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Between Brussels and Moscow: Authoritarian Learning as a Tool of Power Consolidation in Georgia

MA Thesis

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I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

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Abstract

This thesis examines how authoritarian learning functioned as a tool of authoritarian consolidation in Georgia after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Georgian Dream maintained formal pro-European positions while adopting anti-Western, illiberal strategies increasingly similar to those used in Russia, Belarus, and Hungary. The central puzzle for this research is how authoritarian learning contributed to this process of consolidation.

The study uses interpretivist qualitative research methods, combining discourse analysis of Georgian Dream's elite, a secondary literature-based review of three reference states, and nine semi-structured interviews.

The thesis finds that authoritarian learning played a crucial role in consolidating authoritarian rule. Firstly, Georgian Dream selectively adapted authoritarian logic to the domestic context. War, peace, and sovereignty narratives transformed public pro-European positions into skepticism, helping the Georgian Dream legitimize its authoritarian decisions. To achieve that, the strongest evidence of authoritarian learning, "Foreign Agents Legislation," was used. This law institutionalized suspicion towards civil society, media, and opposition actors. The narratives mentioned express an authoritarian repertoire that helped Georgian Dream legitimize its language for regime survival. However, beyond language, authoritarian learning was important on a practical level, reducing the costs of experimentation associated with authoritarian decisions.

Beyond domestic consolidation, authoritarian learning also affected global and regional politics. Georgian Dream's survival sabotaged Georgia's European path and increased Russia's influence in the region.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Georgia's political trajectory after the Rose Revolution was shaped by a strong commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration and democratic consolidation. After 2003, the United National Movement (UNM) began state-building and anti-corruption reforms and prioritized integration into the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). These reforms were implemented in the context of weak state institutions, corruption, and unresolved security threats, which made state effectiveness a major source of political legitimacy (Tatum, 2009, p. 170). Georgia's Western orientation was also expressed through security consolidation, including Active participation in NATO missions and the political framing of Georgia as part of the European and transatlantic space (Courtney, 2024, p. 4).

The 2012 parliamentary elections were Georgia's first peaceful transfer of power, bringing Bidzina Ivanishvili-led Georgian Dream (GD) to office. At first, this transition was perceived as strengthening Georgia's democratic trajectory. Georgian Dream formally maintained pro-European positions, continued cooperation with Western partners, and did not openly reject the fundamentals of electoral democracy; however, over the decade, GD gradually reshaped the political environment in Georgia, narrowing democratic accountability, weakening checks and balances, and delegitimizing opponents. Scholars and political observers described this period as a gradual erosion of democracy (Kandelaki, 2024, p.3).

The acceleration of the authoritarian trajectory after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 created the central question addressed by this thesis. Georgian Dream continued to frame itself as committed to EU integration formally, including applying for EU candidate status, while simultaneously adopting anti-Western, civil society-hostile narratives. This contradiction became apparent when the "Foreign Agents Law" was introduced, framing non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as instruments of foreign influence, similar to Russia (Samkharadze, 2023, pp. 7-9).

The research puzzle of this thesis is how authoritarian learning operated in Georgia's post-2022 authoritarian consolidation. Georgian Dream's authoritarian turn had domestic roots, but after the start of the war, its decisions began to resemble authoritarian repertoires abroad visibly. The puzzle is how these repertoires were selectively adapted to the Georgian context, how they were justified, and what role authoritarian learning played in the Georgian Dream's power consolidation. This thesis does not treat authoritarian learning as a simple

copying. It examines learning as a context-sensitive strategic process, through which authoritarian-minded actors ensure regime survival.

The academic relevance of this puzzle lies in understanding authoritarian consolidation as an adaptive process. General competitive authoritarianism and democratic erosion scholarship explains how ruling parties manipulate elections, weaken democratic institutions and checks and balances to preserve power. However, these approaches do not always explain how authoritarian-minded actors identify, adapt, or justify their decisions. Authoritarian learning fills this gap by focusing on how regimes and political elites draw lessons from previous successes and failures. In the Georgian case, this is particularly important, as the country's authoritarian turn occurred amid accelerated Europeanization and the ongoing war in Ukraine.

The research question of this thesis is: how authoritarian learning functioned as a tool of authoritarian consolidation in Georgia after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Its objective is to analyze how Georgia's Dream adapted, justified, and normalized authoritarian repertoires with particular attention to the rhetorical, institutional, and operational dimensions of learning.

Methodologically, this thesis uses an interpretivist qualitative research design. First, it applies Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) to examine Georgian Dream elite discourse after 2022. The empirical material used is publicly available direct quotations (386 quotes) from two key figures of the ruling party, former and current prime ministers, published by Radio Tavisupleba/Radio Liberty. Second, the thesis reviews secondary literature on Russia, Belarus, and Hungary as reference regimes. These cases are not used as fully comparative cases, but as analytical reference points to identify similar authoritarian repertoires. Third, the thesis uses nine semi-structured expert interviews to validate, contextualize, and interpret the analysis of the Georgian case.

Following chapters will cover theoritical framework of authoritarian learning (Chapter 2), present the research design and methodology (Chapter 3), review secondary literature on reference regimes (Chapter 4), presents the Critical Discourse Analysis (Chapter 5), analyze how expert interviews interpreted logics and patterns found through previous methods (Chapter 6) and synthesize the evidences and interpretations from all three methodological components to discuss how authoritarian learning functioned in Georgia (Chapter 7).

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

Authoritarian consolidation is usually explained through institutional manipulation, coercion, and legitimation. Levitsky and Way (2010, pp. 3-26) explain how ruling parties preserve formal democratic institutions while manipulating elections, the courts, the media, and the legislature to consolidate power in competitive authoritarian regimes. Other than that, in scholarship, the focus on coercion and elite loyalty expresses how authoritarian rulers survive by preventing collective mobilization and controlling security institutions (Svolik, 2012, pp. 10-13). Broader frameworks also exist that conceptualize authoritarian stability through repression, co-optation, and legitimation (Gerschewski, 2013, pp. 18-20). However, as these approaches explain what authoritarians do to survive, they say less about how regimes identify, adapt to, and justify these strategies in ongoing political conditions. This is a sphere where authoritarian learning becomes useful and explains how authoritarian actors draw lessons from internal or external experience. Approaches to studying authoritarianism shifted from a static regime type to an adaptive, dynamic form of rule capable of responding to internal and external challenges. The concept of authoritarian learning gained growing analytical relevance in comparative politics. Instead of assuming that authoritarian regimes persist due to structural advantages or coercion, authoritarian learning theory emphasizes that authoritarian actors observe and adapt their strategies to the threats linked to regime survival. The theoretical importance of authoritarian learning lies in its relevance to the political context.

Authoritarian Learning

Authoritarian learning refers to the process by which authoritarian-minded political actors and authoritarian regimes adapt their strategies of rule, drawing lessons from internal and external experience, primarily to ensure regime survival. Authoritarian learning is a dynamic, intentional response to threats and risks, such as mass protests, legitimacy crises, and pressures for democratization (S. G. F. Hall & Ambrosio, 2017, p. 145). Losing power is directly linked to high costs, which creates a strong incentive for authoritarian leaders and regime elites to monitor political processes and refine their methods accordingly. Learning occurs when authoritarian actors begin to identify successes and failures, either within their

own country or in other regimes. They adjust or refine their actions and strategies according to the lessons or challenges they identify.

The concept of authoritarian learning emerged to explain adaptation and resilience within authoritarian regimes. Previous approaches of authoritarianism tended to conceptualize authoritarian regimes as static entities whose remaining power was explained through their coercive capacity, structural, and institutional factors. This approach interpreted regime changes as decay or externally promoted transformation (S. Hall, 2014, pp. 87-88).

In The Authoritarian International, Hall (2023) frames authoritarianism as a dynamic and uncertain form of rule, underlining that regime survival is not guaranteed. Hall (2023, pp. 11-12) argues that authoritarian regimes operate amid uncertainty and the fear of collapse. According to Hall (2023, p. 6), political learning is not exclusive to democratic systems. Authoritarian regimes also engage in a learning process, but under different scenarios. Without that conception, authoritarian behavior, and especially its change, can be misclassified as mere repression, coincidence, or an ad hoc reaction.

Hall and Ambrosio explain the challenges of researching authoritarian learning and argue that, without perceiving learning as a causal process, it cannot be understood. Firstly, they mention that "not all change is learning." It is crucial to separate learning from other forms of political change (S. G. F. Hall & Ambrosio, 2017, pp. 145-146). Therefore, authoritarian learning is intentional, experience-based adaptation within authoritarian systems or authoritarian-minded political elites.

Hall's (2014) definition of learning is the interpretation of past experiences and the adjustment of future behavior accordingly within authoritarian actors. This formulation expresses that learning must be purposive and is characterized as contextually interpretive (S. Hall, 2014, pp. 50-51). Learning requires actors to draw lessons from past outcomes and intentionally apply those findings to future political decisions. This idea enables us to distinguish between coincidental policy changes and genuine learning (S. G. F. Hall & Ambrosio, 2017, pp. 147-148). Learning is described as an elite-driven process among regime insiders, who have the authority to implement "learned" changes and access to information. Learning relies on the interaction and communication between elites in various authoritarian regimes, even though it is not an open or transparent process. Hall avoids mentioning narrow policies and presenting them as learned, as authoritarian learning is typically about strategies of rule, approaches to managing, and methods of control. These lessons are not copied and have been adapted to reflect the domestic context (S. G. F. Hall, 2023, p. 10).

Authoritarian learning should be expanded beyond simple imitation. Hall and Ambrosio conceptualize learning as a unity of interrelated mechanisms, including policy transfer (the intentional adoption of specific policy practices), diffusion (unintentional emulation), and promotion (external support of authoritarian strategies by dominant regimes) (S. G. F. Hall & Ambrosio, 2017, pp. 145-146).

Hall (2023, p. 10) also explains that authoritarian actors learn not only from others but also use internal learning. This layer highlights how authoritarian learning needs to be discussed from a domestic governance perspective as well, rather than solely as an international phenomenon. Typically, learning is facilitated through specific institutions, security frameworks, and elite networks (S. G. F. Hall, 2023, 154- 155).

Stephen Hall's work, "The Authoritarian International Tracing How Authoritarian Regimes Learn in the Post-Soviet Space," is significant in unpacking the concept of authoritarian learning and in establishing a strong theoretical foundation for this thesis (2023). As mentioned, authoritarian learning is a survival-oriented practice and not a static institutional phenomenon. Therefore, the logic of regime survival needs to be unpacked. Hall uses the "Bank Run" analogy to frame the logic of survival (2023, p. 21). In a financial bank run, a bank fails not necessarily because of a lack of resources, but rather because of public opinion and the belief that others will withdraw their money. This withdrawal is individually rational but collectively irrational for the bank. Authoritarian politics employ a similar logic, in which regime stability rests on the public's belief that the regime is strong and capable of meting out punishment. Once this belief weakens, the system starts to fall. The authoritarian regime's perspective relies on Timur Kuran's (1995) idea, which emphasizes a preference for falsification. Individuals publicly support a system that they privately oppose to avoid consequences and sanctions.

Therefore, authoritarian learning focuses on identifying and suppressing "sparks" that could lower "revolutionary thresholds" (Kuran, 1995, pp. 248-249). The main goal of the authoritarian regime is to prevent the "bandwagon effect," where one person's public position motivates others.

Heydemann and Leenders explain this logic in relation to the Arab uprising (2011). Authoritarian learning, according to them, involves survival-oriented development rather than fixed stages, with a start and an end. In the case of the Arab Awakening, regimes initially engaged in a form of alert learning, which involves observing the collapse of others to understand the process and initiate preventive actions, such as securing elite or force loyalty before the crisis actually begins. Then they relied on discursive learning to prevent escalation

by shaping expectations and raising the costs of protest, thereby maintaining a preference for falsification. And then moved to strategic containment, using coercion through international positioning or building alliances against both domestic and external threats (Heydemann & Leenders, 2011, pp. 688-649).

The Arab Awakening added a significant geopolitical layer to the existing authoritarian framework. Larry Diamond, on the other hand, added a cooperative layer and showed that authoritarian learning intensifies after successful democratic breakthroughs elsewhere (Diamond et al., 2006). Larry Diamond (2006, pp. 215-216) stated that colored revolutions in Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan demonstrated that semi-authoritarian regimes could be overthrown through mass mobilization. For authoritarian elites, these were not isolated cases, but proof that specific opposition strategies could succeed under similar conditions. Regimes learned from the successes of opposition groups and analyzed the threats posed by unified opposition, election monitoring, and protests. Counter-strategy became pre-emptive opposition to their coordination and electoral issues before they could translate into mass mobilization (Diamond et al., 2006, p. 218).

Types of Authoritarian Learning

As mentioned, authoritarian learning does not occur in a uniform, static way, but it operates through different modes, differentiated by context, aims, and intentions. There are three primary interrelated forms of authoritarian learning. In some cases, authoritarian regimes actively select and adapt specific practices from abroad, a process known as policy transfer. In others, learning occurs indirectly when regimes emulate successes without direct coordination, a process called diffusion. The third and most relevant type for this research is authoritarian promotion. In this mode, dominant authoritarian regimes seek to promote or shape the authoritarian behavior of other actors abroad (S. G. F. Hall & Ambrosio, 2017, pp. 146-148).

Policy Transfer-Based Authoritarian Learning

Transfer-based authoritarian learning refers to cases in which authoritarian regimes or authoritarian-minded political elites intentionally adopt specific policies, governance practices, and legal frameworks inspired by authoritarian regimes abroad. In general, policy transfer plays a key role in contemporary policymaking. It is defined as the “use of knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions, and ideas in one political setting (past or present) to

inform the development of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions, and ideas in another political setting" (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000, p. 5). However, authoritarian policy transfer often occurs in the context of consolidating power and is rooted in the previously discussed survival logic. This type of learning is characterized as intentional lesson drawing. As mentioned, authoritarian learning can occur from both successful cases and failures. Hall and Ambrosio bring several examples of both negative and positive cases. For learning from failures, they used a Russian commentator's quote about colored revolutions and potential threats to the Russian regime's survival tied to democratization trends in the post-communist region: "The day before yesterday: Belgrade. Yesterday: Tbilisi. Today: Kyiv. Tomorrow: Moscow (S. G. F. Hall & Ambrosio, 2017, p. 149)." In the case of learning from successful practice, authors cite the Chinese Communist Party, drawing on the Singapore model of capitalist-authoritarian stability. China itself became the model for other countries to learn from as they reform their economies without losing power (S. G. F. Hall & Ambrosio, 2017, p. 149). A significant aspect is adaptation rather than replication, as authoritarian policy transfer is often selective and may cover only specific components perceived as effective in risk management. Transfer-based learning in authoritarian regimes is directly connected to elite networks, unlike democratic policy transfer.

Diffusion-Based Authoritarian Learning

Diffusion-based authoritarian learning refers to the process of learning that occurs indirectly, unlike policy transfer, which involves explicit coordination and policy adoption. In the diffusion type, authoritarian elites observe developments elsewhere and adjust their actions in line with their own perceptions of successful patterns.

Hall and Ambrosio (2017, p. 146) explain diffusion as "unintentional emulation rather than deliberate borrowing."

According to Shipan and Volden, there are several major mechanisms of policy diffusion: learning, economic competition, imitation, and coercion (Shipan & Volden, 2008, pp. 841-944). They define learning-based diffusion as a process in which actors use information about the effectiveness of policies from elsewhere and change their behavior accordingly. In the context of authoritarian learning, Hall and Ambrosio (2017) argue that this process involves informational learning under opacity, leading to decisions in favor of a stabilizing rule (S. G. F. Hall & Ambrosio, 2017, p.145).

An interesting aspect is that regimes sometimes emulate practices not because they understand the effectiveness, but because of association with regime survival elsewhere. explaining imitation type of policy diffusion Shipan and Volden mention that weaker leaders try "to be like these leaders, and therefore adopt the same policies as these leaders without necessarily thinking about the consequences of such adoptions" (Shipan & Volden, 2008, p. 843). Competition-driven diffusion can also be applied to authoritarian regimes, which adjust their strategies to avoid appearing weaker than other authoritarian leaders and maintain their regional standing.

Authoritarian Promotion and Hierarchical Learning

Last but not least is the type of authoritarian learning known as authoritarian promotion. Unlike transfer and diffusion, promotion involves active efforts by dominant authoritarian regimes to shape the strategies and behaviors of other actors.

The term represents the mirror image of democracy promotion. Authoritarian promotion has three most important logics. Firstly, it represents the outcome of the learning process, in which authoritarian regimes see the threat from democratic promotion, as one region's democratic diffusion wave can lead to similar political processes domestically. "For Putin, the biggest threat to Russia's stability and power is the marching of democracy closer to Russian borders and the unleashing of various 'orange viruses' (S. G. F. Hall & Ambrosio, 2017, p. 151)." Secondly, authoritarian promotion reflects the pattern of so-called coercive isomorphism, where an authoritarian regime puts active efforts to undermine democracy and encourage like-minded regimes. Furthermore, the last one is less coercive but still active, a process used by authoritarian regimes to present themselves and their policies as role models for other autocratic political systems.

A significant aspect of authoritarian promotion is its hierarchical characteristics. With authoritarian promotion, we are introduced to asymmetrical power relations in learning. According to Hall, authoritarian learning is not always horizontal, but it often reflects hierarchical relationships shaped by geopolitical power(S. G. F. Hall, 2023, p. 21; S. G. F. Hall & Ambrosio, 2017, p. 152). Hall and Ambrosio perceive Russia as the primary promoter of authoritarianism. They bring the term "black knight", which characterizes the country that uses economic, diplomatic, and other assistance to strengthen authoritarian governments. Russia is seen as the primary "black knight" using its resources to protect and aid other authoritarian

regimes and authoritarian-minded elites. Nevertheless, this promotion has a geopolitical context. It is not just about supporting authoritarianism everywhere, but also about creating a bulwark against North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expansion, particularly in the cases of Lukashenka and Yanukovych (S. G. F. Hall & Ambrosio, 2017, p. 153).

