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THE REPRESSIVE POLICY OF ‘GEORGIAN DREAM’ AND GEORGIA’S ‘PAUSED’ EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The article examines the tendencies of authoritarian consolidation in contemporary Georgia in the context of the country’s formally declared European integration course and the actual political practices of the ruling party, Georgian Dream. Particular attention is paid to the expediency and political consequences of the hedging strategy pursued by the ruling party, which combines rhetorical commitment to European integration with governance practices that increasingly contradict the normative and institutional criteria of European democracy. The article analyses the correlation between the results of this strategy and the standards of democratic governance, the rule of law, political pluralism, civil liberties, and accountability that constitute the foundation of the European political and legal order.

The research focuses on anti-democratic and freedom-restricting legislative initiatives, as well as on the mechanisms of their practical implementation in Georgia’s political system. It demonstrates that such initiatives are not isolated political episodes but elements of a broader process of democratic backsliding, institutional capture, and restriction of civic space. Special attention is given to the use of repressive measures against demonstrators, civil society actors, opposition groups, and independent voices, since these practices directly affect Georgia’s democratic credibility and undermine the legitimacy of its European aspirations. The article argues that the growing discrepancy between the declared pro-European orientation of the Georgian state and the authoritarian governance model established by the ruling party has become one of the central factors contributing to the de facto pause in Georgia’s European integration perspective.

The article aims to identify and analyse the political, institutional, and legal mechanisms that have complicated the realization of Georgia’s European perspective and hindered the development of democratic processes in the country. It substantiates that the crisis of Georgia’s European trajectory should be interpreted not only as a foreign policy problem but also as a consequence of internal transformations in the system of governance, where the weakening of the rule of law, the narrowing of political competition, and the restriction of fundamental freedoms create structural obstacles to democratic consolidation and European integration.

Keywords: political hedging, consolidation of authoritarianism, repressive policy, anti-democratic and freedom-restricting legislation, European Union criteria, institutional delay.

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Introduction

The relevance of the topic is determined by the existential challenge facing the Georgian state: the choice between the country's democratic development and authoritarian isolation.

Georgia currently stands at a historic crossroads. Since gaining independence, it has pursued a policy based on the theory of balancing, built on the course of integration with the West. However, during the rule of "Georgian Dream", this strategy was revised and replaced with the theory of "hedging". The hedging policy pursued by the ruling team, that is, the attempt to balance relations between the West and authoritarian regimes, in the Georgian reality, transformed into a rejection of Western values. After the country received EU candidate status, there was an expectation that democratic reforms would accelerate further, as required by the integration process, but in reality, we received a process of democratic backsliding. The anti-democratic and freedom-restricting legislative initiatives implemented by the authorities have qualitatively turned into an instrument of authoritarian consolidation, which is used to weaken civil society. The government's "hedging strategy" exposes its attempt to maintain power at the expense of the erosion of democratic institutions, which directly threatens Georgia's European perspective and hinders the country's integration into Western structures.

The aim of the article is to study the correlation between the policies of "Georgian Dream" and the consolidation of authoritarianism and to identify the mechanisms that have complicated the realization of Georgia's European perspective and hindered the development of democratic procedures in Georgia.

Based on the research objective, the following tasks were set:

1. Determining the expediency of the political hedging strategy pursued by "Georgian Dream";
2. Presenting the cause-and-effect links between the tendencies of authoritarian consolidation in Georgia and the institutional delays of the European integration process;
3. Analyzing anti-democratic and freedom-restricting legislation as a mechanism of political control;

During the research process, the following hypothesis was identified:

The policies pursued by the government of "Georgian Dream" in recent years, which have been expressed in the adoption of anti-democratic and freedom-restricting laws and their repressive application, represent an attempt to consolidate authoritarianism in the country's internal politics, which systematically weakens democratic institutions and civil society, also reduces the level of political pluralism, increases political polarization, and causes the process of democratic backsliding.

The instrumentalization of authoritarian governance contradicts the rule-of-law criteria defined by the European Union, which leads to an open distancing from relations with the European Union. Accordingly, the repressive policy pursued by "Georgian Dream" represents not only a factor of internal democratic backsliding, but also the main mechanism determining the de facto pause of Georgia's European perspective.

