niko Managadze was physically attacked near Tbilisi State University after protesting a lecture by the Prime Minister, who served there as a law professor.²⁵⁰ Literary scholar Levan Berdzenishvili faced repeated disruptions by regime-tolerated violent groups, blocking his

academic lectures throughout 2023.²⁵¹ Award-winning teacher Lado Apkhazava was assaulted following his participation in protests against the foreign agents laws.²⁵² These incidents illustrate a broader pattern of targeting intellectuals and activists to enforce compliance. The regime has also weaponized employment security to ensure political alignment across the education system. During the 2024 election cycle, numerous school principals and teachers were fired for supporting opposition parties, signaling a purge to eliminate opposition voices and enforce loyalty.²⁵³

Collectively, these actions form a comprehensive strategy to eliminate intellectual dissent and align Georgia's education system with the regime's authoritarian objectives. A further threat now looms through the Higher Education Reform Commission, chaired by the Prime Minister. It is widely feared that this Commission will formalize political control over universities.²⁵⁴ The resulting erosion of academic freedom threatens the diversity of thought and independence critical to a vibrant academic community and society.

IV. International Response to Georgia's Democratic Regression

While international attention on Georgia has intensified since late 2024, the global response to the Ivanishvili regime has been insufficient to effectively restrain its autocratic crackdown.²⁵⁵ Meanwhile, the regime has continued to consolidate its authoritarian power while deepening its ties with Russia, China, and Iran.²⁵⁶

In late 2024, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and four UN special rapporteurs expressed concern over the brutal suppression of protests that arose in response to Georgian Dream's withdrawal from EU accession talks.²⁵⁷ In January 2025, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) adopted a condemnatory resolution, ratifying Georgia's credentials subject to a demand that Georgian authorities undertake, *inter alia*, "new, genuinely democratic" parliamentary elections, release political prisoners, and end human rights abuses, until which time Georgia would be deprived of certain rights in PACE such as committee-membership and election-observation mandates.²⁵⁸ In response, the regime unilaterally suspended participation with PACE.²⁵⁹

In February 2025, the European Parliament passed a resolution refusing to recognize the legitimacy of the Georgian Dream government and calling for sanctions against Georgian Dream officials and leaders, including Ivanishvili.²⁶⁰ However, while the EU suspended visa-free travel for Georgian officials,²⁶¹ EU sanctions against Georgian officials have been blocked by Hungary and Slovakia.²⁶²

A handful of governments have imposed overlapping sanctions on a total of over 200 Georgian Dream representatives.²⁶³ Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were among the first to impose travel bans on Georgian Dream officials, including on Ivanishvili.²⁶⁴ The Czech Republic sanctioned three high-ranking Georgian Ministry of Internal

Affairs (MIA) officials for their involvement in the "brutal repression of protests."²⁶⁵ Germany announced that it would not enter into any new loan agreements or development cooperation projects with Georgia, in addition to imposing travel bans on Georgian Dream officials (but not including Ivanishvili) responsible for the crackdown on protestors in Georgia.²⁶⁶

The UK has imposed travel bans and asset freezes on Georgian officials (but not including Ivanishvili) for their role in allowing serious human rights violations in response to legitimate protests in Georgia since 2024.²⁶⁷ Canada announced that it would "sanction key individuals and also businesses, entities that are involved in either human rights violations or corruption" in Georgia.²⁶⁸ Ukraine has imposed asset freezes and travel bans on Georgian officials and businessmen, including on Ivanishvili.²⁶⁹

In June 2025, following the enactment of Georgia's "foreign agent" law, Canada, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and the United Kingdom issued a joint statement expressing "deep concern," describing the legislation as a "serious setback for democratic governance, civil liberties, and Georgia's stated European aspirations."²⁷⁰ In July 2025, following the European Parliament's adoption of a critical progress report on Georgia, the foreign ministers of European democracies and the EU High Representative issued a joint statement warning that they would "not hesitate to make use of the range of unilateral and multilateral tools" available to them "should Georgian authorities continue to take steps that erode Georgia's democracy and respect for human rights."²⁷¹ Georgian Dream's political council responded by describing that statement as "another blatant and unfair attack on Georgian people and Georgian democracy," while accusing the EU of being run by the "deep state."²⁷²

In 2024, the Biden administration suspended the U.S.'s strategic partnership with Georgia²⁷³ and sanctioned Ivanishvili and other top Georgian Dream officials, including for "undermining the democratic and Euro-Atlantic future of Georgia for the benefit of the Russian Federation."²⁷⁴ The sanctions included asset freezes and prohibitions on U.S. entities and citizens from doing business with the sanctioned individuals.²⁷⁵ In May 2025, during a U.S. House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee hearing, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio referred to the Georgian Dream regime as an "anti-American government" in response to a question from Republican Congressman Joe Wilson.²⁷⁶

Significantly, in May 2025, the House of Representatives overwhelmingly passed a bipartisan bill, the "Mobilizing and Enhancing Georgia's Options for Building Accountability, Resilience, and Independence" (MEGOBARI) Act, aimed at supporting democracy in Georgia, including by imposing sanctions on those responsible for undermining democracy there.²⁷⁷ That bill is currently pending in the U.S. Senate.²⁷⁸ If enacted, this legislation could significantly intensify pressure on the ruling regime.

V. Conclusion

Georgia has witnessed profound democratic regression, culminating in the emergence of a personalist authoritarian regime under Bidzina Ivanishvili and his Georgian Dream party. Once a regional leader in democratic reform, Georgia now exhibits the hallmarks of an autocracy—manipulated elections, a captured judiciary, weaponized state institutions that target political opposition, and repressive laws and tactics to persecute independent media, civil society, and LGBTQI+ communities.

While there has been widespread international condemnation of Georgian Dream's authoritarian takeover, the global response thus far has been insufficient. This report recommends a far stronger, coordinated international response for raising the cost of repression and supporting democratic resilience. Sustained political and economic pressure—including diplomatic isolation, targeted sanctions, and support for independent institutions—is essential to counter the regime's consolidation of power and to uphold the democratic aspirations of the Georgian people.



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