Based on our discussion, there are leading regimes that serve as model exporters, promoting authoritarianism in other regimes and acting as teachers, and peripheral regimes that function as learners, selectively adopting the promoted strategies.

However, according to Hall, authoritarian promotion is not as hierarchical as it seems. A notable example of this is Belarus. Hall found that Belarus served as the testing ground for the Kremlin to observe and learn methods to counter democratization pressures and prevent a color revolution in Russia. This case proves the hierarchical characteristics of promotion, but it is not a classic teacher-student relationship. Russia, in this case, remains dominant, but is the learner. Addressing this aspect, Hall brings the term "authoritarian gravity center". It advocates, dominates, and leads authoritarian promotion in post-Soviet countries, but from the role of an authoritarian gravity center. It shows that hierarchy is flatter than expected. However, this is just an exception, not the dominant strategy, as evidenced by the Foreign Agents Law (S. G. F. Hall, 2023, p. 128).

Where Authoritarian Learning Can Be Observed

Authoritarian learning is difficult to observe. Unlike other political phenomena, authoritarian learning does not occur in transparent political environments; rather, it is based on elite networks. This process is closed and takes place in private, which makes it challenging to identify the learning that occurs directly. Therefore, authoritarian learning cannot be identified through institutional documents or declarations, but rather from patterns and their changes over time(S. G. F. Hall & Ambrosio, 2017, p. 144). It is extremely hard to "prove" authoritarian learning, and scientific studies usually rely on correlating examples of authoritarian practices with their later adoption by other autocratic governments.

A significant issue is the researcher's bias. The lack of operationalizable variables leaves considerable room for interpretation. Hall and Ambrosio warn that "not all change is learning. Research must differentiate learning from coincidences and general imitations. This research identifies three dimensions of outcomes that authoritarian learning can be observed:

rhetorical (the adoption of discourse), institutional (the adoption of legal frameworks), and operational (methods of repression or control).

Rhetorical Learning

Rhetorical learning refers to the adaptation of discursive strategies, framing techniques, and narratives by authoritarian regimes and authoritarian-minded elites in response to threats, failures, or successful examples abroad. This discursive adaptation is a central component of authoritarian learning.

According to Hall (2023, p. 14), authoritarian regimes manage perceptions of stability and legitimacy, as regime survival depends on the preference for falsification in the regime's favor.

Rhetorical learning is important during episodes of mass protests or the potential for regime collapse elsewhere. They respond to threats by adjusting their discourses to reduce political risk using appropriate interpretation. Learning occurs when elites observe how specific narratives affected opposition and protest in similar situations abroad. Rhetorical learning can contribute to questioning the protesters' legitimacy or to intimidating protesters by highlighting the costs of participating in collective action (Heydemann & Leenders, 2011, pp. 651-652). Rhetorical learning can be useful for regime legitimization and for normalizing reciprocal measures by framing them as necessary for stability. Beyond protests, rhetorical learning can be used to justify authoritarian decisions. Rhetorical learning is used to undermine political opponents and legitimize authoritarian measures in a specific, already tested war. Rhetorical learning often combines internal and external learning. Authoritarian gravity centers usually promote grand narratives, trajectories, and rhetoric, but they adapt them to local contexts based on observed consequences over time.

Institutional Learning

Institutional learning refers to the process by which authoritarian regimes transform learned strategies into formal rules, legal frameworks, and institutional structures. Unlike rhetorical adaptation, institutional adaptation is easily observable over time. When the strategies are translated into legal frameworks, electoral systems, and governance arrangements, learning becomes institutionalized. "Lessons derived from authoritarian learning can be useful for fixing different problems confronted by the autocrat: maximizing the pro-

government party's advantage, providing "sufficient" representation for the opposition, or consolidating executive control over the legislature (Golosov, 2017, p. 188)." Usually, the goal of authoritarian regimes is to maintain a pseudo-democratic reputation and appear pluralistic while remaining controllable. Institutional adaptation is the most effective mechanism for achieving pseudo-competitiveness without risking regime survival. "Authoritarian regimes had to cloak themselves in the vestments of a democracy. These regimes created parliaments and political parties and ran elections. While these structures were controlled, it was hoped that their formation would hide the undemocratic reality" (S. G. F. Hall, 2023, p. 33). To identify the institutional dimension of authoritarian learning, the analogous legislation of consolidating laws adopted needs to be identified and compared with its formal and practical implications.

Operational Learning

Operational learning refers to the type of adaptation that involves control mechanisms, such as police forces, surveillance, repression, and protest management. This dimension captures how regimes learn how to act, especially in the short term.

"So too were the counter-revolutionary strategies of regimes shaped by processes of learning and emulation among regime elites, especially among those where protests began later in the sequence of events that constitute the Arab awakening" (Heydemann & Leenders, 2011, p. 648). Operational learning encompasses all direct actions governments take to repress. Hall, in his book Authoritarian International, explains several cases of operational learning, including Belarus after the color revolutions, Yanukovych's reforms, and the reorganization of Berkut (2023, pp. 68-69). Authoritarian regimes learn how to allocate loyal security units, manage the escalation and de-escalation of protests, and coordinate domestic repression and international positioning.

These three dimensions of authoritarian learning capture the core manifestations of when, how, and why authoritarian elites use authoritarian learning, providing a strong theoretical foundation for observing the Georgian Dream's tactics in this research.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter explains the methodological approach used in this research, presenting the research design, case selection, data collection logic, and analytical framework. This methodology aims to unpack how authoritarian learning functions as a tool of authoritarian consolidation in Georgia. This study uses an interpretivist epistemology and a constructivist ontology and treats political realities not as objectively given but as contested and constructed meanings produced and adopted strategically (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2015).

The core methodological logic is that authoritarian learning is rhetorical, operational, and institutional, but the rhetorical aspect reflects the institutional and operational dimensions, as discourse serves to justify and explain. Accordingly, the study adopts discourse analysis as the primary research method. Addressing the research question requires analyzing how political actors define enemies, frame threats, and justify political choices.

This approach is designed not to test hypotheses but to reconstruct the political logic of elite communications and interpret discourse as a governing instrument that reflects political agendas, geopolitical pressures, and shifts in the political system. This chapter justifies the exploratory single-case strategy as the most appropriate for identifying authoritarian learning as a process of selective adaptation and specifies a selected data-collection strategy. The research uses Critical Discourse Analysis as a core method.

Even though research uses a single-case study approach, specifications of authoritarian learning require focusing on “teachers” as well. Accordingly, this thesis reviewed secondary literature to identify reference points from regimes where authoritarian practices are well-documented and studied. These regimes are not treated as cases for comparative analysis, but rather as analytical reference points for pattern recognition in the Georgian domestic context.

As the research uses an interpretivist approach, to strengthen the validity of the discourse analysis and reduce the risk of researcher bias, the study uses expert interviews, selecting based on professional experience in political science, international relations, EU integration, democratization, and civil society.

Ensuring credibility, trustworthiness, and ethical standards is essential for this research, as it uses an interpretivist approach, and to achieve credible outcomes, this research follows these standards. Accordingly, this study integrates ethical reflection aspects at every stage, from data collection to analysis.

Research Design

This research investigates how authoritarian learning has shaped Georgia's democratic backsliding after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The study examines how authoritarian learning has shaped Georgia's political trajectory since the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian war.

Therefore, the research question for this research is:

How does authoritarian learning function as a tool of authoritarian consolidation in Georgia since the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine?

To answer this question, the study pursues the following objectives:

1. Identifying how ruling elites in Georgia construct narratives in the post-2022 period using discourse analysis
2. Analyzing how these narratives are built and adjusted over time across time periods.
3. Identifying key features of authoritarian learning in reference countries using a literature review
4. Interpreting whether the observed narrative and its adjustments resemble discursive patterns in relevant reference regimes
5. Validating analysis using expert interviews

This research is based on a constructivist/anti-foundationalist ontological position, assuming that political and social phenomena, such as authoritarianism, spheres of influence, and consolidation, are socially constructed rather than given objectively. These concepts gain meaning through interaction, practice, and language (Marsh & Stoker, 2010; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2015).This approach is chosen because it addresses authoritarian practices in a hybrid regime context. In this case, essential concepts like „foreign agent“ and "sovereignty“ do not have fixed meanings but are strategically constructed by political actors. Therefore, constructivism is the best approach for analyzing the discursive process that constructs the context.This study also adopts an interpretivist epistemology. Interpretivism argues that knowledge is produced through interpretation rather than objective measurement. This approach focuses on how actors perceive, construct, and narrate their decisions and actions within specific contexts (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2015).

A single-case strategy is well-suited because it focuses on how Georgian Dream adopts and implements narratives and tools in Georgia through an authoritarian learning lens. While

learning also includes reference to other regimes (Hungary, Russia, Belarus), these cases are used as analytical reference points to identify influence, not as units of comparison.

The time frame (February 2022 - End of 2025) covers the key period that made democratic backsliding more intense, after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Georgian Dream adopted illiberal rhetoric during this specific period while formally pursuing EU integration until 28 November 2024. This period allows us to track how the discourse shifted, whether it used authoritarian learning, and how Russian influence shaped the process.

This study employs a triangulated qualitative research method strategy. The primary method is a discourse analysis to identify rhetorical patterns and framings in the Georgian Dream's political communication. To support this analysis, this thesis reviews secondary literature on reference regimes. This method will examine narratives in regimes such as Russia, Hungary, and Belarus and provide analytical reference points for identifying signs of learning during this period. As the study uses an interpretivist approach, the third method, semi-structured expert interviews, will be used to validate the findings of the discourse analysis. These three components, together, will enable us to conduct layered exploration and address the selected research questions.

Discourse Analysis

The broad logic of the thesis's account of authoritarian learning is that it can be publicly observable across rhetorical, institutional, and operational dimensions, and that the rhetorical dimension is particularly important, as it gives meaning to the other two. The rhetorical dimension observes how enemies, risks, political choices, and shifts are framed, justified, and normalized. For the reasons mentioned, this thesis treats discourse not as an isolated dimension but as a governing instrument that expresses how power is narrated. The main goal of this section is not to summarize what Georgian Dream representatives were saying during the selected time frame, but to find the logic embedded in these statements and observe the evolution of this logic.

The time frame of this thesis starts with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The acceleration phase of erosion of Georgian democracy justifies this starting point. Even though this thesis has a specific time frame, the research does not assume that the war in Ukraine created Georgian Dream's illiberal tendencies out of nothing; rather, it views it as an acceleration that sharpened and made the authoritarian turn more publicly observable (Kandelaki, 2024, p.3). This aspect is important, as it allows analysis to avoid a narrow claim

that a specific date was the starting point while still allowing researchers to treat the war as a meaningful checkpoint.

This method analyzes publicly available quoted statements published by Radio Tavisupleba/Radio Liberty. It focuses on two important representatives of Georgian Dream's public communication: former Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili and current Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze. Focus on Gharibashvili is important because of political continuity within the ruling party: he has been a member of Georgian Dream since 2012. He has served as Prime Minister, Minister of Internal Affairs, and Minister of Defense over the years. He had strong personal ties with the leader of Georgian Dream, Bidzina Ivanishvili, and his family. Kobakhidze is significant for tracing the acceleration phase of the authoritarian turn. As Prime Minister during the later stage of this process, he represents a sharper illiberal turn of Georgian Dream. These actors are selected because they significantly shape, or have shaped, ruling parties' political communication and narrative-building.

The data for this thesis is based on quotations published by Radio Tavisupleba (Radio Liberty) (See Appendix 1). This source was selected for several methodological reasons. Firstly, Radio Tavisupleba is a foreign-funded, independent organization not affiliated with any Georgian political party, making it a suitable archive for tracing ruling-party discourse. Secondly, its archive is useful for continuous discourse analysis, since it allows researchers to observe statements that unfold over time. Radio Tavisupleba systematically includes direct quotations from political actors, so units of analysis are easily accessible. Focusing on direct quotations instead of journalistic paraphrases helps reduce the risk of media bias.

This study applies **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)** to examine how ruling elites justify political choices and construct concepts such as enemies and foreign influence. CDA is a suitable framework for this research, as it views discourse not as a neutral reflection of reality but as meaning-making that shapes perceptions of reasonability, necessity, and truth in politics. According to Fairclough, CDA is suited for studying legitimation processes, since "analysis of discourse and of texts emerges as an important resource for research on legitimacy and legitimation" (Fairclough, 2013, p. 493). In this research, elite narratives are treated as consequential, as they set boundaries, determine the political agenda, and their evolution reflects shifts in the political system. This is significant, as in contexts of democratic backsliding, authoritarian consolidation often occurs through justificatory narratives. This research assumes that political communication is strategic and functional, rather than just expressive. Therefore, CDA, which is "systematic analysis of texts" and not regular commentary on discourses, addresses that tradition of political communication (Fairclough,

2013, pp. 10-11). Also, elite discourse is used to produce and stabilize legitimacy. Moreover, in itself, legitimacy is not a legal status but an ongoing political indicator. Furthermore, as legitimacy is a core part of authoritarian consolidation and legitimacy is produced and stabilized in discourses, Critical Discourse Analysis is appropriate for this research. On the other hand, discourses are not only imaginary in relation to reality, but are also transformed into practice; therefore, discourse analysis also addresses the institutional and operational dimensions of authoritarian learning.

To address how narratives are linguistically and rhetorically constructed and to operationalize CDA, the study uses the **Discourse-Historical approach (DHA)** strategy toolkit as the analytical lens. This framework provides a structured set of categories for analyzing how political meaning is produced in discourse (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 30). This approach is chosen because:

DHA unfolds a four-step strategy of analysis: after (1) having established the specific contents or topics of a specific discourse..., (2) the discursive strategies (including argumentation strategies) are investigated. Then (3), the linguistic means (as types) and the specific, context-dependent linguistic realizations are examined (4) (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, pp. 29-30).

According to the theory (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, pp. 29-30), this research will report the analysis by period.

1. **Nomination**: how actors and groups are named, categorized, labeled;
2. **Predication**: how traits and moral evaluations are assigned;
3. **Argumentation**: how claims are justified;
4. **Perspectivization**: How viewpoints are constructed (positioning)
5. **Intensification**: How claims are strengthened or softened;

This analytical lens is important to this thesis because authoritarian learning is less likely to be expressed through explicit imitation than through the observation of justificatory logics and rhetorical techniques. Especially because legitimacy is an ongoing process, shifts over time contribute to pattern recognition and the capture of authoritarian learning.

To compare shifts of narratives over time, four analytical time anchors are selected.

1) Start of Russo-Ukraine War (24 February 2022)
2) First „Foreign Agents Law“ (14 February 2023)
3) Second „Foreign Agents Law“ (3 April 2024)
4) EU integration suspension (28 November 2024)

Separation of time periods helps clarify evolutionary narratives and their interlinkages. Other than that, timeframes help to address the fifth, intensification lens of DHA.

The broad logic of the thesis's account of authoritarian learning is that it can be publicly observable across rhetorical, institutional, and operational dimensions, and that the rhetorical dimension is particularly important, as it gives meaning to the other two. The rhetorical dimension observes how enemies, risks, political choices, and shifts are framed, justified, and normalized. For the reasons mentioned, this thesis treats discourse not as an isolated dimension but as a governing instrument that expresses how power is narrated. The main goal of this section is not to summarize what Georgian Dream representatives were saying during the selected time frame, but to find the logic embedded in these statements and observe the evolution of this logic.

Review of secondary literature about reference states

This study analyzes existing literature, identifying dominant narratives by pre-selected authoritarian regimes to identify signs of authoritarian learning. The selection of reference regimes is based on different, but relevant, authoritarian or illiberal repertoires. Russia is selected as a central authoritarian promoter in the post-Soviet sphere and the most direct reference for the foreign agents framework, anti-Western conspiracies, and sovereign democracy narratives. Belarus provides this thesis with important counter-protest measures, coercive survival, and russian support. In the case of Hungary, illiberal rule and its sovereignty, as well as traditional values justifications with formal links to Europe, are crucial contributions. These cases are not treated as full comparative units, but as analytical reference points to help identify authoritarian logic. These countries will serve as an analytical reference point for identifying discursive matches in Georgian Dream's decisions and political communication. The review of secondary literature will draw on sources that show how authoritarian regimes weaponize discourse to attack political pluralism and civil society, and to portray NGOs as foreign agents or Western institutions as fighters against sovereignty. Therefore, the review of secondary literature will identify reference points from Russia, Hungary, and Belarus, and their narratives, from academically credible, peer-reviewed sources. This will provide us with reliable, methodologically advanced, and trustworthy literature.

Expert Interviews

The expert interviews serve two main goals. First, they clarify the theoretical foundations of authoritarian learning and uncover the advantages and limitations of the rhetorical, institutional, and operational dimensions approach. Second, they validate and contribute to the interpretation of the analysis. As this research adopts an interpretivist epistemology and a constructivist ontology, expert validation and additional contributions from practical and theoretical experience are crucial. The interviews are not used as evidence of expert opinion, but rather to strengthen the interpretation of patterns identified through discourse analysis.

In total, nine interviews were conducted, six in Georgian and three in English. The interviews were conducted between 24 March and 17 April: eight online and one on-site. The format was semi-structured, providing common thematic ground while also allowing experts to develop arguments grounded in their expertise. This aspect is important, as the thesis combines several dimensions, including authoritarian learning itself, the Georgian authoritarian turn, international politics, illiberal discourse, the Foreign Agents Law, and repression.

The expert sample was selected with purposive sampling. The aim of the expert interviews was not to achieve statistical representation, but to use them for analytical relevance. The selected experts contribute different types of knowledge to the thesis. **Stephen Hall** was selected for his expertise in authoritarian learning and for checking the relevance of the approach this thesis is using. Focusing more on the Georgian political context, Georgian political experts **Ghia Nodia** and **Giorgi Badridze** were selected. For practitioner-based interpretation, Georgian politicians, **Giga Bokeria** and **Givi Targamadze**, were interviewed. **Tinatin Inauri** contributed with her expertise on Georgian Dream's discourse and illiberal political communication. **Lia Gurchiani** and **Anastasya Zavyalova** contribute legal and civil-society-focused expertise on the Foreign Agents law, covering both the Georgian and Russian versions. **Amelie Tolvin** contributed with her knowledge on Belarus, protest repression, and the operational dimension of authoritarian learning. All interviews will be conducted using the informed consent form, participants will be offered anonymity, and ethical data protection standards will be followed.