Theoretical Framework of the Research. Several theories are used as the theoretical framework of the research:

1. **Fareed Zakaria's theory of "illiberal democracy".** According to this theory, the consolidation of modern authoritarianism often occurs not in the form of open dictatorship, but in the form of "illiberal democracy", when elections retain the function of legitimization, while liberal institutions – the judiciary, media, and civil sector – gradually degrade (Zakaria, 1997). Zakaria considers this process a soft but stable form of authoritarianism, because it is based on legal formalism; it uses elections for legitimacy and does not require open dictatorship (Zakaria, 2003).

Zakaria's theory is also relevant for analyzing the political processes taking place in Georgia. His concept makes it possible to assess Georgia's political processes as a soft, institutional form of authoritarian consolidation, when formally democratic procedures retain the function of legitimization, while liberal institutions gradually degrade. In particular, elections formally remain in Georgia, which gives the authorities a narrative of democratic legitimacy; at the same time, the use of legislation to restrict civil and political freedoms increases; law enforcement institutions are actively used against demonstrators, while critical media and the non-governmental sector experience unprecedented political pressure.

According to Zakaria's theory, these processes create the consolidation of illiberal democracy, under which democratic procedures are emptied of liberal content, while the legal framework is used as an instrument of political control.

In this context, we believe that the pause of Georgia's European perspective can be considered as a logical result of authoritarian consolidation, which contradicts the normative requirements of the European Union.

2. **The theoretical concept of hedging.** Among the contributions made to its development, the works of Kuik are particularly noteworthy: “The Essence of Hedging: Malaysia and Singapore’s Response to a Rising China” (Kuik, 2008, 167-185) and “The Essence of Hedging: How Small States Respond to Great Power Politics” (Kuik, 2013).

According to the concept, hedging in international relations is considered a strategic instrument through which states attempt to reduce the risks of security and economic dependence, maintain multi-partner strategic flexibility, and avoid becoming dependent on a single bloc/partner. Therefore, a country simultaneously pursues a course of integration toward Western institutions while maintaining/strengthening relations with authoritarian states. Hedging is particularly relevant for countries located between regional and global “contradictions”, for which reliance on a single partner may be harmful.

3. **The theory of bandwagoning and balancing.** The author of this theory is Stephen M. Walt. The theory considers the existence of two different strategies – allying against a source of threat in order to balance it, or bandwagoning with the threatening country in order to neutralize the source of threat (Walt, 1988).

The latter two independent theories, in the Georgian reality, are interconnected with each other. Since gaining independence, Georgia chose the theory of balancing based on the course of integration with the West, but during the rule of “Georgian Dream,” this strategy was reconsidered and replaced with the theory of hedging. The “multi-vector” foreign policy declared by the ruling party, which implies protecting its sovereignty through “navigation and balance between great powers”, achieving stability, economic development, full neutrality and independence, fully fits within the concept of “hedging”, but considering the Georgian context, it is only an illusion in a multipolar world and in reality represents a process of bandwagoning toward Russia.

The research methods used in the article include case-study, comparative analysis, systemic, problem-chronological, and other approaches.

Political “Hedging Strategy” and the Tendencies of Authoritarian Consolidation in Georgia

Authoritarian governance in Georgia was not created suddenly, but gradually progressed since the “Georgian Dream” came to power.

The foreign policy of “Georgian Dream” can be described as a hedging strategy, which in the initial stage of coming to power seemed, at first glance, successful. “Georgian Dream” followed a “democratization” agenda that was closely intertwined with the progress achieved on the country’s path of Europeanization; it also maintained cooperation with the European Union and the rhetoric of European integration, while simultaneously developing and increasing relations with China, Iran, and Russia.

In 2013-2017, Georgia achieved certain progress in the fields of civil liberties and freedom of speech. The country also signed the Association Agreement with the European Union, obtained visa-free travel to the “Schengen” zone, and achieved good results in “approximation with EU legislation” (Delcour, & Wolczuk 2015, p. 465).

However, these successes proved to be only short-term results of the hedging strategy. From 2018 onwards, it became clear that Georgia had begun to retreat from the path of democratization, which became noticeable in the fields of elections, the independence of the judiciary, and political rights (Chkhetiani 2023, p. 46). The 2025 report of the V-Dem Institute states that the episode of autocratization in Georgia began in 2017 (Nord, et al., 2025). The score of 64 points indicated for Georgia in the 2017 report “Freedom in the World” decreased to 55 by 2025. The 2024 Freedom House report warned that Georgia was becoming a “semi-consolidated authoritarian regime” (Smeltzer, & Karppi, 2024).

Until 2022–23, political hedging still retained a façade appearance, but when the unprecedented scale of manipulation of voting was recorded during the most dramatic parliamentary elections for Georgian democracy in 2024, after that, the country was drawn into one of the greatest political crises of the last decade (Chikhladze, 2025). The hedging strategy lost even its façade content. This was expressed not only in the changes of the political rhetoric of the ruling elite, but also in the strengthening of dependency in the economic and security spheres, which ultimately further strengthened the process of authoritarian consolidation and contributed to the pause of Georgia’s European perspective. After this, “political hedging” turned into a manipulative technological instrument in the hands of the ruling kleptocratic elite, for internal legitimization and for finding economic alternatives, through which they legitimized the necessity of increasing relations with authoritarian countries; that is, with countries that would not require the implementation of democratic reforms.

Unfortunately, the political price of hedging for the Georgian context, in our opinion, was completely relevant, because considering Georgia's geopolitical context, the "policy of hedging" for it can only represent an illusion in a "multipolar world". In reality, this strategy meant the process of bandwagoning toward Russia.

In academic circles, the "policy of hedging" was considered a successful state governance strategy under conditions of "uncertainty" in the region of Southeast Asia after the Cold War, although this was during the short period when there was no sharp competition between the United States and China. Specific examples of "hedging" concerned the economic hedging of medium-sized states of this region with China (for example, Vietnam, Singapore) against the background of balancing relations with the United States. However, today there is already discussion about the growing risks and costs of this policy, especially in the conditions of the escalation of competition between the United States and China.

In addition, unlike countries with a "hedging strategy", Georgia is not a "rentier" state. Therefore, there will not be a pyramid of redistribution of wealth such as exists in resource-rich countries, which at the same time stabilizes authoritarian governance by satisfying the basic needs of society, because they steadily receive resources from the export of natural resources. Therefore, after the effect of the inflow of "black money" into the country passes against the background of the Russian migration boom and sanctions, when flexible investment and development-oriented foreign grants will no longer enter Georgia, the country will gradually experience economic stagnation. To compensate for this, it will become necessary to attract public Russian business, as a result of which we will receive "accelerated Russification", which in principle is the main essence of the "bandwagoning theory".

Institutional Delay of the European Integration Process and the Anti-democratic and Freedom-restricting Legislation of "Georgian Dream."

In 2024, "Georgian Dream", for the first time in the country's history, officially changed the foreign policy course that had been directed toward European integration for a decade and officially announced the postponement of accession to the European Union. Along with an unpragmatic approach, by changing the foreign policy course directed toward European integration, the government violated Article 78 of the Constitution of Georgia, according to which state bodies must "take all measures to ensure the full integration of Georgia into the European Union and the North Atlantic Alliance" (Constitution of Georgia, 2020). It is noteworthy that in the history of the European Union, there has never been a case where a candidate country itself refused the accession process. Especially after it had been given the precondition to fulfill nine necessary recommendations to begin the accession process. With the obligation to fulfill these recommendations, it can be said that the country received candidacy in advance, thanks to the fighting Ukrainian and fighting Georgian people.

Besides the six founding countries, for the 21 countries of the European Union, the accession procedures required on average 9 years. From the start of negotiations to signing, 11 out of 21 countries required 5+ years. Overall, for example, Finland and Sweden required much less time for accession than the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Georgia, for understandable reasons, like Croatia, would overcome this period in 5-6 years, exactly by 2030.

Accordingly, thanks to the policies of "Georgian Dream", a serious threat has arisen to Georgia of the closing of that extremely valuable "geopolitical window" toward which generations had aspired.

No less important is that during the negotiation period, if the state is effective, it receives enormous assistance from the European Union. In particular, since 2007, the European Union has provided financial and other technical assistance to enlargement countries through the "Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance" (IPA). According to the new financial framework of 2021–2027, the budget of IPA III is 14.162 billion euros.

When the Government of Georgia announced in 2024 the postponement of accession to the European Union until 2028, it thereby refused European Union funds. Unfortunately, it turned out that democratic conditionality and the strengthening of institutions proved incompatible with the policy agenda of the Government of Georgia.

"Georgian Dream", in order to legitimize its political decision, began using the mechanism of "black PR" in relations with the European Union. It conducted an antagonistic discourse against members of the European Parliament and representatives of the governments of certain member states and made accusations that European funds were being used to interfere in the country's internal affairs (Tsuladze, 2024).