Research Limitations and Ethical Considerations

Ensuring credibility, trustworthiness, and ethical standards is essential for this research, as it uses an interpretivist approach, and to achieve credible outcomes, we must follow these standards. Accordingly, this study integrates ethical reflection aspects at every stage, from data collection to analysis. One of the central strategies used in this thesis to enhance trustworthiness is methodological triangulation. Combining discourse analysis, expert interviews, and literature review creates a multilayered understanding of the context, concepts, and process. This approach allows us to increase understanding while minimizing the influence of the researcher's subjective assumptions, a core risk in interpretive research. Discourse analysis will only use publicly available content. The study will collect data from the Media dataset of Radio Tavisupleba (Liberty). As political speech might include manipulations and misinformation, this research will analyze it critically, using careful contextual framing. Also, to avoid selective interpretation, the paper will use systematic coding according to the topics and document the evolution of the narratives. However, as analysis remains subjective and interpretivist, expert interviews will provide analytical validation for the study. As mentioned, these interviews will be conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of scientific research, obtain informed consent, and involve voluntary participation. The researcher will explain the study's aims, participants' rights, and the option of anonymity. Data will be collected for only academic purposes. Also, as mentioned, research will review secondary literature on reference countries to reduce reliance on interpretation and identify reference points from countries where the Georgian Dream could learn, following the authoritarian learning model. This approach will help us avoid missing the focus on selected single cases while still analyzing all the actors. This method will use only credible, peer-reviewed sources.

Even though this study follows the ethical and scientific standards, several limitations remain. The discourse analysis is limited to the selected Radio Liberty quotes from the ruling party's specific leadership, excluding other politicians, other social platforms, and offline communications. The analysis captures only a part of the broad political discourse.

Other than that, interpretation is shaped by the researcher's perspective. Using expert interviews reduces this bias, but interview data can also be affected by participants' affiliations or hesitance to speak openly, despite the anonymity option. An important aspect is that this research lacks generalizability, as it focuses on in-depth contextual understanding. These

limitations are part of the interpretive research and should not be perceived as a weakness of the study, but as part of it.

For this thesis, the artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2026) was used as an auxiliary tool for language refinement and to check the clarity and readability of passages. All analytical decisions, source selection, interpretation, and final formulations remain as the author's own responsibility. In addition, Grammarly was used to identify minor grammar, spelling, and punctuation issues during the work (Grammarly, Inc, 2026). The suggested edits were reviewed manually before being accepted.

Chapter 4: Analysis

Chapter 4.1: Review of Secondary Literature on Reference Regimes

Russia

Stability, Normality, Liberal Uncertainty

Russian political discourse frames stability and order as a precondition for social normality and the well-being of society. Stability and order are presented as central political virtues used to strengthen regime legitimacy. Legitimacy is articulated through predictability, continuity, and control, as political order is narrated as the product of state protection rather than the outcome of pluralistic processes (Casier, 2025a, p. 15). This framing is not neutral by idea. It is not just the emphasis on stability or order. It has a normative character, detaching political authorities from democratic accountability and giving them the legitimate right to maintain order. As Casier argues, controlling discourse allows the Russian regime to create a general frame of what it stands for, reinforcing its legitimacy and enabling it to marginalize alternative interpretations of political processes internationally and governance domestically (Casier, 2025a, p. 4). In the big picture, emphasis on stability is a fundamental justification for authoritarianism. The idea of a social contract in Russia comes in different versions, suggesting a trade-off in which citizens' loyalty is exchanged for stability and/or reasonable living standards (Casier, 2025b, p. 274).

In Russian political discourse, liberal democracy is problematized as a source of chaos, risk, and uncertainty. The idea of linking democracy and democratization to instability started in the post-Soviet context. "Supporting this point is prior research demonstrating that many post-Soviet citizens associate democracy with 'the disorder, instability, chaos, and hardship' of the 1990s"(Look, 2020, p. 196). This association is not just retrospective; it has become an active narrative, framing liberal democratic procedures as incapable of delivering social and economic stability, thereby delegitimizing pluralism and democratic governing principles. Even though this understanding is context-dependent, it remains a powerful narrative through which democratic principles are associated with uncertainty and authoritarian order with stability.

Russian state-affiliated media and official discourses use externalization of disorder and present democratic systems from abroad through a specific lens. Russian television discourse often uses protests in democratic countries and frames them as violent, ineffective, and destabilizing. Consequently, this narrative constructs Russian politics as comparatively orderly (Otlan et al., 2023, pp. 394-295). Therefore, these representations not only comment on foreign events but also function as a normalization of control, with authoritarianism appearing as reasonable and preventive of chaos, governance failure, and breakdown, rather than as repression. The literature notes that the outcomes of these narratives on public opinion are difficult to measure, but the pattern of delegitimizing democracy through uncertainty and chaos is consistent.

To legitimize authoritarian dominance in political processes, the notion of normality is a significant aspect of Russian discursive architecture. "Normal life" is perceived as fragile and constantly threatened by external influences. According to Faure's analysis, conservative and state-affiliated ideology in Russia shows hierarchy, order, and a strong state as safeguards against the crisis, which is shifting normal life (Faure, 2025, p. 159). Normality, in this sense, is not just an empirical condition, but it is a legitimization of intervention in the political and social sphere. This ends up narrowing the space for legitimate disagreement, labeling different perspectives as irresponsible in the name of preserving normality and state authority.

Sovereignty, Foreign Interference, and Suspicions

Russian political discourse is using sovereignty as a crucial narrative. Sovereignty is constructed not as territorial or legal autonomy, but as the capacity of a state to monopolize the political agenda. To unpack how Russian political discourse threatens national sovereignty, the article "Reconstructing Russian Strategic Culture: Narratives, Othering, and the West" by Dogachan Dagi is essential. Dagi shows that national sovereignty is an inviolable condition of state survival; it is linked to autonomy and state strength. This idea is rationalized by presenting the West as a hegemonic actor seeking to expand its political values globally and threaten alternative political systems (Dagi, 2025, pp. 22-23). Therefore, sovereignty is framed as a protective shield against the West and Western hegemony. Preservation of states' autonomy is essential to Russia's civilizational continuity and existence. To counter Western interference, the Kremlin is using the ideological framework of so-called Sovereign Democracy.

This conception is linked to Russia's ambitions of a multipolar world order. Dagi notes that the Russian political elite frames unipolarity as a primary security threat to Russia and accuses the West of denying the sovereignty of other countries, their identities, and their political cultures by shifting the world in its own interests. Therefore, Russia frames itself as a counter-hegemonic force resisting Western domination and restoring balance (Dagi, 2025, p. 23). This self-assigned role, presented as historically grounded, allows Russia to expand its ideology across other countries through authoritarian promotion.

However, sovereignty is narrated as incomplete and in need of protection. This incompleteness justifies the authoritarian, repressive, and anti-Western politics Russia implements (Casier, 2025b, p. 272). Political conflict is not usually interpreted as endogenous. The literature shows that protest, criticism, opposition, and diverse opinions are frequently framed as evidence of an external agenda rather than as domestically generated. The explanatory factor of instability is manipulation rather than social demands. The political function of this narrative is to delegitimize opposition without addressing their narratives.

With discursive externalization, the enemy is located outside of the national political space. By repeatedly using this narrative, the space in which domestic actors are perceived as legitimate subjects is narrowed. Chow and Levin, in their experimental research, mention that allegations of foreign involvement can significantly damage support for political movements, even if the causes of protests remain unchanged. This research is not Russia-specific, but this finding helps us identify the logic of delegitimizing opposition through foreign influence and sovereignty narratives (Chow & Levin, 2025, pp. 315-318). We can say that foreign influence and sovereign democracy have both domestic and international goals. Domestically, it delegitimizes the opposition, promotes the idea of state dominance, and seeks a monopoly on the political agenda, when, on the other hand, Russia takes responsibility and mission to fight for multipolarity and defend sovereignty globally, justifies its conflict with the West, and expresses ambitions that are important to observe authoritarian learning.

Civil Society Reimagined

Russian political discourse towards civil society is directly linked to the already discussed sovereignty concept. Civil society is reimagined as a politically suspicious sphere whose activities are based on origin rather than representation. The literature indicates that this transformation reinterprets independent organizations as vulnerable to external manipulation (Haddad & Sundstrom, 2023, pp. 14-15). Evaluation of civil society actors is no longer based

on their social or political function, but on their links to foreign networks, which are narrated as foreign influence in a sovereign country. This shift in discourse is central to legitimizing authoritarianism, as it relocates domestic problems onto external actors. Advocacy and political activities are considered outcomes of the external agenda (Arribas et al., 2023, pp. 9-10). This framing allows the regime to avoid political engagement against civic critique by delegitimizing civil society.

Addressing this narrative shift, Russia started using the foreign agents framework. This framework was introduced in 2012 and expanded over time. The law requires organizations that receive foreign funding to register as "foreign agents." The framework imposed mandatory labeling requirements on publications, materials, and content, and noncompliance with it led to fines, criminal penalties, and the organization's shutdown. Over time, the framework was extended and intensified. New amendments allowed the government to register NGOs without their consent, broadened the term "political activity and expanded the law on individuals, with additional and stricter restrictions and sanctions(Haddad & Sundstrom, 2023, p. 13).

> *As of 2022, all of the organizations that repeatedly and prominently litigate against Russia before the Court had been branded as "foreign agents," due to receiving funding from abroad, and forced to either shut down, reorient themselves, divert resources to fight the label, or submit burdensome fines and reports to the government to avoid or survive the being named a foreign agent. (Haddad & Sundstrom, 2023, p. 14).*

Importantly, the law does not require proof of foreign control or influence; instead, it presumes that foreign linkage itself compromises independence. Over time, this law expanded from civil organizations to the media and even individuals. According to Kirill Koroteev, since 2022, foreign funding has not even been required to trigger the "foreign agent" framework, as even a popular rock musician was listed as a "foreign agent" for giving interviews to foreign media (Koroteev, 2024, p. 3).

According to Zavyalova's analysis, the central function of the Foreign Agent framework lies not in enforcement alone, but in state-driven stigmatization. She conceptualized stigmatization in Russia as a top-down process of promoting stigma in society, through which targeted actors are publicly reclassified as norm violators (Zavyalova, 2025, p. 83). She mentions that the term "foreign agent" is intentionally chosen because it has historical connotations of espionage and betrayal, evoking Stalinist and Cold War propaganda in the Soviet Union. Using this historical memory, state shifts perceptions of NGOs towards mostly suspect actors. This stigmatization puts civil society organizations in a condition where reputational damage and isolation occur even before formal sanctions are applied. The

effectiveness of this mechanism lies in its capacity to shift behaviors, reputations, and expectations without requiring continuous action. The transformational nature of this framework destabilizes civil society rather than immediately eliminating it (Zavyalova, 2025, p. 84). Therefore, civil society is not only weakened by the law's implications but also by reputational erosion and fragmentation. The study of Chow and Levin is crucial here as well. As the allegations of foreign involvement significantly reduce public support for protests, movements, and activism (Chow & Levin, 2025, pp. 315-316), political activities of non-state actors are discounted and repositioned as illegitimate.

To legitimize these actions, the Russian political discourse is using three core narratives. First is already-covered sovereignty and non-interference, framing foreign funding as foreign control, so regulating/repressing is framed as protection of domestic authority. The second core narrative is transparency. Regime discourse often claims that the law only informs the public about who is influenced by foreign actors, and that declaring their funding and donors is a legitimate right for the government. According to Koroteev, the term transparency functions as a legitimizing vocabulary rather than an actual driver of this framework (Koroteev, 2024, p. 4). Furthermore, the third narrative is an analogy to established international practices, especially the U.S. Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA). Koroteev (2024, p. 2) believes that the FARA narrative is a defense strategy to justify the Russian Foreign Agents Law. This argument is supported by the fact that, according to legal scholars, even the comparison to FARA is not relevant, as American law requires proof and evidence of a principal-agent relationship. At the same time, the Russian framework assumes such ties. Additionally, FARA was adopted in a specific political context in 1938, in opposition to Nazi Propaganda (Haddad & Sundstrom, 2023, p.17).

Moral Order, "Traditional Values" and Protection

Political Discourse in Russia towards civil society and foreign influence is connected to the protection of "Traditional values". The Russian case is not just about the presence of conservative values in governance, but also about the moral discourse used as a governing instrument to justify the political legitimacy of state intervention as protection (Edenborg, 2023, p. 176). "Traditional values" are framed as a moral order that the state must protect. This concept shifts moral disagreements and worldview competition in the public sphere to the matter of collective security. An important aspect is that "Traditional values" are also linked to the sovereignty discourse; as a result, they are externalized and securitized. Edenborg

explains that anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-gender narratives not only represent conservative perspectives about social change, but also construct social issues as a threat of destabilization, as gender related topics are externally promoted agendas by the West (Edenborg, 2023, pp. 178-179). Consequently, moral conservatism is removed from internal discussion and is reframed as resistance to foreign influence. That perception justifies the state's position as a defensive actor, defending society's social structure and the state against a foreign agenda. This framing can be described as boundary-setting, creating a hierarchy between "normal" and "dangerous". Deviation is not considered illegal, but it is publicly delegitimized. This delegitimization is justified in the name of child protection and public morals (Katsuba, 2025, pp. 2-4). The effectiveness of this approach is reinforced by biopolitical framing. Dorogov discusses how moral narratives are used in public health and demography, particularly in HIV policy, where certain behaviors are framed as threats to the nation's survival (Dorogov, 2025, p.12). Conservatism links morality and survival, thereby justifying the state's role in safeguarding.

According to Edenborg, "traditional values" are part of the broader strategy of stabilization during a period of uncertainty. The author discusses that conservative moral narratives are used in moments of crisis to shift public perception of the regime towards continuity and order. "When Putin returned to the presidency in 2012, facing a legitimacy crisis manifested in antigovernment protests, the government fully embraced the idea of 'traditional values' as a guiding notion for both domestic and foreign policy" (Edenborg, 2023, p. 177).

Other than that, "traditional values" play a significant role in the enemy building process. The logic is the same as in the case of "foreign agents". As the issues this framework fights against are framed as a foreign agenda, members of these groups are externalized as the topic itself.

> *In the Russian context, Nikita Sleptcov (2018) defines it as an 'oppressive strategy [that] has been used to legitimize the current authoritarian political regime, to unify national identity, and to present the country's particular values as distinct from those of the West (Katsuba, 2025, p. 2).*

War, Ukraine, and the West in the Russian Political Discourse

The Russo-Ukraine war is central to the Russian political context and discourse. Regime discourse explains the war against Ukraine not as a bilateral conflict but as the culmination of a broad geopolitical and ideological confrontation. Across the literature, the

invasion is portrayed as a forced and defensive response to an externally driven political process rather than an initiative invasion. “The Kremlin attempted to justify Russia’s invasion as a form of collective heroism to defend and protect the prosperity of the Russian nation and humanity in general” (Zavershinskaia, 2024, p. 29). This narrative removes war from the realm of political choice and shifts it to the logic of inevitability, where that violence was the only option amid increasing threats.

The characteristic of this explanation is again the externalization of causality. Instead of discussing Russia-Ukraine relations, Russian discourse constantly puts the responsibility outside of the bilateral context. Ukraine is framed not as an autonomous, sovereign political actor with its own interests, but as a territory in which external forces operate. Portraying Ukraine as a pawn of the “Collective West” allows the war to be explained as resistance to geopolitical threats rather than as an intervention against a sovereign country (Zavershinskaia, 2024, pp. 27-30).

Within the architecture of the “collective West” narrative, Russian media discourse conflates the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the European Union, the United States, and, more broadly, liberal democracies into a single actor. This merger simplifies the geopolitical environment and shifts conflict into systemic confrontation (Brusylovska & Maksymenko, 2023, p. 223). The West is portrayed as an expansionist and hegemonic actor, linking this narrative to the idea of inevitability, and war becomes part of long-standing resistance against Western domination. Addressing this, Putin declared the invasion not only a necessary response to threats but also a preventive and protective measure (Zavershinskaia, 2024, p. 233). A key aspect is that this narrative does not require evidence, as it relies on moral and strategic ideas. The moral side of the Russian political discourse is important, as Putin justified his actions by naming it a “special military operation” to protect the population in Eastern Ukraine from the “evil” Ukrainian government and Western allies (Zavershinskaia, 2024, p. 227). In eastern Ukraine, Russia considered the “Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics,” which were recognized in February 2022. Moreover, the key moral layer of this justification was the narrative of “denazification”. “Denazification” has several important components that make up a complete conception. Firstly, the Russian government portrays Ukraine as the aggressor. Representatives of Russian political elites alleged that the Ukrainian government and the Ukrainian army were committing ‘bloody’ crimes against civilians, including Russian citizens. The Ukrainian government is framed as a neo-nazi regime, or controlled by a neo-nazi regime.

On the other hand, the international community's response to Russia's attack on Ukraine was framed as "Russophobia". So to summarize this narrative, the West controls Ukraine to destabilize independent Russia, while the US and EU support Nazism and Russophobia globally, without recognizing Ukraine's 'crimes against humanity'. Furthermore, from a historical perspective, Russia always had its mission to fight against Western Nazism (referring to World War 2), Russia has to fight for this mission again and 'demilitarise and denazify' Ukraine (Arribas et al., 2023; Brusylovska & Maksymenko, 2023; Casier, 2025b; Locoman & Lau, 2025; Polegkyi, 2023; Zavershinskaia, 2024).

Other than the "moral" aspects of the war justification, Russian narratives portray Ukraine as a corrupt and self-destructive country. Polegkyi explained how Ukrainian political elites are portrayed as corrupt actors who sacrifice their own population to advance Western interests (Polegkyi, 2023, p. 102). This narrative serves several goals; it delegitimizes Ukrainian sovereignty, puts blame on political elites and the West, and sabotages Ukraine's European integration (Polegkyi, 2023).

The personalized blame plays a significant role in this process. Zelenskyy is constructed as an illegitimate, corrupt, controlled neo-nazi leader who is a drug addict. Also, questioning Zelensky's Ukrainian roots and aligning with being Jewish, but in a negative context (Brusylovska & Maksymenko, 2023, pp. 225-226). This narrative is used to sabotage the partnership of Western allies and the Ukrainian government and cause a legitimacy crisis domestically in Ukraine. There is strong discourse about the war's dynamics, as Russian discourse promotes the narrative that Ukraine is losing the war (Brusylovska & Maksymenko, 2023, pp. 231-232).

Wartime discourse is not confined to international discourse but also plays an important role in domestic politics. In war narratives, ambiguity is reduced, and alternative perceptions are marginalized. Political authority of the state increases, and war becomes a central organizing concept of the political agenda, limiting the political sphere to acceptable interpretations (Faure, 2025, pp. 269-271). War is used to hasten regime transformation and easily normalize extra measures by governing elites. Repressions appear justified, and hardship is reframed as a patriotic struggle.

Belarus

Belarus before the 2020 protests

Before the important processes of 2020, Belarus was already considered one of the most consolidated authoritarian regimes in the post-Soviet space. As Stephen Hall explains, the evolution of the Belarusian regime was shaped by preventive authoritarianism and authoritarian learning from external failure, more specifically from the experience of Color Revolutions in the post-Soviet sphere (S. G. F. Hall, 2023, pp. 122-123). From the start of the 2000s, Belarusian authorities considered democratization, elections, and protests to be systemic threats to regime stability, requiring preventive, well-planned actions.

Accordingly, Hall (2023, pp. 59-63) perceives Belarus as an early adopter of post-Soviet counter-revolutionary practices, arguing that authoritarian learning accelerated following regime changes in Serbia (2000), Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), and Kyrgyzstan (2005). The Belarusian regime observed developments in the region and learned that electoral moments accompanied by civil society mobilization and external support could trigger regime collapse. This lesson reframed pluralism as a security issue and increased the importance of systemic prevention of civil mobilization.

The 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine was vital for Minsk, as the geographic, political, and cultural context was relevant and comparable to Belarus. According to Hall (2023, p. 60), research documents that Belarusian embassy staff attended protests in Kyiv, observing their organization, symbols, tactics, and leadership dynamics, and reporting directly to security institutions in Minsk. These observations informed the regime not only of abstract concepts, but also of concrete counter-mobilization, surveillance, and intimidation practices. “The Belarusian regime learned the apparent lessons of Ukraine’s Orange Revolution better than the opposition” (S. G. F. Hall, 2023, p. 60).

This learning process translated into a preventive, counter-revolutionary governance strategy that combined controlled pluralism and repression. This strategy was using institutionalized preventive repression to avoid the backlash with visible mass violence.

Politics towards civil society followed the same strategy. The regime used conditional tolerance but set strict boundaries. According to Bindman and Chulitskaya (2025, pp. 1413-1413), civil society organizations were allowed to operate before 2020, but only on the condition that they avoid advocacy, opposition coordination, and civil rights-based activism. This approach addressed the risk of possible anti-regime coordination and consolidation

originating in civil society. In the context of the counter-colored revolution, the Belarusian regime has been adopting legislation targeting civil society, including measures affecting the right to receive funds. Since 2011, criminal liability has been introduced for violations of procedures for receiving foreign aid (Beltsiuhova, 2023, p.33). These laws followed the logic of the "Foreign agent" framework, which became a core piece of evidence of authoritarian learning.

Other than that, narrative learning played a crucial role. The Belarusian authorities evaluated narratives from the Ukrainian context aimed at delegitimizing opposition, civil society, and protests. For example, in line with Yanukovych's framing of protesters as paid by the United States, the Belarusian regime avoided anti-American narratives in this context. It looked for "alternative enemy", particularly Poland and Lithuania (S. G. F. Hall, 2023, pp. 60-61).

Important research by Bodrunova and Blekanov presents that this authoritarian model coexisted with limited pluralism. They analyzed oppositional YouTube channels prior to 2020, demonstrating that digital platforms enabled the existence of a critical public (Bodrunova & Blekanov, 2021, pp. 10-11). These spaces were not directly political; therefore, direct state control was limited, and it became communicative infrastructure.

Logic of power consolidation

The post-election protest is a significant checkpoint for the Belarusian authoritarian regime, as it fundamentally changed its governance model, which was built on a preventive counter-revolutionary model. Unlike earlier episodes, the 2020 mobilization was characterized by an unprecedented scale of protest that exceeded the regime's expectations and pushed beyond manageable limits (Stykow, 2023, p. 815). According to Stykow, 15-20% of urban adults participated in at least one protest, placing the Belarus protests on a level with the Orange Revolution and Euromaidan. Other than the qualitative perspective, the social composition of the protest was the crucial factor. This mobilization extended beyond the oppositional politicians and political activists, and involved industrial workers, women-led groups, regional communities, and even those who previously did not participate in political confrontations. This diffusion damaged the well-tested strategy of regimes to mark different opinions as elite-driven and marginal. According to Hall, authoritarian regimes that rely on preventive authoritarian learning are vulnerable when protests stop being concentrated organizationally (S. G. F. Hall, 2023).

Furthermore, that specific aspect was the catalyst for approach shifts in Belarus. The organizational shift of the 2020 protests eroded the effectiveness of the regime's approach, which relied on centralized leadership and structures. decentralized, adaptive, and network-based protest neutralized the regime's ability to counterattack through targeted arrests.

Digital communication infrastructures contributed to this decentralization. Rudnik explains that platforms like Telegram, Instagram, and Viber were used not only for spreading information but also as operational infrastructures that facilitated coordination, emotional reinforcement of protesters, and instant tactical adaptation (Rudnik, 2025, pp. 229-235). protesters were using these platforms to change protest locations, spread information about police movements, and other tactical details.

An important aspect of the protests is that excessive and massive violence during the first days after the election acted as a catalyst. These actions led to mobilization rather than deterrence (Stykow, 2023). Instead of intimidation, violence gave the protests momentum. "This dynamic cannot be explained by the 'focal point' model of electoral fraud. Rather, the mechanism that set the second protest wave in motion was 'backlash mobilization,' following an act of government repression" (Stykow, 2023, p. 813).

To discuss that aspect from an institutional perspective, the 2020 protests showed the limitations of under-institutionalized repression. Even though the Belarusian state demonstrated its coercive capacity, reliance on episodic deterrence indicated a lack of optimization of repressive bodies to manage the process in the long term, especially during mass mobilization.

Lukashenko's responsive strategy to mass protests relied on escalation and operational repression. Instead of attempting negotiation or using selective and targeted repression, the state framed the protests as a security emergency, which justified immediate response, mass violence, and detention. Multiple studies note that the response involved unprecedented levels of force used. Way and Tolvin mention that repressive measures included flashbang grenades, batons, and rubber bullets indiscriminately against protesters, journalists, and even bystanders (Way & Tolvin, 2023, p. 788). This indiscriminacy is the key aspect of the repression, as it was not targeting the leadership or specific behavior, but instead aimed to maximize participation costs for the whole population. Tolvin's analysis of repression explains that the state used an operational spectrum of strategies, ranging from intimidation to mass arrests, beatings, and tear gas and water cannons (Tolvin, 2025, pp. 3-4). The regime used tactical deception to confuse protesters. Police officers often hide themselves in ambulance vehicles and attack protesters from there, to blur the boundary between emergency services and coercive forces, increasing

uncertainty, and spreading perceptions of ubiquitous surveillance control (Way & Tolvin, 2023, p. 788). Another central part of the regime's response was high-volume detention. In the first days of the protests, approximately seven thousand people were arrested, targeting broad categories of protesters and bystanders to deter further protests. Coercion did not stop with the arrest; instead, images of activists in confinement, beaten and tortured, were spread massively. In detention centers, systematic beatings and torture became a widespread tactic(Tolvin, 2025, p. 2; Way & Tolvin, 2023, p. 788). With arrests and intimidation operations, Belarus was systematically using masked and plainclothes officers. In Belarusian and Russian public discourse, these actors are referred to as Tikhari ("quiet ones"). Arrests were often carried out by unidentified state agents who operated in cooperation with formal forces. Other than Tikhari, few sources mention the use of "Titushki" (slang word for hired thugs by the authorities to intimidate or attack protesters) against the protests.

Brawny men wearing facemasks and brandishing truncheons appeared on the streets of Minsk during the Sunday rally and began randomly attacking pedestrians and demonstrators. In one incident, widely shared on social media, a group of titushki attacked a group of demonstrators, knocking some to the ground, where they were beaten with truncheons (Aris, 2020).

Elite-targeting became an additional layer of repression over time. Way and Tolvin (2023, pp. 788-789) document that opposition candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya was forced to make a statement calling on protesters to cease. After alleged threats against her children, she had to leave Belarus.

After the first phase of the protests, the Belarusian regime entered the new stage of authoritarian consolidation. Repression recalibrated to a systematized mode of rule, aiming to eliminate future protests. Post-2020 governance adopted a zero-tolerance approach to political activities, including forms of activism previously considered non-political. After the escalating phase, the regime started the institutionalization of repression. The main focus shifted from street violence to the legal, judicial, and administrative fields. Court, prosecutors, and other administrative bodies were integrated into the repressive apparatus. Neutralizing activists by arresting, imprisoning, or giving criminal sentences to politicians, delegitimizing civil society, and consolidating power in Lukashenko's rule, despite the awakening of the Belarusian population.

A significant tool for Lukashenko to consolidate power was rhetoric-building. Along with protests, the Belarusian regime's discourse became structured and focused on foreign interference. Like Russia, Belarusian authorities shifted focus from domestic political conflict

to external, geopolitical matters. They portrayed protesters, opposition, and civil society as pawns of foreign actors who seek regime change in Belarus (Parker, 2021, p. 19). According to Parker's analysis of pro-Kremlin narratives in Belarus, the government linked the political process to geopolitics, specifically Western governments and their intelligence services. The logic of externalization aligns with Russia's narratives.

The well-known "collective west" narrative was also used in Belarus, especially in the context of the 2021-2022 migration crisis. This narrative positioned Belarus as a state under siege, with actions framed as defensive responses to external threats and pressures(Yeliseyeu, 2024, pp. 91-92). Mirrored narratives for justifying state behavior express the rhetorical authoritarian learning involving Russia and Belarus.

The literature shows that conspiracy theories serve as a key mechanism for linking domestic political processes to broader contexts, especially the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. Gentile and Kragh (2022, pp. 976-979) explain that these conspiracies portray protests and opposition as outcomes of foreign influence. In their discourse, Ukraine appears not as an independent political actor, but as an instrument of the West. This narrative frames the pro-Western political trajectory as evidence of dangers and consequences (Gentile & Kragh, 2022, pp. 991-992). Framing Ukraine as manipulated and politically illegitimate endorses the idea that avoiding similar outcomes in Belarus is necessary. Conspiracy narratives also use Euromaidan to show that external forces took over Ukraine, and the war is its consequence. This narrative delegitimizes domestic opposition and also blames the West for having the will to destabilize the post-Soviet sphere (Gentile & Kragh, 2022, p.991). Other than that, Belarusian propaganda underreports setbacks and loses the Russian forces' experience, while downplaying Ukrainian achievements. Pro-government media frames Belarus as a peaceful country with peacekeeping as its objective. This strategy is especially used in comparison to Ukraine, where they report the war's human costs to strengthen public support for Belarus's peacekeeping role (Katerynych, 2023, pp. 32-33).

Hungary

Hungary is an analytically significant case because it represents illiberal governance within the EU, adding a crucial layer to this research in the Georgian context. Hungary's experience shows an authoritarianization process through ideas, law, and discourse.

Hungarian illiberalism emerged from conservative networks that held skeptical attitudes towards democracy and neoliberalism. Using conservative narratives and populist rhetoric, Viktor Orbán shifted the ideological mainstream toward rejecting liberalism in favor of political order, nationhood, and sovereignty (Buzogány & Varga, 2018, p. 822).

Even though Hungarian illiberalism does not advocate abandoning democracy entirely, it offers an alternative form of democracy grounded in moral order and national sovereignty. This idea can be linked to the concept of Russian sovereign democracy. The Hungarian government presents an illiberal government as the solution to liberal pluralism, framing it as ideologically dominant rather than politically neutral (Pirro & Stanley, 2022, pp. 90-91).

Sovereignty is a core principle in Hungarian illiberal discourse. In contrast, Russian discourse frames sovereignty as both a legal concept and a permanent target of attacks and threats by other actors. The most important external actor is the European Union. Liberal democracy and the EU are reinterpreted as mechanisms against national self-determination and sovereignty (Buzogány & Varga, 2018, p. 812). Conflict with the EU is framed as an existential struggle for political autonomy; therefore, disagreements, for example, over the rule of law, are presented as evidence of "Brussels" domination (Pirro & Stanley, 2022, pp.97-98). This narrative allows the Hungarian government to transform external disagreement into domestic legitimation, portraying itself as the protector of national sovereignty.

Mirrored in Minsk and Moscow, Budapest uses a sovereignty narrative to delegitimize opposition, civil society, and media institutions domestically, framing them as agents of foreign influence (Metodieva, 2025, p. 8). This narrative has been extended on the institutional level, adopting initiatives against civil society and media in the name of "Foreign agent". Same narratives, adjusted to the domestic context, are used to justify illiberal governance and authoritarian trajectories.

The government strategically marginalized and delegitimized critical NGOs through its narratives and legal frameworks. The Hungarian government created the concept of acceptable and unacceptable forms of civil activity. This approach incentivized co-optation from civil society, as organizations that aligned with governmental priorities were integrated into funding structures. In contrast, rights-based and advocacy organizations remained targets of suspicion

and pressure (Gerő et al., 2023, pp.18-19). This strategy helps the regime to maintain the formal appearance of pluralism. As a result, the government managed to reduce civil society's mobilizational capabilities.

Another similar narrative between Russia and Hungary is traditional values. Hungary uses moral panic to redefine the political process and present it from a cultural and moral perspective. Permanent crisis and fear-mongering campaigns against enemies activate "moral panic buttons," through which articulated threats to children, families, and values are politicized (Sik & Krekó, 2025, pp.6-7). These panics are repeatedly mobilized, especially in moments of political competition, to justify state intervention against a "liberal agenda" such as gender, sexuality, and other "existential threats" to traditional values. Government-affiliated media discourses use narratives that portray liberal norms as a morally corrosive ideology, positioning the state as the guardian of culture and values (Tamássy et al., 2025, pp. 678-679).

For Hungary's illiberal transformation, the governing party Fidesz used specific legal instruments. They relied on constitutional amendments and expanded cardinal laws (a type of legislation that requires a two-thirds parliamentary majority for adoption and future modification). These mechanisms were used to consolidate power through electoral regulation, judicial reforms, and media governance (Pirro & Stanley, 2022, pp.91-92). The government also used memory and cultural laws to define acceptable narratives and symbols for political actors. Together, these strategies express democratic erosion and represent the institutional level of authoritarian learning.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is now a critical part of Hungarian governance. War provided Hungary with the opportunity to promote its sovereignty-based worldview in a geopolitical context. Rather than supporting a sovereign state under invasion from another country, Hungarian sovereignty ideology emphasized "staying out" of the war, framing non-involvement as responsible leadership and the protection of the Hungarian people's interests. However, as an EU member, "staying out" favored Russia. EU support for Ukraine and sanctions against Russia were framed as dragging Hungary into a Foreign war against its own nation. Hungary used those disagreements as evidence of external interference (Kallius, 2025, p.201). Within this framework, Hungary positioned itself toward Russia not as an ally but as a general peace lobby, criticizing sanctions while requesting pragmatic, interest-driven policies from the EU. Recent Vsquare's investigative report (Cieśla et al., 2026), which leaked Lavrov-Szijjártó calls, shows why Hungary's illiberalism should not be discussed only in the frameworks of Euroscepticism, populism, or far-right trends, but as part of an authoritarian

promotion logic. In leaked recordings, Hungarian officials allegedly brief Moscow on EU discussions, forward Ukraine-related documents, and choose Russia-compatible narratives to slow Ukraine's accession. To sum up, the Ukraine war served as a discursive catalyst, helping the government justify its Euroscepticism, consolidate power, and enhance domestic legitimacy.

Chapter 4.2: Critical Discourse Analysis

This section examines the discourse of Georgian Dream as a primary rhetorical dimension that contributes to the observation of authoritarian learning in the Georgian case. This section does not identify or prove the existence of authoritarian learning. However, it unpacks the evolution and structure of Georgian Dream's discourse, enabling this thesis to capture the internal logic of discourse production. The outcomes of the analysis are then interpreted through the authoritarian learning framework in the expert interviews and final synthesis of research methods.

Start of Russo-Ukraine War (February 2022)

The first checkpoint in Georgian Dream's discourse for this thesis runs from Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 to February 2023, when the first Foreign Agents Law was initiated. In this period, the dominant topic for Georgian Dream was structured around war, while anti-Western narratives were more passive. Georgian Dream reacted to the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine with a dual discourse. In the early statements, both Gharibashvili and Kobakhidze used formal solidarity with Ukraine. They underscore the importance of peace and the terrible consequences of armed conflict. Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili has repeatedly strongly criticized Russia for its aggressive actions and called on the international community to act. However, that formal solidarity was noticeably artificial. Even though formal statements showed signs of solidarity, practical distancing from the conflict was evident, leading Georgian Dream to add a domestic layer to its discourse by delegitimizing the opposition. Very quickly, the war became not only an external event, but was also linked to opposition from several perspectives. Firstly, they repeatedly underlined that during the 2008 Georgia-Russia war, Former President Saakashvili made several provocative mistakes that led to its escalation. According to Gharibashvili, he shared that mistakes were made on the Ukrainian side. With that phrase, Gharibashvili activated memories of the previous war and already linked the oppositional party "United National Movement" to escalation and destabilization. This labeling did not only focus on the past. However, it addressed the current opposition's claim that their criticism of Georgian Dreams' distancing was caused by sabotaging peace and by a motivation to "repeat" the war in Georgia and open a second front of war there. Gharibashvili justified the distancing on grounds of national interest. The day after, when the de facto president of the occupied Tskhinvali region, Anatoly Bibilov, noted

that they should expect provocations from the Georgian side, Irakli Gharibashvili, the Georgian Prime Minister, stated that Georgia would not join sanctions against Russia, due to national interests. In this phase, the main argumentative logic is that the government speaks from the position of the only actor capable of preserving peace, while stronger action is dangerous and irresponsible.