In reality, this narrative of the authorities did not contain truth, because most of the European funds were directed to the government itself and not to the civil sector. In 2019–2024, European Union funding for Georgian ministries was almost 11 times greater than the funds allocated to civil society; specifically, in 2019–2024, the European Union funding received by the ministries of Georgia and other state institutions amounted to 517 million euros, while the amount allocated directly to civil society organizations was 46.1 million euros.

Civil sector organizations conduct monitoring in the country on issues such as human rights, the adoption of European Union standards, gender equality, and decentralization (Koplatadze, 2024). That is, a large part of the 46 million euros spent on the civil sector was spent on activities that were an integral part of the democratic façade for which the government receives positive assessments from the European Union.

The approach of “Georgian Dream” toward representatives of civil society was almost always antagonistic. However, this antagonistic dynamic became particularly noticeable from 2022, when the party, after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, began both the country’s complete foreign isolation and an active assault on internal democracy, in order to maintain oligarchic governance at any cost. The reason for this was that it considered civil society to be the locomotive of the country’s democratization and, therefore, the most important barrier to maintaining its power. Accordingly, the neutralization of this sector began.

Initially, the party and its associated propaganda resources (media, agents of social networks, satellite parties, supportive cultural elites, etc.) conducted a proactive parallel campaign aimed at stigmatizing and publicly demonizing the civil sector. Afterwards, the government legally attacked the space of civil society activity by adopting repressive laws and legislative amendments. Among the main trio of laws that are considered a direct attack are the laws adopted in 2024, specifically:

1. **“Law on Transparency of Foreign Power” (the so-called “Russian law”)**, this law serves the attempt to portray civil society and the European Union as a “hostile force”. In reality, the problem of “transparency” in relation to the European Union did not exist in Georgia. Even the detail that the websites of the Parliament, the Tbilisi City Court, and many other governmental institutions were created with European Union funding reflects the real picture of who stands behind the country’s institutional development and openness.

2. **“Law on Registration of Foreign Agents” (the so-called FARA)**, which is much more repressive and includes new and relatively more dangerous restrictions. It provides not only financial fines for non-governmental organizations and other critically minded citizens, but also imprisonment.

3. **A legislative amendment package to the “Law on Grants”**, by virtue of which Georgian non-governmental organizations were restricted from providing assistance to citizens. Today, no international organization can issue a grant to a Georgian non-governmental organization without the prior consent of the “Georgian Dream” government (Samkharadze, 2025).

From the current year, authoritarianism in Georgia has fully entered in the form of laws and uncontrolled courts. The series of anti-democratic and freedom-restricting laws adopted by “Georgian Dream” has brought harmful effects to the state and society. The existing system has moved state governance and legislative systems further away from Europe and closer to Russia. In particular:

Through the adopted laws, the criminalization of rallies was formalized and restricted. The “Law on Assemblies and Demonstrations” and the Code of Administrative Offenses were tightened five times within one year: they began with a tenfold increase of fines and ended with the introduction of imprisonment. The latest version was completely unprecedented: a demonstrator who steps onto the roadway or wears a mask may be administratively detained for up to 15 days, while in case of repetition, a criminal punishment of up to 1 year imprisonment is threatened.

By virtue of the adopted laws, administrative detention for various periods was imposed on up to 150 citizens. Previously, more than 1,000 persons had been fined administratively, including some repeatedly. Prosecution began even for criticism of high-ranking officials of “Georgian Dream”, for which high fines and a 60-day prison sentence were established. Media-restricting legislation was adopted. Courtrooms were completely closed to the media and the public, the procedure for dissolving political parties was simplified, after which a lawsuit by “Georgian Dream” was submitted to the Constitutional Court demanding the banning of the three main opposition parties – “United National Movement”, the party “Akhali”, and “Lelo”.