This pragmatic distancing was noticed on the Ukrainian side, and the relationship between the Georgian and Ukrainian governments grew tense. That is a significant checkpoint at which narratives become increasingly anti-Ukrainian. Firstly, they personally link members of the Ukrainian government to the United National Movement, which is accused of aspiring to start a war in Georgia. Officials framed pro-Ukrainian rallies as anti-state. Firstly, to increase public sensitivity to the conflict and downplay the Ukrainian fight for independence, they highlighted the war's consequences while maintaining a tone of solidarity. Other than that, they accused the Ukrainian side of wanting Georgian kids and women to be killed, as they supported the war in Georgia. They accused Ukraine of being pro-Russian in the recent past.

Georgian Dream's position toward the Ukrainian government was that it would resolve those tensions only when Ukraine would cut its ties to the Georgian opposition. Irakli Kobakhidze directly attacked the Ukrainian government, saying: "There is a direct expressed desire on the part of the Ukrainian authorities for Georgia to become a second front"(Q_40, see Appendix 1[1]). He was using personal insulting words against Ukrainian officials and was linking them to President Saakashvili. Even harsher, he used the names of Mikheil Saakashvili and David Arakhamia (Chairman of the majority faction "Servant of the People" in the Rada of Ukraine) as insults against journalists. In this phase, Irakli Kobakhidze used the first version of the conspiracy now well known as the Global War Party. In the first version, the United National Movement was labeled a war party that was dragging Georgia into war. This conspiracy initially involved only UNM; later, the Ukrainian side was added, and eventually it became a worldwide conspiracy. Before the conspiracy took the form of a Global War Party, Kobakhidze stated with CNN that there is "serious power" whose interest is to drag Georgia into war and create problems. But because the Ukraine crisis was sensitive to Georgians, they made several formal decisions in support of Ukraine.

Even though on the first days of the war, Irakli Gharibashvili was strict towards Russia, later Georgian Dream's discourse excluded Russia from the topic. The Prime Minister stated

[1] Direct quotations are referenced using Q_[Number] format, which addresses the numbered list of direct quotations from Appendix 1

that an economic partnership with Russia is crucial for Georgia and that any economic trade is welcome.

Taken together, Georgian Dream's early war discourse already contained elements of authoritarian narratives. At the level of nomination, Georgian Dream is divided into protectors of peace and radicals who want to drag Georgia to war. At the predication level, the government labeled itself as responsible, realist, and peacebuilder, while the opposition was marked as a provocateur, extremist power with anti-statist goals. On the level of justification, refusal to join sanctions was justified through survival and national interest. Moreover, the distance to Ukraine was justified with the threats of being dragged into war by Ukraine-affiliated political powers domestically. Moreover, in addressing those arguments, they frame themselves as the monopolists of peace. At the intensification level, we can see that at the start of the conflict, their narratives are soft and solidarity-oriented, and once they face serious opposition in practice, they intensify them with the harsher language of "war parties" and "second fronts."

Beyond the war-centered and opposition-delegitimizing rhetoric, the same period also reveals early stages of anti-Western narratives. From February 2022 to February 2023, Georgian Dream continued to prioritize pro-European vocabulary while avoiding open confrontation. The first form of criticism of the West came from a Ukrainian perspective: that efforts to support Ukraine were not enough. This can be considered as a pro-Ukrainian narrative, but later another layer was added, that the West did not impose sanctions on Russia after the 2008 war, which altogether questioned the security guarantees of pro-Europeanism. Gharibashvili says they will not be able to join NATO until Georgia solves the issues of territorial Integrity.

On the other hand, he does not specify whether he trusts Putin. The first clearly anti-European narrative was used to defend Bidzina Ivanishvili against sanctions. Irakli Kobakhidze connected sanctions to the Ukraine war. He believed sanctions were used as a pressure mechanism to drag Georgia into war by the West. On the one hand, the ruling party interpreted European integration as a "civilizational choice" for Georgia. They thanked European institutions for their support and maintained EU integration as a strategic objective. An important note is that during that time, Irakli Gharibashvili was softer towards Western partners and avoided confrontation, while Irakli Kobakhidze already started using sharper language. But still, criticism of Western partners gradually entered Georgian Dream's discourse. The first target of these narratives was Members of the European Parliament. They were labeled as unimportant, unserious politicians with lobbying links to UNM. Irakli Kobakhidze compared the European Parliament resolution to the Soviet Union's abstract resolution. In this sense, anti-

Westernism does not appear at the start of the time frame; rather, we first notice suspicions towards the West.

This made the discourse towards EU integration contradictory but functional. Georgian Dream did not directly reject Europeanization. They preserved the symbolic legitimacy of the EU path. They formally remained pro-European, but started to question European institutions.

We can also notice the first forms of sovereignty narratives in this period. Sovereignty was invoked as a defensive argument against external pressure in cases of sanctions, domestic justice reforms, and the justification of foreign policy. This narrative was used not as a constitutional principle, but as a shield to distance itself from the pressure of the Ukraine war and delegitimize foreign criticism. Pro-Ukrainian rallies were labeled as anti-state. Protests towards fuel prices were linked to UNM, which was blamed for causing destabilization. It means Georgian Dream had already been using this narrative in its protests, even before the protests against the Foreign Agents Law.

Another important evolution in the later part of this period was the early formation of narratives about foreign influence. Firstly, as mentioned, narratives of foreign influence and interest were used to oppose the Ukrainian government. Nevertheless, later, European institutions got involved. Therefore, Georgian Dream created a discursive foundation for the further development of this narrative. Ukrainian officials, Members of the European Parliament, embassies, NGOs, and oppositional parties were accused of coordinating strategies and objectives. However, in their critical narratives, Kobakhidze and Gharibashvili sought to balance with softer or even positive statements towards external actors. For example, Georgian Dream initiated a plan to restrict several foreign-funded NGOs from spectating elections as they were supporting revolutionary scenarios. Irakli Kobakhidze said he was surprised by the US embassy's support for those organizations.

Regarding the US embassy's response, he said the ambassador insulted Georgian politicians and that the possible reduction in funding for Georgian NGOs was not the government's business, as the US usually operates through NGOs. He also accused the US of interfering with Georgian sovereignty. Nevertheless, Gharibashvili thanks the US for its support for Georgia's European integration. They used words suggesting that the era of following foreign directives was over, yet they applied for EU membership.

To sum up, the first checkpoint of analysis shows that Georgian Dream’s illiberal acceleration began not with openly anti-Westernism, but through the gradual interconnection of peace, war, selective pro-Europeanism, sovereignty, protest securitization, anti-opposition,

and the logic of foreign influence. What later becomes a crystal-clear, institutionalized, authoritarian repertoire in this period has a visible discursive form.

First „Foreign Agents Law"(February 2023)

Initiation of the Foreign Agents Law in early 2023 is a significant marker of a new stage in Georgian Dream's discourse. If in the previous checkpoint narratives were dominated by war, peace, and avoidance of escalation, in this phase, we notice broader, more stable foreign influence, manipulated agents, and defensive sovereignty narratives.

As mentioned, Georgian Dream has already created a strong foundation for foreign agents' narratives in previous checkpoints. Nevertheless, in this phase, we see a clear shift from suspicions and discursive attacks to an institutionalized frame of foreign influence. By early 2023, Irakli Kobakhidze had already been normalizing the phrases "agents" and "spies" in relation to the opposition. He still tried to explain that spies were not connected to agents, since agents follow directives from abroad. The main argument against the criticism of the word "agent" was transparency. He claimed that organizations with foreign funding had more funding than they needed. Moreover, that funding was used to slander the church and overthrow the government, in collaboration with radical opposition. Addressing the criticism of similarity to the Russian analog, he accused US representatives of lying. He said that the Georgian version was much more developed and a copy of the American one (FARA). The law suffered significant reputational damage when the public dubbed it "Russian law"; as a result, demand for a response was high. In this way, the law combined previous suspicions into naming practice. "Foreign influence: became a bridge which connected civil society, protests, opposition, and Western actors into one chain to attack. They changed the concept of the enemy: before, the enemy was domestic radical powers that aspired to provoke war; now, it is a domestic actor under external control.

This logic of discourse also transformed positions towards opposition. In this phase, rhetoric became more systematic. The opposition was repeatedly called radical, extremist, violent, and fascist. The Georgian Dream weakened the separation between street protests, civil society, and party opposition. Irakli Gharibashvili even personally blamed the European Union for using President Saakashvili as an agent/spy. Labeling opposition as "extremist" intensified. They were accused of organizing radical manifestations. During that phase, opposition was not

only delegitimized but was labeled as anti-state actors, whose political existence threatened peace and stability. This language moved party politics from competition to internal defense.

Georgian Dream's well-known strategy to label all oppositional parties as one, the United National Movement, has developed even further. The main target of this strategy was President Salome Zourabichvili. The Georgian Dreams' attack on Zourabichvili was not caused by disagreements over specific statements but aimed to delegitimize her and her institutional autonomy. Georgian Dream placed her inside the same oppositional camp as other politicians. Her pro-European criticism of the ruling party's foreign policy, democratic backslide, and distancing from Western actors and Ukraine was labeled as illegitimate. In addition to labeling, she also received warnings and threats that she would be taken to criminal court and arrested by Irakli Kobakhidze.

As protest intensity increased, the discursive response intensified. During the March Protests against the Foreign Agents Law, the protests were actively framed as non-civic reactions to the legislation. The protest was labeled as dangerous and externally encouraged to destabilize the country. However, the attack on the protestors was not only delegitimization, but also inserting protests into a broad transnational context of externally supported regime change. One note from March 2023 was especially important.

"I will tell you that the Georgian Yanukovych is in prison, and his name is Mikheil Saakashvili. This is one thing and another, as for the Maidan in general, what did the Maidan bring to Ukraine - the very next year, Ukraine had a war, during which they lost Crimea and a large part of Luhansk and Donetsk, the war that is in Ukraine today is a continuation of all this. In total, Ukraine has lost 20 percent of its territory. This is the result of the very processes that the radicals want in Georgia, which Viola von Cramon supports."

– Irakli Kobakhidze (Q_69)

Kobakhidze argued that Euromaidan caused the war in Ukraine, and similar scenarios were organized in Georgia by the EU, specifically Viola Von Cramon. That scenario needed to be achieved using opposition and NGOs organizing protests. This quote effectively shows how Georgian Dream uses interconnected narratives to offer an alternative explanation of the process. Protests were often called fascist, as activists were getting paid and were linked to opposition and served revolutionary scenarios.

In the same period, anti-Western narratives became more systematic. The main shift was that criticism of Western actors no longer implicated specific institutions. The first and well-known pillar was the claim that the West intended to drag Georgia into the war. Even

though this conspiracy was already introduced in the previous phase, it became more structured and more direct towards partners here. They accused the EU and the USA of using sanctions as pressure to involve Georgia in the war. Irakli Gharibashvili stated that granting candidate status was used as a form of pressure to open “a second front” in Georgia. Kobakhidze accused Western partners of encouraging the ongoing territorial integrity of Georgia through war. “Second Front” Narrative was often linked to a conspiracy of revolutionary scenarios. In that pillar, the West was not only portrayed as a dangerous geopolitical power but also as a hidden force that attempted to engineer regime change in Georgia. With that narrative, Georgian Dream was delegitimizing protest, framing it as externally encouraged, and also invoking anti-Westernism. Kobakhidze accused United States Agency for International Development (USAID) of funding the training of revolutionary scenarios using Georgian NGOs. This narrative connected embassies, international organizations, NGOs, media, protests, oppositions, and justified the Foreign Agents Law in its entirety. Earlier “war party” ideas developed into a broad anti-Western interpretation.

Based on the same logic, decisions were framed as politically biased. Conspiracy was proving that the West had agents and spies in Georgia, especially in NGO’s and the opposition party. According to Kobakhidze, the initiation of the Foreign Agents law revealed those links. However, an interesting aspect is that, according to the ruling party, the relationship between the “agents” and their “owners” was not always top-down. Sometimes, they accused domestic actors of intentionally harming Georgia's interests. For example, the US State Department’s reports and spokespersons’ statements were based on biased NGO reports. The candidate status situation was caused by opposition sabotage aimed at foreign partners. They were still claiming they were the only power working for European Integration, attacking civil society and the party opposition, and, on the other hand, producing critical discourse against the EU and the U.S.

"In fact, it happened that another agent pardoned one agent. This proves that there are forces that want to incite polarization in Georgia. The president did not even consider Georgian society worthy of an explanation of her decision. Several MEPs had information about the pardon; that is, the Georgian president considers himself accountable not to Georgian society but to the odious MEPs and their patrons. This speaks volumes about whose dictates the Georgian president acts. He acts according to external dictates."

- Irakli Kobakhidze (Q_83)

These anti-Western narratives also led to the concept of sovereignty. Interference in domestic politics became a regular anti-Western narrative. Western criticism was no longer a regular disagreement, but an illegitimate violation of sovereignty. The ruling party accused US ambassadors and American judges of interfering in Georgian politics. Sanctions against the ex-Prosecutor were described as biased and unfair and would not be followed or implemented by the Georgian side.

Similar to Russian Sovereign Democracy, the Georgian sovereignty narrative was also using family values and anti-LGBT rhetoric against the West. Gharibashvili justified leaving the Party of European Socialists by citing ideological differences and the defense of family values, as the Socialist Party was pressuring Georgian Dream not to uphold Georgian values and cut ties with conservative Orban. Other than that, he framed LGBT visibility in France as alarming and unacceptable. Gharibashvili stated that LGBT propaganda was coming from the West and Georgia would use legislative measures against it. Kobakhidze criticized U.S. support for "Tbilisi Pride" and prioritized defending the orthodox church from attacks of "neo-bolshevik" ideology. To sum up anti-Western discourse in February 2023- April 2024, narratives were built using combinations of geopolitical, institutional, and moral arguments.

At the same time, Georgian Dream remained formally pro-European in its discourse, focusing on integration and candidate status. The ruling party repeatedly stated that Georgia deserved EU candidate status and framed itself as a pro-European power. This position was evident in statements accusing the opposition of sabotaging EU integration, in campaigns against visa liberalization, and in opposition to the granting of candidate status. Based on that narrative, candidate status was not presented as an outcome of democratic reforms and external evaluations, but as something Georgia already deserved and biased European actors and opposition lobby were not granting. They preserved the symbolic support of the European path, but increased anti-Western narratives.

In the context of the Ukraine war, Georgian Dream officials continued to use formal, emotional language of solidarity on symbolic dates, mentioning Ukraine as a friendly country, praising its heroism, and using expressions such as *'Slava Ukraini'*. However, this solidarity was limited and separate from the Ukrainian government. Firstly, the ruling party repeatedly underlined the destruction, deaths, and sufferings caused by war. This narrative was not used to express sympathy, but to strengthen the argument about what confrontation leads to. They use this narrative to argue that Georgia would face a similar catastrophe if it did not preserve peace and defend the country against both foreign and domestic pressures. Georgian Dream continued to blame the West for not doing enough to prevent a military confrontation in

Ukraine. Memories of 2008 were actively used to argue against Saakashvili's mistakes and reckless policies, and to justify their "realist" and "balanced" interpretations. Within this logic, Kobakhidze was framing Russia as an occupier, as a factual reality, rather than as an actor to be confronted and labeled an enemy. Any stronger pressure that would make Georgian Dream frame Russia as an enemy was considered an effort to drag Georgia into war.

Aside from war narratives, criticism of the Ukrainian government persisted, though less intensively. Zelenskyy and Arakhamia were criticized for their positions and for their direct links to Georgia's "radical opposition." The Ukrainian government was criticized for interfering in domestic politics and dividing the Ukrainian people.

Having traced the main developments of narratives from February 2023 to April 2024, the next step is to analyze them from the five lenses of the Discourse-Historical Approach.

At the nomination level, Georgian Dream reorganized the whole political field by naming actors. Ruling parties were repeatedly using "radicals", "extremists", "fascists" or the United National Movement against the whole oppositional field, already including President Zourabichvili. Addressing NGO's, media, protests, and other civil society groups, labels of "agents", "spies", and foreign-funded were used. Western actors used the term "owners" to describe domestic actors. This naming practice mattered as it reshaped the definition of enemy. On the other hand, towards Russia, the word enemy was avoided.

The level of predication revealed that actors were not only named or labeled, but were assigned to moral qualities. The opposition was framed as extremist, anti-state betrayals. The protest was portrayed as manipulated and funded by revolutionaries with revolutionary objectives. NGO's were portrayed as corrupt, overfunded, church-slandering power with the motivation of overthrowing the government. Western actors were presented as biased, interfering, "liberal", LGBT propagandist power with anti-Georgian motivations.

In contrast, Georgian Dream characterized itself as a defender of peace, sovereignty, and order, and as one that continues the European path with dignity despite massive challenges. This contrast moralized political field. Criticism was not only wrong, but also anti-state and dangerous for sovereignty.

The argumentation level of the discourse justified its rhetoric through several reasons. The main justification for the Foreign Agents Law was transparency, while continuing to label civil society as corrupt. They justified the law with an American analog. Law was presented as a neutral instrument to expose foreign influence rather than a restrictive measure. Justification of the foreign influence was based on the argument of sovereignty. Western criticism, sanctions, and responses towards law were framed as illegitimate interference in domestic

politics. War narratives justified defending sovereignty at the expense of tense relationships with partners. Protest, NGO activities, and opposition were linked to war and revolutionary attempts, which were "revealing" the interests of global powers to get Georgia involved in the Ukraine war. Anti-LGBT and family-values narratives added moral justification of anti-Westernism, presenting resistance to Western pressures as defending Georgian cultural and religious values.

On the level of perspectivization, Kobakhidze and Gharibashvili were framing Georgian Dream as the only force that recognized the real dangers behind the protests, foreign funding, and the confrontation with Russia. This viewpoint allowed for the reinterpretation of democratic criticism and public mobilization as destabilizing. Nevertheless, that monopoly on truth is held in the context of European integration. Georgian Dream framed itself as the only pro-European force, using all available resources to join the EU. They were blaming the opposition for undermining Georgia's chances. From that perspective, the ruling party claimed the right to define who truly represented Georgia's national interests and its people, rather than foreign agendas.

The level of intensification is one of the most important factors to analyze in this phase. The discourse hardened compared to the previous checkpoint. If anti-Western narratives were only slight suspicions, and discourse primarily focused on opposition and the Ukraine war, in this time period, narratives became direct, stable, accusatory, and interconnected. The vocabulary of "agents", "fascists", "spies", "radicals", "extremists", and "manipulated" was intensified and normalized. Even though the first initiative under the Foreign Agents Law was withdrawn, this discourse had already served as a label. Moral and political criticism of the EU intensified as well. Only softening in narratives was towards Ukraine, where tensions with the Ukrainian government were reduced but did not disappear. Georgian Dream was using Ukraine to promote fear of war with Georgia rather than attacking Ukraine.

Taken together, developed conspiracy theories, foreign agents' narratives, and harsher political language normalized and justified Georgian Dream's authoritarian steps, even though the law was not enforced during that time period.

Second „Foreign Agents Law" (April 2024)

This phase was crucial due to the pace of authoritarian acceleration. What happened in the earlier checkpoints becomes more confident and integrated in the Georgian Dreams language. An interesting aspect is that, two months after Georgia was granted candidate status,

Irakli Gharibashvili was replaced by Irakli Kobakhidze, who took the post of Prime Minister and became the main governmental face of this stage. This change is important because, even though Irakli Gharibashvili had strong anti-Western and national value-based narratives, Kobakhidze was less cautious, openly confrontational even before this replacement. In late October, Georgia has Parliamentary elections planned, which were treated as a decisive political moment for the country's future direction. This election was characterized by the importance of referenda between the West and Russia, between Democracy and Authoritarianism, and between War and Peace. After Kobakhidze became Prime Minister, the Georgian Dream initiated the Foreign Agents Law as a pre-election campaign.

The second initiation of the Foreign Agents Law in April 2024 is a significant marker, as the discourse of foreign influence became more expansive than in the first introduction. The second attempt was again justified with "Transparency", but this time the argument was immediately tied to the risk that foreign money would be used to fund radical opposition in the elections. Quickly, rhetoric becomes sharper. As protests emerge against the law, activists are described as traitors and stateless. Protests are framed as foreign-funded and revolutionary. Western diplomats are accused of interfering with Georgian sovereignty and manipulating public opinion about the law. Despite the large-scale protests, Irakli Kobakhidze promises that this time the law will definitely be passed because of the risks to sovereignty. Even more, Kobakhidze framed this law as a necessary condition for European Integration, despite European partners strongly opposing it. The Foreign Agents Law was no longer justified with transparency but was discursively framed as a defensive measure against foreign political influence.

As protests intensify, Kobakhidze uses the phrase "collective national movement" to combine NGOs, movements, and the party's opposition into a single radicalizing actor. Justification of this law also involves a cultural argument, which aims at addressing LGBT issues, family values, and drugs that foreign agents endorse. This adds a moral component to the legislative field. Irakli Kobakhidze also attacked the Venice Commission for a critical report on the law, which stated that the government was not just responding to domestic protests but was also facing international legal criticism.

During the 2024 summer and early autumn, the law's labeling provisions are in effect. Kobakhidze described the Democracy Festival as foreign interference in Georgian elections, thereby moving the foreign influence narrative directly into the electoral arena. In early September, Kobakhidze thanked NGO's who registered under the agents law and announced a state grant program. This was an important theoretical move to separate foreign-funded

“suspicious” organizations and state-controlled “responsible” organizations. 10 days before the election, Kobakhidze accused critical media of using “black money”. Moreover, even after elections, critical reactions and questioning the legitimacy of elections led NGOs to be labeled radicalized. Kobakhidze used it as an argument for the necessity of the agent's law.

Taken together, foreign agents’ law narratives followed the same logic but were intensified and used more. Previously, Georgian Dream justified the legislature with other arguments, but from the second introduction, it became the argument itself.

As before, anti-Western narratives in this phase were central, but even more direct, sharper, and more central. Kobakhidze repeatedly accused diplomats of misleading the public and interfering with Georgian sovereignty. Criticism about the law from partners was framed as evidence that foreign actors were defending their interests in Georgia. Responding to the European Parliament resolution, the Prime Minister stated that the Western attack on the Foreign Agents Law served the same goal as in 2022: opening “a second front” in Georgia.

"The main goal [of Resolution] is to facilitate the processes that failed in 2022. The leaders of these odious MEPs are driven by the sole goal of somehow artificially causing unrest in Georgian society to change the government artificially. There is a government in the country that has popular legitimacy. Today, our trust exceeds 60%. Everyone, including the odious MEPs, must accept this."

- Irakli Kobakhidze (Q_135)

Kobakhidze was framing Europe as an unreliable partner and creating a dilemma, a choice between EU integration and sovereignty. Protest and opposition were accused of slavishly choosing the European Union over Georgian sovereignty. This quote was a rare instance in which the West was presented as the problem itself.

The conspiracy of revolutionary pressure continued in this phase as well. In early May, Irakli Kobakhidze directly accused the United States of organizing a revolutionary change of government, using NGO’s as tools. Ivanishvili’s personal court case was blamed on the “Global War Party”. Kobakhidze questioned the relevance of the Venice Commission and the Strasbourg courts due to political influence. According to the ruling party, Western actors were no longer merely biased but were operating through networks such as courts and commissions. Additionally, Kobakhidze blamed the EU and the US for not allocating sufficient resources to resolving tensions between them and for the negative trend in the partnership. From this moment onward, the rhetorical dimension began eroding the long-established partnership between Georgia and Western actors. After the elections, Kobakhidze’s attacks on partners

intensified. He insulted the US and German ambassadors, branding them as private members of the UNM. Kobakhidze deepened the "Global War Party" conspiracy and stated that the EU is under the influence of "Global War Party", which was blamed for having war in Georgia as an objective. The ruling party insulted MEPs with several vulgar words. The opposition's communication to Brussels was compared to the Georgian historical betrayer Ordzhonikidze's communication to Moscow. With this quote, Kobakhidze puts an equivalence mark between Moscow and Brussels.

Finally, on 28th November, tensions between Georgian Dream and the EU reached their peak. A few hours after the European Parliament adopted critical resolutions on elections, Kobakhidze suspended EU integration until 2028, citing EU disrespect.

That time period was the last one in which Georgian Dream maintained its formal pro-European positions. However, these conditions became conditional and selective. The discourse of European integration was increasingly confrontational. Kobakhidze still stated that Georgia would join the EU, but linked this to strategic patience and sovereignty, rather than democratic standards. In August, Kobakhidze stated that Article 78 of the Constitution, which addresses EU integration, has not been removed, and that he formally supports the European path. An important narrative Georgian Dream added was integration "with dignity". They linked sovereignty to the integration process and underlined that their terms were crucial for partnership as well. It is expressed in Kobakhidze's statement, in which he argues that if the U.S. reduces spending on Georgian defense, not only Georgian but also American interests will be harmed. This shift led Georgian Dream to announce the suspension of negotiations towards European integration until 2028. Symbolically keeping their pro-European position, Georgian Dream finalized their anti-European trajectory with that decision.

As the political environment during that time period was tense, the sovereignty narrative became much more central. Sovereignty became the main argument supporting the Foreign Agents Law, replacing the transparency and FARA-similarity arguments. Criticism from diplomats and other foreign actors was avoided through sovereignty and dignity. Sovereignty became a campaign principle. Using the negative campaigning method, foreign-funded electoral activity and reactions from partners were described as an attack on Georgian sovereignty. In earlier phases, Georgian Dream had already grounded its legitimacy in peace and stability. In the later stage of 2024, legitimacy was tied to a monopolistic idea that only Georgian Dream could defend the country from foreign influence. However, after the 2024 parliamentary elections, legitimacy became a much more vulnerable aspect for Georgian Dream, as Western partners and the domestic opposition were critical of the election's fairness.

Addressing that criticism, the legitimacy crisis was not perceived as a democratic concession but was reframed in the existing language of foreign-organized destabilization. The government was continuously presenting parliament as legitimate, portraying opposition as damaged, unserious power.

In this phase, narratives about the war in Ukraine became increasingly tied to conspiracy theories and were directed at the election campaign. In early 2024, "second front" logic was still there, but was already involving conspiracy theories. The EU was accused of having a direct objective to open a second front in Georgia. Kobakhidze used Ukraine as a contrast to show that a lack of sovereignty leads a country into dependence. Sanctions were blamed on the "Global War Party". Kobakhidze accused the "Global War party" of attempting to assassinate Donald Trump and attack on Robert Fico. He underlined that powers are planning to attempt it against Bidzina Ivanishvili as well.

To justify the fight against the so-called "Global War Party", the Ukraine war was used as a main argument. He was framing threats as "Ukrainization of Georgia". The tactic of formal solidarity with the underlying Ukrainian damage was used in this phase as well. Georgian Dream used electoral banners (Figure 1 & Figure 2) comparing "destroyed Ukraine" to "developed Georgia" with the message, "No to war, choose Peace." Kobakhidze explained that these banners aim to show society the price of war and encourage voters to make election decisions based on that. On these banners, four main oppositional parties were shown on the side where the war occurred. On the developed and peaceful side, Georgian Dream was shown. This was a direct message to the voters: what choice was he referring to when he explained the price of war?

Figure 1. Georgian Dream's Banner [Translated using an AI chatbot (OpenAI, 2026)]



Figure 2. Georgian Dream's Banner [Translated using an AI chatbot (OpenAI, 2026)]



Narratives towards the 2008 war shifted as well. If, before, the previous government was criticized for mistakes, now President Saakashvili is directly portrayed as a traitor. Russia was framed as a guilty power that used Saakashvili's betrayal. The United National Movement was blamed for starting the war, reducing the guilt of Russia.

At the nomination level, Georgian Dream continuously used "agents" and "traitors." "radicals", "Collective National Movement", linked actors to "Global War Party". This approach targeted party opposition, civil society, critical media, protests, and even diplomatic actors.

At the level of predication, these actors were characterized as dangerous. Protesters were a traitorous, stateless, revolutionary, and violent group. Opposition was extremist, anti-state, fascist groups. Foreign-funded organizations were mechanisms of foreign manipulation. On the other hand, Georgian Dream framed itself as a responsible power defending dignity, sovereignty, and peace. With this tactic, Georgian Dream moralized the political field.

The argumentation was based on highly reusable logic. The second Foreign Agents Law was defended on the grounds of sovereignty, dignity, and destabilization, rather than transparency. Anti-Western rhetoric still lay on the logic of opening a second front and funding revolutionary scenarios. Foreign policy was explained using the language of "deserving" integration, but with "dignity". War was the most commonly used narrative, as the avoiding war narrative ultimately supported all the other justifications. Arguments were not separate, but increasingly supported and strengthened each other.

From this perspective, Georgian Dream spoke as the only actor recognizing the real threats. Georgian Dream portrayed itself as a force that recognized the potential threats posed by war, foreign interference, and damaged sovereignty. The ruling party framed itself as the defender of dignity and national self-respect. The ruling party was portrayed as a survival from the threats.

This checkpoint can be characterized as highly intensified discourse. In this phase, narratives became much sharper and were used in combination to address the elections and the post-election crisis. If the Foreign Agents Law was demanding arguments from Georgian Dream, in that time period, it became an argument itself. Sovereignty became a moralized claim rather than a defensive one. The war in Ukraine transformed into a direct electoral message. In general, the ruling party's discourse became harsher and more totalizing, framing laws, elections, protests, and foreign policy within a unified rhetoric.

EU integration suspension (November 2024)

The period after 28 November 2024 is marked by Georgian Dream's discourse not only as long-term strategies of consolidation but also as an urgent response to the need for regime survival. Suspending negotiations with the EU encouraged massive protests in the streets. The protest involved boycotting opposition figures, civil society, and activists, and the scale of non-affiliated citizens and civil servants increased. Georgian Dream's discourse was targeting domestic and foreign political crises.

In November 2024, anti-Western narratives entered a new stage. As the formal pro-European position disappeared, anti-Westernism in the ruling party's discourse became harder. If before discourse was preparing the government to cut ties with the EU, now anti-Western narratives have become justificatory for the decision. Kobakhidze accused the European Union of blackmailing Georgia, first with candidate status and then by opening negotiations. Kobakhidze explained the suspension with an argument of blackmail. As protest waves increased, Irakli Kobakhidze softened that narrative, stating that the EU is the one not opening negotiations and that, if it were not the case, Georgia would sign immediately. However, in contrast, the EU ambassador was accused of personally joining the radical opposition and NGOs. As protests threatened regime survival, Kobakhidze was using the last opportunities of symbolic legitimacy of the European path, while continuing constant attacks on Western actors.

From 2024 December, discourse toward the United States and the EU became much sharper. The Biden administration was accused of not wanting peace in Georgia, trying to put Donald Trump in a difficult situation, and solving both Georgian and Ukrainian issues. The U.S. ambassador was directly accused of supporting violence in Georgia. However, anti-American narratives had one significant aspect. According to Kobakhidze, Trump's inauguration would stabilize the Georgian-American relationship. With that matter, anti-Westernism framed the West as one fixed enemy, but liberal, democratic, or liberal fascist (which was mentioned during the attempt to assassinate Donald Trump as well) powers. Georgian Dream viewed Donald Trump more favorably. Moreover, the Biden administration's decisions were seen as illegitimate.

That is the reason why the logic of conspiracy theories changed drastically. Georgian Dream added another layer, the language of the Deep State. He explained that Trump and Georgian Dream had a common enemy and that Trump's victory over the Deep State would improve the situation in Georgia as well. From the biased, interventionist West, the enemy was reframed as a hidden force that operated through Western institutions. Georgian Dream reframed itself not as anti-Western, but against the Deep State.

The aggressive tone towards European partners persisted during that period. Kobakhidze was using aggressive rhetoric directly toward European leaders. For example, Emmanuel Macron was told to focus on "doomed and destroyed Ukraine", rather than Georgia.

The President of France should go and deal with Ukraine, which they sacrificed for destruction. I am talking about the real problem. I cannot comment on lies. I am commenting on the problem facing everyone — and that is a destroyed Ukraine.

- Irakli Kobakhidze (Q_229)

However, as a legitimacy crisis posed a crucial threat to regime survival, Kobakhidze repeatedly invoked the narrative of opening "a new page" in relations with the United States to restore the partnership. In Europe, the situation depended on the war in Ukraine and the Deep State's defeat. Marco Rubio's speech on Independence Day, which was addressed to the Georgian People, rather than the government, was portrayed as actions of the Deep State. Georgian Dream sought to normalize relations, but kept anti-Western narratives sharp and intense.

Kobakhidze mentioned that the ruling party was not fighting against the West, but against the Deep State. With the countries, where "Europe maintained its face", like Hungary, Georgia had a positive relationship. The EU was directly accused of punishing Georgians by

planning the suspension of visa liberalization, because the “bloody collective national movement” was not in the Government. Europe was compared to the Soviet Union, and European Bureaucrats were accused of being part of the Global War Party. He even mentioned that he is not interested in joining the EU “as it is now”.

Taken together, the anti-Western narrative shifted from suspicion to paradoxical conspiracy theories that rejected the civilizational choice that Georgian Dream had been talking about years earlier. Despite active anti-Westernism, Georgian Dream used conditional language for future normalization.

In the final phase, Georgian Dream’s Discourse towards protests, opposition, and NGOs became harder. The protest wave was not portrayed as a pro-European response to the suspension of EU negotiations, but was instead labeled radical and violent. Police violence against journalists and protesters was justified through the “radical nature” of the protests. In contrast, police actions were framed as episodic against systematic violence. Kobakhidze used the term “Natsmaidani,” combining the Ukrainian Euromaidan and the united National movement, to label the protest against a “discredited” political party. Labels of “Bolsheviks” were used, encouraging radicalization.

"*There was international coordination. In addition to the fact that foreign funding was involved in the attempt to organize this "Natsmaidani", this involvement was also absolutely coordinated. Otherwise, it is impossible that representatives of three or more countries were involved in violent actions. There was serious coordination here.*"

- Irakli Kobakhidze (Q_203)

Kobakhidze threatened politicians and civil society with legal consequences. Repressive laws addressing protests, such as banning face coverings, were presented as an urgent necessity. Police raids on the offices of opposition parties were portrayed as preventive rather than repressive. Domestic actors were not treated as autonomous actors. Imprisoned journalist and media manager Mzia Amaghlobeli, who was on a several-week hunger strike, was described as “funded from abroad” with responsibility addressed to her master/owner. Ambassadors’ visit to the Amaghlobeli trial was portrayed as proof of that funded relationship and as a violation of sovereignty.

Approaches towards the party opposition followed the same trajectory. Kobakhidze was actively using threats of imprisonment against politicians, the most significant example being President Salome Zourabichvili. This threat was caused by declaring Mikheil Kavelashvili as “the real president” during the ongoing legitimacy crisis. Kobakhidze pressured the opposition to declare repentance for boycotting and anti-state actions. Opposition leaders

were personally insulted and threatened by him. Political parties were promised that they would face a constitutional complaint that would restrict their operations. Later, Kobakhidze directly stated they were planning to ban at least 10 political parties. On that stage, Georgian Dream did not just criticize or delegitimize the opposition, but also began legally eliminating them.