The results of the repressive laws were immediate: in November–December 2024, special purpose police forces brutally dispersed tens of thousands of peaceful demonstrators; the police used disproportionate force, tortured and inhumanely treated nearly 300 peaceful demonstrators. However, for these actions,

the government of “Georgian Dream” did not punish even a single police officer. Instead, prisoners of conscience were arrested and tried without any evidence; the majority of leaders of opposition parties were arrested and tried on political grounds; during and after the protests, there were around 400 cases of physical violence, persecution, and harassment against journalists. However, no one was held accountable for this. In the last year, Georgia’s press freedom index has also significantly worsened. According to the May 2025 report of “Reporters Without Borders” (RSF), Georgia fell by 11 positions and moved from 103rd place to 114th place. As a result, Georgia ended up alongside countries such as Colombia, the Philippines, and Kenya (Transparency International, 2025). Solidarity funds were frozen, and within the framework of criminal investigations, authorities are investigating the facts of citizens helping and supporting each other, thereby criminalizing solidarity among citizens; repression against the civil sector began. Today, more than 100 Georgian civil society organizations are under various types of monitoring. Seven non-governmental organizations had their bank accounts frozen, and the leaders of the organizations were summoned for interrogations.

The culmination of the repressive policy of the government of “Georgian Dream” was the use of chemical weapons against peaceful demonstrators, which was revealed only after the British television company “BBC” dedicated a special documentary film to it. Georgian society still unsuccessfully demands that the government explain what poisonous substances were used during the dispersal of the rallies, and also opposes the international investigation.

Fareed Zakaria (whose theory we defined as the theoretical framework of the article), in his book “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy” (Zakaria, 2003), argues that authoritarian regimes do not collapse only through mass protest. In his opinion, three conditions are necessary to shake a dictatorship: 1) division and confrontation within the elites; 2) the organizational maturity of the opposition; and 3) support for the resistance movement from powerful financial groups.

Based on this thesis, he analyzed contemporary events in Iran, in which, according to him, besides unprecedented mass protests, none of the other conditions existed. If we apply this theory in the Georgian context to evaluate the ongoing political processes, then we can conclude that a very important fact is that continuous mass protest is taking place in Tbilisi (as of January 19, 2026, it is the 418th day of protest demonstrations), which is the longest and most resilient civil resistance in the modern history of Georgia.

In addition, in Georgia, the first condition for dismantling a dictatorship is already present – division within the political ruling elite: in 2025 alone, the following figures were officially arrested on corruption charges: the two-time former Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, the former head of the State Security Service Grigol Liluashvili, the former Minister of Defense Juansher Burchuladze and his former deputy Giorgi Khaindrava, the Vice-Minister of Economy and Finance Romeo Mikaoutadze, and other figures holding high political positions.

The second condition (similar to Iran) does not exist in Georgia either, because authoritarian regimes suffocate political opposition. In the Georgian reality, out of ten leaders of parties that crossed the electoral threshold, six are in prison, three have been released, and one has been forced to leave the country.

As for the third condition, of course there is serious support from the European Union, which is expressed in various forms, for example: decisions were adopted on the imposition of restrictive measures (sanctions) against persons and bodies involved in serious violations of human rights; in addition, the visa-free regime was abolished for citizens holding Georgian diplomatic passports; the United Kingdom sanctioned the propaganda media controlled by “Georgian Dream”: “Imedi” and “Postv”; and finally, very recently, 18 countries of the European Union activated the so-called “Moscow Mechanism” against the Government of Georgia. However, in order to save Georgian democracy, we believe that much greater and deeper support and the development of comprehensive responses are necessary, which Georgian society is waiting for.

Conclusion

The analysis of the research problem shows that the political processes taking place in Georgia significantly determine the prospects of the country’s democratic development and its foreign policy directions.

Authoritarian governance in Georgia gradually progressed after the party “Georgian Dream” came to power. The foreign policy of the ruling party was based on the “hedging strategy”, which in the initial stage of coming to power seemed, at first glance, successful. However, these successes proved to be calculated only on the short-term results of the “hedging strategy”. From 2018 onwards, it became clear

that Georgia had begun to retreat in terms of democratization, which became noticeable in the fields of elections, control of the judicial system, and political rights.

In recent years, the government's policy has increasingly been considered as a practice directed toward the consolidation of power, which includes elements of political and institutional pressure. In this case, we are referring to the anti-democratic and freedom-restricting laws adopted by the parliament of "Georgian Dream", which ultimately caused an increase in political polarization in the country and the weakening of democratic institutions.

In our assessment, the political situation in Georgia can be described as a "paused" condition that hinders Georgia's European and democratic transformation. Formally existing democratic institutions are unable to ensure full political competition and pluralism. Consequently, Georgia's future will largely depend on how successfully the country's political system manages to strengthen democratic institutions, normalize political competition, and establish a broad consensus within a significant part of society regarding the strategic directions of development.

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