In this time period, Georgian Dream used the same logic of sovereignty to justify its decisions. The ruling party was framing actors as foreign-funded, a mechanism by which foreign powers were interfering with Georgian sovereignty. Kobakhidze was presenting sovereignty not as a response to a crisis, but as an achievement for the government, for the first time in the last two centuries. From the challenge, defending sovereignty became celebratory.

Georgian Dream also used strict language to address the legitimacy crisis. After the elections with fragile legitimacy, Georgian Dream activated conspiracy theories. Both domestic and international actors who doubted the fairness of elections responded with attacks using discursive and legal mechanisms. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe/Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) report was selectively cited to portray elections as held in a free and peaceful environment, omitting the more stringent conditions.

The war in Ukraine continued to play a foundational role in discourse-building in this phase. Parallels were drawn to Euromaidan, and the opening of a second front was repeatedly invoked. As mentioned, the Biden administration was directly accused of intending to open a second front in Georgia to worsen the situation for the Trump administration. Also, Europe was insulted and criticized based on the Ukraine war, without giving a detailed context. Trump's unclear position about Ukraine was also a trigger to shift conspiracy theories from the Global War Party to the Deep State.

At the nomination level, Georgian Dream was using the same strategy, with several new layers added. The “Collective United National Movement” labeled all opposition parties under one umbrella. Protest was mentioned as an attempt of “Natsmaidani”. Words such as agents, foreign-funded, etc., continued with the addition of “Deep state agent.”

At the level of predication, actors were fully delegitimized by their intentions and by the qualities they were labeled with. Opposition was again framed as unserious, a traitor, and bloody. Western institutions are accused of blackmail, hypocrisy, and being controlled by the Deep State. Talking about qualities, Georgian Dream is identified with responsible governments that celebrate sovereignty against global powers.

Main justificatory logic remained the same. Georgia was asserting its sovereignty, while other powers, domestic and foreign, were imposing sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and

blackmail using visa liberalization. West was criticized from a civilizational perspective and moral compass, not because of national interests.

In terms of perspectivization, the ruling party portrayed itself as the only pro-Georgian actor, while others received directives from the deep state vertically.

As the narratives' foundation was laid earlier, the most important aspect is intensification, which accelerates authoritarian consolidation in Georgia. The delegitimization of protest and opposition achieved its peak during the protests. Anti-Western narratives intensified and shifted from regular suspicions to civilizational choices.

Chapter 4.3: Analysis of Expert Interviews

The expert interviews firstly addressed clarifying the theoretical foundations of this thesis and challenging the observability of authoritarian learning. As authoritarian learning is rarely visible, the interviews were used to explore how the concept can be understood and where its effects can be located.

The most important interview on the theoretical aspect of authoritarian learning was with Dr. Stephen G. F. Hall, whose publications served as the theoretical framework for this thesis. For Hall (Interview, 31 March, 2026), authoritarian learning is linked to regime survival. During the interview, authoritarian learning was described as a "palette of survival tactics" that authoritarian regimes use to remain in power (Hall, Interview, 31 March 2026). It is a survival-oriented process in which authoritarian actors identify threats, successful and failed responses elsewhere, and adjust their approaches accordingly. Hall explained that, for regime survival, being "right every single time" is important; the process by which that survival develops is significant. So, regimes learn from within, facing similar risks, which places authoritarian learning within the wider concept of authoritarian consolidation. To remain in power, authoritarian regimes adopt legal instruments, adjust propaganda, and reorganize their coercive capacity. Authoritarian learning is a process of adaptation and not a single act of copying.

According to Hall, there are several major issues regarding the observability of authoritarian learning. Firstly, regimes can imitate practices without deeper layers of it, or two regimes independently "invent" similar tactics as they face similar incentives or risks. Also, it is significantly challenging to identify "teacher" as practice might be used across a wide regional repertoire rather than through direct instruction (Hall, Interview, 31 March 2026). Therefore, this thesis examines concept learning as identifiable within patterns, its logic, its multidimensionality, and its role in regime survival and geopolitics.

Another major issue Hall explains is the lack of transparency. He discussed that researchers often try to enter the "black box" of the closed regimes (Hall, Interview, 31 March 2026). Elite networks, communication, and informal consultation are rarely public. Usually, there is no direct evidence that one regime learned something from another. Addressing that, Hall's advice was to avoid looking for a "smoking gun," but to observe the logic of variable evolution, connect variables, and create a causal chain. He also underlines the limitations of researching authoritarian learning, as there will be no direct evidence until regimes change and archives open. Therefore, according to him, the usual practice is for the research claim to be

explanatory rather than conclusive. This caution is taken into account in this thesis, as it does not claim to uncover hidden evidence of learning but rather studies observable outcomes.

Hall was also cautious with the selected strategy of identifying three dimensions. When the research design was presented to him, he agreed that discourse analysis is a relevant method and that he had conducted it himself (Hall, Interview, 31 March 2026). But he also warned that discourse is a bit vague as evidence of learning, since similar narratives are used across different illiberal contexts. For Hall, discourse is not unimportant, but shouldn't be isolated from other dimensions.

This is why the thesis prioritizes discourse analysis without ignoring other dimensions. Discourse is prioritized as this layer reflects how institutional and operational decisions are justified and normalized. As every dimension has its own limitations, using discourse to study rhetorical, institutional, and operational narratives allows us to identify the logic that underlies the strategy.

Other experts also supported this methodological approach. For example, Ghia Nodia highlighted (Interview, 30 March 2026) rhetoric, legislation, and repression as relevant layers of authoritarian learning, even before research design was introduced to him. He mentioned that legal changes are important, but that what matters more is how they operate within a broader discursive framing (Nodia, Interview, 30 March 2026). This supports the thesis's approach to capturing authoritarian learning not only as legal transfer but also in the rhetoric that legitimizes institutional and operational decisions. Giorgi Badridze agreed on the relevance of the three dimensions (Badridze, Interview, 25 March 2026), but emphasized rhetoric as a justificatory tool that connects legal and coercive practices. "That is why, whatever they may say behind closed doors and whatever remains hidden from us, we need to watch discourse closely, because language constantly leaks their aspirations."- said Inauri (Interview, 30 March 2026) Discussions with Zavyalova and Gurchiani also highlighted the importance of the discursive aspects of legal changes, based on the foreign agent law practices in Georgia and Russia, in which the main objective of the legislature was not only its implementation but also stigmatization and labeling.

To shift the focus on the Georgian case away from the theoretical scope of authoritarian learning, the starting point for democracy backsliding in Georgia is not the selected timeframe. According to the expert interviews, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine needs to be understood as an acceleration point. That checkpoint changed Georgia's political environment and geopolitical choices, but significant power consolidation had been developing before 2022 as well.

Bokeria (Interview, 26 March 2026) described 2022 as a leap. From his perspective, Georgian Dream's linkage with Russia and demonization of the West was visible from the party's first years. War in Ukraine made this orientation clear and openly articulated (Bokeria, Interview, 26 March 2026). Similar to Bokeria's position, Badridze argues that the consolidation process started in 2012, when power became concentrated in Ivanishvili's hands, and the post-2022 shift exposed and intensified it (Badridze, 25 March 2026). Nodia interprets this process similarly. "One could call this (Georgia before 2022) competitive authoritarianism, but it was balanced by a comparatively strong civil society, a comparatively strong opposition, a comparatively strong independent media, and fairly active civil society organizations"- he said (Nodia, Interview, 30 March 2026). According to him, war changed the ruling party's calculations, leading to later authoritarian shifts. Tinatin Inauri (Interview, 30 March 2026) believes that Georgian Dream had a softer tone and a more formal, pro-European language because international legitimacy mattered. After the start of the Russo-Ukrainian war, this need weakened, and illiberal discourse was normalized. Targamadze stated that war did not create this process, but made the government's choice visible to the public. (interview, 17 April 2026). According to him, the roots of this process lie in the post-2012 government restructuring.

Most importantly, he claimed that after 2012, the targets of the government's harshest attacks were security sector officials, especially those who had worked in special operations against Russian interests (Targamadze, Interview, 17 April 2026). He mentioned that anti-Russian and pro-Western security personnel were fired, imprisoned, or liquidated. At the same time, people with stronger ties to Russia or those educated in Moscow were promoted within security structures (Targamadze, Interview, 17 April 2026). Also, he claims that the memory politics supported this process. He believes that figures who should have been remembered as protectors of Georgian statehood were pushed away, while educational narratives started to include Russia-compatible interpretations of the past.

Unlike this narrative, the interviews did not provide a consensual response about anti-Westernism. Experts offered several overlapping yet distinct interpretations of the ruling party's foreign trajectory.

As a diplomat and former ambassador, Giorgi Badridze provided a clear account of how Georgian Dream deployed tactical Europeanism. He believes that pro-Western language was a political necessity for a society with a majority supporting European and Euro-Atlantic integration (Badridze, 25 March 2026). Even though authoritarian tendencies were visible in the areas where Ivanishvili sought power, some relatively liberal spaces remained, such as academic freedom and other spaces linked to Western projects. During that time, confrontation

was not a politically beneficial strategy. Badridze names this period “a phase of imitating Western, pro-Western policy”, which, according to him, became clear that was not based on real interests.

For Badridze, the collapse of the formal European façade began when EU integration ceased to be merely symbolic and began requiring concrete institutional reforms. The war in Ukraine and the EU’s real accession perspective caused a “moment of truth”: Georgia’s application and symbolic Europeanism were no longer enough; it had to meet the EU’s criteria (Badridze, 25 March 2026). In this interpretation, once it became clear that Ivanishvili’s party was not planning to give up its mechanisms of control, the imitation phase ended, and open confrontation started. The pro-European façade collapsed when Europeanization became incompatible with the regime’s survival domestically.

Badridze also linked this tactical Europeanism to authoritarian learning, especially to the case of Ukraine. He argued that Ivanishvili’s team was cautious about changing Georgia's foreign trajectory, as Georgian society demanded democratization and EU and NATO membership. He notes that the Yanukovych case showed that, in a pro-Western society, failing to satisfy pro-European demands poses a risk to regime survival. So, for Georgian Dream, a pro-European stance was a tactical adaptation to a political environment in which anti-Westernism had not yet dominated (Badridze, Interview, 25 March 2026).

About that topic, Bokeria develops a slightly different interpretation. From his worldview, Georgian Dream already had a natural convergence with Russia since 2012. According to him, from 2022, Georgian Dream’s strategic ambiguity became clearer and more visible, but the aspiration towards Russia and the demonization of the West existed before (Bokeria, Interview, 26 March 2026). Bokeria remembers several narratives used by Georgian Dream, before the timeframe of this thesis. Georgian Dream was promoting the idea that Georgia could never escape Russia, that the West was abandoning the region, and that a settlement with Russia was the only logical way to survive. They also justified the settlement with economic dependence on Russia and cultural familiarity. In that sense, pro-European façade and anti-Western narratives could coexist. EU remained a formal aspiration, while the civilizational frame shifted elsewhere (Bokeria, Interview, 26 March 2026). He argues that Georgian Dream was using Pro-European legitimacy flexibly (Bokeria, Interview, 26 March 2026). They didn’t aim to reject Western aspirations directly, but to squeeze out as much benefit from the West as possible. For Georgian Dream, candidate status was and could be useful electorally. Georgian Dream claimed they are preserving peace while still advancing EU integration, but only on their own “terms”.

Nodia sees this more cautiously and gives a systemic explanation. For him, the Russo-Ukraine war changed the regime's cost-benefit calculation (Nodia, Interview, 30 March 2026). Western orientation became less beneficial for regime survival, while appeasing Russia became more important. Georgian Dream still wanted to preserve its relationship with the West, but space for that shrank. From that perspective, Pro-Western positions weakened as the changing external environment altered regime survival objectives.

Inauri perceived Georgian Dream's transformation differently. Her view was that the Georgian Dream's pretended pro-Europeanism was no longer needed (Inauri, Interview, 30 March 2026). In the early years, Georgian Dream used a soft tone and framed Europe as a strategic choice. Still, later, they managed to strengthen international illiberal networks, enabling them to redefine their strategies so they no longer needed to prove liberal powers' commitment to democracy. Inauri believes that Georgian Dream is an opportunistic power, which used the war in Ukraine to its advantage.

Across interviews, the Russo-Ukrainian War is perceived as a political opportunity for Georgian Dream to create a fear context, justify a shift in its geopolitical trajectory, and legitimize itself. Like Inauri, Lia Gurchiani agrees on the idea that war was used as an emotional trigger to revive existing trauma. Fear of war produced "physical reaction" among people (Gurchiani, interview, 24 March 2026). After choosing a side in geopolitics, the government used war for tactical positioning.

According to her, that fear-based opportunism was not invented out of nothing; historical experience was also used (Inauri, Interview, 30 March 2026). Georgia already had "a very strong base of fear" due to several recent Russian military aggressions. Therefore, fears that "Today or tomorrow we might be next" were not unrealistic (Inauri, Interview, 30 March 2026). Georgian Dream found an opportunity to manage these emotions by redirecting them toward regime legitimation. They made voters focus on "fear and peace", making democratic issues less prioritized. The phrase "at least there is peace" created a comfortable environment to justify authoritarian decisions with the "preserving peace" argument (Inauri, Interview, 30 March 2026).

Bokeria perceives discourse towards the Ukraine war through the same lens. For him, Georgian Dream's central message can be summarized with: "we may be scoundrels, but as long as we are here, there will be no war; as long as Ivanishvili is here, Russia won't bomb us"(Bokeria, Interview, 26 March 2026) (Style is preserved). This quote captures how democratic legitimacy is shifted to a survival logic. The regime does not have the ambition to present itself as morally good or democratic, but rather seeks to portray itself as the only actor

capable of preventing catastrophe for Georgia. Bokeria unpacked this logic and identified the second aspect of this narrative. The first aspect is already discussed: fear of war. “Who wants their children to die as they do in Ukraine? No normal person wants that.” Bokeria said (Interview, 26 March 2026). But second, the most manipulative aspect is that the regime says, “We know another war.” And that another way is “sacrificing the country’s freedom and freedom inside the country” (Bokeria, Interview, 26 March 2026). They frame peace as conditional. Avoiding war is constructed as dependent on accepting and settling with Russia, with reduced democratic pressure.

This narrative is also used in a domestic context. “Global war party” narrative expands fear. Firstly, it’s used to delegitimize the domestic opposition by labeling it as war-seeking. Then, the Ukraine-related context was added, and eventually the narrative globalized, involving NGO’s, Western institutions, and Ukrainian officials portrayed as a hidden force with war aspirations. This narrative does not require hating the West, but escalates the fear of war. And once fear is activated, “everything can be attached to the global war party” (Bokeria, Interview, 26 March 2026). Similarly, Nodia sees war narrative as an ideological precondition for “destroying” civil society (Nodia, Interview, 30 March 2026). For Nodia Interview (30 March 2026), war narratives are a new stage of authoritarian learning, where it’s no longer focused on preventing democratization, but it “dismantles concessions” made to the West previously. He believes that Georgia is repeating Russia’s path, but at an accelerated pace. What Russia spent twenty years doing, the Georgian Dream did it much faster (Nodia, Interview, 30 March 2026).

According to Targamadze, war had an exposing role, rather than a causal one. He believes that War made governments’ geopolitical choices more open and visible, but Russian interests were already in place before the war (Targamadze, Interview, 17 April 2026). The war revealed that Georgian Dream was already structurally ready for the geopolitical shift. The war narrative was effective because of earlier institutional and memory politics, which weakened pro-Western positions. This explanation shows how war narrative works in favor of both sides: Russian interests benefit as Georgia becomes less capable of resisting Russian political influence, while Georgian Dream justifies control and authoritarian turn through fear and dependency on Russia (Targamadze, Interview, 17 April 2026).

Badridze agrees with the perspective that Georgian Dream made a civilizational choice before the war. During the interview, he discussed the language Prime Minister Gharibashvili used towards Ukraine in the early days of the war. He does not provide evidence of informal negotiations, but he believes that Russian pressure left Georgian Dream with no choice but to

openly choose a side in the conflict. He thinks that Gharibashvili is too strict and clear in his statements about not imposing sanctions.

Yes. Fine, perhaps you will not join sanctions — but why announce it in advance and in such categorical terms? If your goal were simply that you cannot do something, but at the same time you do not want to confront your allies, you would behave differently. We have spent 23 years in this system, and I myself worked for several years as a department director in the Foreign Ministry, dealing with Europe as well. I worked with exactly those people who were later accused of wanting us to enter the war. And if our Western partners ever did anything wrong toward us, it was that they too often and too loudly shouted that we must not fall for any Russian provocation, must not become involved in any confrontation with Russia, because they would not be able to help us. So the claim that anyone ever said, or even hinted, "Maybe you should open a second front," is an absurdity. But the point I want to make is that they were probably confronted with a demand from Russia to make it sharply clear whose side they were on.

-Giorgi Badridze (Badridze, Interview, 25 March 2026)

Hall's contribution towards war narratives was that regimes use war positioning as a means of survival and adaptation. He thinks that if the EU imposes rule-of-law and democratic pressures, an aspiring autocrat might prefer to align with Russia and avoid integration to preserve the regime (Hall, Interview, 31 March 2026). He thinks that Lukashenko's case is also important for understanding why non-involvement in war matters in authoritarian learning. His ideas were not directly about Georgia, but he believes that Lukashenko is using a "peacebuilder" narrative to frame himself as someone who never got involved in war to rebuild relations with the West (Hall, Interview, 31 March 2026). Even though the cases are significantly different, we can see a similar logic in the peacebuilder narrative and the formal pro-EU, pro-Ukraine narratives, both of which work in favor of Russia.

As we covered how the Russo-Ukrainian war created an emotional public backdrop for geopolitics, now we will discuss how Georgian Dream framed Western actors as politically suspicious. Hall mentioned that authoritarian learning is difficult to prove, but legal transfers are traceable as documents leave more stable evidence (Hall, Interview, 31 March 2026). To focus on this evidence, this thesis involves two interviews with experts specializing in foreign agents. Gurchiani's interview is central, as she explains the legal perspective on the Foreign Agents Law in Georgia. She discussed that the law should not be interpreted solely by reading

the text, as it is a living organism and the same legal documents produce different political effects across different regime types, political cultures, and geopolitical contexts (Gurchiani, interview, 24 March 2026). With this statement, Gurchiani challenges Georgian Dream's "FARA" argument. The ruling party's argument, similar to Russia's, was that if a similar legal document exists in the United States, the Georgian version can not be interpreted as authoritarian. Gurchiani rejected that logic. She added that "Georgian version is closer to the Russian one" and in several aspects it is even more repressive than the Russian one (Gurchiani, interview, 24 March 2026). Gurchiani does not think that FARA is perfect or that Western legal systems lack threats of misuse, but her point is more contextual. She believes that in a fragile democratic environment, the same legal document can become a weapon. She also states that, even though FARA is not perfect, it aims to make foreign influence transparent to defend democracy. At the same time, Russian and Georgian models target to delegitimize democratic actors: NGO's, media, and even individuals.

Firstly, Gurchiani believes that this mechanism has direct social consequences. She thinks the law precisely targets the kinds of foreign influence that bring concrete benefits to Georgia, such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure. Forcing organizations to register and carry a stigmatizing label creates barriers that make donors lose interest (Gurchiani, interview, 24 March 2026). It's important that the future evolution of this mechanism becomes stricter, reducing opportunities to receive foreign funding even when donors remain interested. She interprets it not as restricting NGOs administratively, but as narrowing the channels through which Western-linked knowledge and values reach Georgian society. She connected the law to authoritarian logic, arguing that it's easier to control a scared society left out of strong education (Gurchiani, interview, 24 March 2026).

But the most important characteristic of the Foreign Agents Law is its stigmatization and control. Stigmatization is the main mechanism to gain control for Gurchiani (interview, 24 March 2026). The law does not need to imprison, ban, or criminalize organizations to work. The core function is to change how society perceives them. Once NGOs, the media, and other democratic actors are legally associated with foreign influence, it's easier to isolate them and create public skepticism and distrust. So law is firstly symbolic, and legal effect is a secondary phase.

Drawing on the interview with Anastasya Zavyalova, this thesis seeks to identify similarities in the logic of the Foreign Agents Laws in Georgia and Russia. Even though she is careful to overclaim motives of the Russian Foreign Agents law, she still explains that it was used as a tool for authoritarian consolidation (Zavyalova, Interview, 27 March 2026).

According to her, the Russian model was based on two unclear criteria: receiving funding from abroad and engaging in political activity. She gave the example that even a small donation from abroad could be considered foreign funding. At the same time, ecological advocacy could be perceived as a political activity if authorities decided to interpret it that way. This vague character was discretionary power, as if the state targeted an organization, the criteria were elastic enough to use (Zavyalova, Interview, 27 March 2026). Zavyalova explained the official justification and the practical effects of the Russian model. Publicly, the main argument was a transparency narrative: that society should know who funds political activity, as in Georgia. But in practice, the law became a mechanism of control. Politically selective enforcement and stigmatizing language were used to attack oppositional organizations (Zavyalova, Interview, 27 March 2026). For her, stigmatization is itself a form of control, which isolates organizations, scares members, damages credibility, and justifies repression from a moral perspective.

She unpacks how stigmatization works in practice and prepares society to tolerate repression. She explained that when the headline says "foreign agent arrested," public reaction differs from that for "human rights defender arrested" (Zavyalova, Interview, 27 March 2026). That explains how the target's moral status evolves and how the rhetorical and institutional layers of authoritarian learning are connected. According to her, the Russian Foreign Agents Framework is not static. She explained the logic of evolution. Eliminating organization is not effective if individuals can reorganize themselves, but once individuals are treated as media or foreign agents, this framework becomes almost limitless. From that interview, we can see that Georgian Dream's approach follows the same logic in terms of discourse and the strictness of the framework. The law controls not only from a legal perspective but also by changing the meaning of the actor addressed. Zavyalova and Gurchiani explained what the "foreign agent" label meant in the post-Soviet context, with connotations of espionage and betrayal.

From a comparative politics perspective, Ghia Nodia directly connected this mechanism to authoritarian learning in Georgia. For him, the Foreign Agents Law was the most visible example of learning from Russia. he argues that the fact that it was named the "Russian Law" is already meaningful (Nodia, Interview, 30 March 2026). Also, the justificatory logic used by the ruling party, such as transparency and FARA similarity, is part of the repertoire. Nodia argues that Georgian Dream not only adopted a similar legal framework but also borrowed the same argumentative defense to make that law appear legitimate. From his perspective, through the exchange, Russia, as a teacher and authoritarian promoter, benefits from neutralizing Georgia as a pro-Western actor and gains geopolitical influence, while Georgian Dream gains survival and benefits by restricting oppositional civil sources. This

explanation shows why this law has a geopolitical context and should not be seen solely as NGO control. To address the geopolitical context of the Foreign Agents Law, Badridze's interview is useful. Badridze connects the Foreign Agents law to EU integration. From his perspective, the law was not adopted to address the problem of "foreign influence," but rather because European integration had ceased to be symbolic. It had begun to require concrete reforms to improve democracy (Badridze, Interview, 25 March 2026). He mentioned that according to the primary source:

The EU ambassador meets with the then speaker of parliament, Irakli Kobakhidze, and says: 'Despite all this, we are still considering granting you candidate status." I know this personally from that man. Kobakhidze nodded politely. Yes, good, thank you. And the very next day, Irakli Kobakhidze announced in parliament the initiation of the foreign agents bill — that is, the bill was introduced not only to make it easier for them to persecute NGOs they disliked, which they could already do anyway, but also as a gesture toward the EU, showing that their real disposition was that they had no intention of complying

-Giorgi Badridze (Badridze, Interview, 25 March 2026)

This logic is supported by the argument that once Georgian Dream withdrew the bill, Georgia was granted Candidate status. And a few months later, it was introduced again, with Kobakhidze already the prime minister. Badridze agrees with the idea that the Foreign Agents' Legislation can be seen as a "litmus test" of authoritarian learning. He mentioned that the legal instrument itself and public justifications are close to the Russian language, sometimes even word-for-word. He brings examples of the word "agent" not necessarily being a negative argument, and the FARA argument.

But Bokeria partly disagrees with Badridze's interpretation. He believes that the first introduction of the Foreign Agents Law as a form of sabotage of EU integration is not entirely correct. His disagreement is not about whether the law damaged the European path, but about the political logic behind it. For Bokeria, Georgian Dream did not want to reject all the benefits of EU integration, but wanted to benefit as much without accepting transformation. Candidate status was useful for the regime to present itself as a power that is preserving peace and still moves forward (Bokeria, Interview, 26 March 2026). The key aspect is that the law should be read as an attempt to maintain European legitimacy "on its own terms", while breaking domestic resistance. For him, law had a chilling effect, to demonstrate that it could "break protest" (Bokeria, Interview, 26 March 2026). In contrast, Inauri believes that the Foreign

Agents Law was a signal that Georgian Dream would no longer try to satisfy liberal expectations, while internally authorized confrontation with NGO's and media (Inauri, Interview, 30 March 2026).

The expert interviews, in general, supported the interpretation that Georgian Dream's post-2022 trajectory could be seen through an authoritarian learning lens, but not in a narrow, copying-or-direct-instruction way. The experts did not frame the similarities with reference countries as a coincidence. Even more, they accepted the approach this thesis uses, but with caution. For example, Badridze believes that Russia is a likely source of the rhetorical strategy Georgian Dream uses. When discussing sovereign democracy, he argues that:

They (Georgian Dream) are not just following a path that has already been paved. Rather, although I have no concrete proof or facts, I have a well-founded suspicion that they are in close contact with representatives of the Russian regime, who at the very least provide them with some kind of consultation.

-Giorgi Badridze (Badridze, Interview, 25 March 2026)

In his view, the similarities are not only a result of observing russian practice, but the outcome of a possible active exchange between them. Badridze does not highlight Russia alone. He believes that Georgian Dream has ties with other pro-Russian, authoritarian-leaning actors, such as Hungary, in terms of campaigning and intelligence. This idea shows that authoritarian learning does not occur only through direct Russian influence, but also connects illiberal networks with Russia-compatible narratives. But, as we said, he also underlined the word-by-word copying of narratives in Russia and Hungary (Badridze, Interview, 25 March 2026). Nodia strongly supported the authoritarian learning framework for Georgia. Firstly, for him as well, the Foreign Agents Law is a "litmus test" or "most visible example" of learning from Russia. he believes that the ideological foundations of the Georgian Dream existed even before the war, and can be noticed in anti-Western rhetoric: religion, national values, LGBT propaganda, using which liberal civil society is discredited. Nodia says that this rhetoric is very close to the Russian one. He thinks that, in theory, someone could argue that Georgian Dream's propaganda invented these ideas independently. Still, for him, it's "far more logical to assume they learned them in some way" (Nodia, Interview, 30 March 2026). He believes that Georgian Dream tries to make its rhetoric look like part of a wide Western conservative way and avoid presenting it as Russian. But for Nodia, this too is "Russian Know-how", to find like-minded

actors in the West and frame narratives not as Russian imports (Nodia, Interview, 30 March 2026). Other than the rhetorical level, he stated that:

If we consider information from various, more or less credible domestic and foreign sources, it suggests that in the work and decision-making processes of Georgia's security services, someone from the corresponding Russian structures is always involved.

-Ghia Nodia (Nodia, Interview, 30 March 2026).

Bokeria offers a slightly different explanation. He believes that Ivanishvili is a "natural ally" for the Kremlin. He compared their ties to „dance partners". He believes that the Soviet system shapes Ivanishvili's ideology and worldview; his approach since 2012 has consistently followed a pro-Russian trajectory(Bokeria, Interview, 26 March 2026). He believes that Georgian Dream's domestic survival and Russia's geopolitical interests already overlap. This overlap is often reinforced by mechanisms such as pressure, incentives, religious and conservative narratives, and security service links. He does not say that there are no direct orders from Moscow, and Georgian Dream does it voluntarily. Even more, he said that "there is definitely a connection, and the forces that do this are often the same ones whose geopolitical positions are useful to Russia" (Bokeria, Interview, 26 March 2026). He also explained that certain public actors are given ways to make money and spread pro-Russian narratives, describing this process as "practically a joint project of Georgian security forces and Russians" (Bokeria, Interview, 26 March 2026).

Givi Targamadze supports an authoritarian learning lens for this case and presents several pieces of evidence to support it. His main point was that, from 2012 onward, Georgian Dream began weakening the anti-Russian state capacity. He described in detail that Russian strategic interests were taken into consideration even before the Ukraine war. He did explain that personnel replacement is an important indicator. In his view, pro-Western trained officers were replaced with pro-Russian ones in important state structures. An important case he discussed in the interview was about Zemilkhan Khangoshvili, a former military officer in the 2008 war. Targamadze explained that after the attack on Khangoshvili in Tbilisi, the case was demonstratively not investigated, and then Khangoshvili was assassinated in Berlin by a Federal Security Service(FSB)-linked killer. For Targamadze, this case shows how anti-Russian actors were abandoned or physically targeted (Targamadze, Interview, 17 April 2026). He also confirmed the exchange of repressive experiences. He compared this to how democratic movements learned from each other in the cases of Kmara, Otpor, and Zubr,

arguing that, in reverse, authoritarian regimes are sharing strategies for protest control. He believes that, based on Georgian crackdowns, consultation between coercive structures, more specifically between Georgian and Belarusian ones, is highly plausible (Targamadze, Interview, 17 April 2026). In his view, the laws and practices Russia and Belarus implemented took years to develop, whereas Georgia implemented them much faster, which also addresses the possible learning.

This chapter unpacks what logic Georgian dreams of authoritarian consolidation followed and what role authoritarian learning played. To sum up, we can say that authoritarian learning did not operate through one single mechanism, but through rhetorical, institutional, and operational dimensions. It helped the ruling party to redefine political enemies, attack and delegitimize media, protests, opposition, Western partners, and Ukrainian authorities with connected narratives. authoritarian learning helped Georgian Dream transform discourse into institutional control as well, through the label of "foreign agent". Using that approach, Georgian Dream narrowed democratic space and justified it by claiming it was necessary to preserve peace.

But the effects of this learning should not be considered only in the domestic context. Interviews also suggested a geopolitical tradeoff. The same authoritarian playbook that helps the regime survive might weaken the country's actual sovereignty and independence. Nodia believes it is a mutually beneficial exchange, where Russia benefits from an anti-Western Georgia, while Georgian Dream manages to survive a regime collapse (Nodia, Interview, 30 March 2026). Authoritarian learning created common ground for Russia's regional interests and the ruling party's survival interests. Bokeria continues the idea that Russian interests are not simply anti-Western but also aimed at demoralizing Georgia, weakening Georgia's defense capacity, and making a settlement with Russia realistic and pragmatic. At the same time, Georgian Dream transforms fear of war into loyalty towards Russia and names it sovereignty. This results in the sovereignty paradox: the government claims to defend sovereignty against the West while making Georgia vulnerable to Russia (Bokeria, Interview, 26 March 2026).

Discussions with Tolvin and Targamadze supported this theory. Tolvin explained that Lukashenko survived the 2020 protests not only because of coercive structures but also because of Russian support. She mentioned that the Russian side helped through the media and finances, and possibly through coercive measures, which were crucial to Lukashenko's regime's survival (Tolvin, Interview, 26 March 2026). She believes that after that, Belarus's autonomy narrowed, and it became a platform for Russia in the war against Ukraine. This shows that a Russian-supported authoritarian regime's survival can lead to a reduction in the state's independent

agency. Targamadze fully supports Tolvin's claims. He explained that Lukashenko tried to keep some room for maneuver between Russia and the West for a long time.

According to Targamadze, Lukashenko consistently sought to avoid fully surrendering to Moscow and to secure alternative sources of funding and political support. However, Targamadze believes that the room for maneuver narrowed after the 2020 crisis, especially after the war started. He stated that Russian influence was not only external, but also involved integrated cadres inside the Belarusian system. He gave insights that during the protests, Lukashenko's head of personal security advised against violent repression. Still, this position was outweighed by the minister of interior defense, whom Targamadze described as “Directly Russia’s man”. He thinks that Russian support leads to the loss of sovereignty. He argued that Lukashenko understood the personal danger from Putin, but not fully obeying became an even bigger threat to him. Putin needed Belarusian territory for the war; therefore, if Lukashenko did not obey, Russia would impose its will anyway. That is how he explains Lukashenka's “surrender towards Russia”. Targamadze recalls that the Belarusian Security Services showed Lukashenko “a very detailed, very specific plan” for a possible diversion against the regime. Lukashenko understood that his own security services would not be capable of uncovering such a high-class plan themselves; therefore, he interpreted the plan as something that Putin allowed him to see as a message of “if you are not fully obedient, this is what I will do to you”. Targamadze recalls that Lukashenko himself told him, “Now I understand what you have been trying to tell me” about the security trap that authoritarian learning has caused in Belarus. This episode from Targamadze’s past is relevant because he is not speaking as an observer but as a Georgian political actor associated with the “color revolution” network.

The Belarus case, as analyzed by Georgian political experts, offers an interesting idea: Russian-backed survival may help a regime remain in power but reduces its room for maneuver in defending its sovereignty.

Chapter 4.4: Synthesis of Methods

This chapter aims to synthesize the findings of the discourse analysis, expert interviews, and secondary literature-based review of reference countries, and to analyze them together. This thesis must not only focus on similarities, but also on the logic behind them. This approach helps the thesis to avoid overclaiming and portraying regular authoritarian behavior as learning. This chapter does not claim that acts of repression or specific anti-Western narratives are directly learned from Russia or any other reference country. As Hall explained (Hall, Interview, 31 March 2026), authoritarian learning is extremely difficult to observe directly, as learning exchanges usually occur through informal channels; therefore, findings are treated inferentially. The strongest evidence is not the act of learning itself or a single isolated legal act or narrative, but the timing, sequencing, and logic behind the government's decisions, which are similar to the repeated logics in reference countries.

The first contextual finding is that the post-2022 period is an acceleration of Georgian Dream's authoritarian consolidation, rather than a starting point. This thesis already used a selected time frame as an acceleration phase. However, Georgian experts on the topic still agree that the authoritarian shift was an ongoing process from 2012, and the start of the Ukraine war changed the domestic and international political agenda, which also affected strategies for this shift.

However, it is also important to note that the idea that the post-2022 period is not the starting point of the authoritarian shift in Georgia does not make this research analytically irrelevant. Moreover, this phase intensified a long-ago-started trend, and, from suspicions, an authoritarian shift became more visible. Therefore, observing authoritarian learning as a tool in this time frame became publicly observable and researchable. Based on the analysis of discourse, we can even see that, within the time frame, narratives exhibit different levels of intensification. It starts with softer narratives and intensifies gradually. This indicates that Georgia's authoritarian consolidation is not a static process and reorganizes over time in response to internal and external pressures on the regime's survival objective.

To move forward to explain authoritarian learning in Georgia's case, the theoretical foundation should be unpacked as well. It is important not to understand authoritarian learning solely as the theoretical similarity of copying legal frameworks, but to situate it within the structure of authoritarian promotion. In this case, authoritarian learning does not occur in a neutral space where all authoritarian-minded actors exchange ideas equally. Important factors

for this structure are geopolitical interests, hierarchy, and strategic positions of each actor. This thesis analyzes the Georgian case through the lens of Russia as an authoritarian gravity center, with its influence/promotion operating through several models. That role differs across the regimes.

According to the sources analyzed, we can notice different patterns towards reference countries, to understand how Russia's role differs. Firstly, the Belarusian case is interesting as Belarus has a long-standing repressive policy towards civil society, actively uses conspiracy theories like the collective West to delegitimize democratic criticism with foreign influence narratives. Uses the Ukraine war as a strong narrative anchor, portraying the war initiated by the West, which uses and sacrifices Ukraine for its own national interests. Uses the damages of Ukraine to convince society that Ukraine is losing the war and to prove the possible outcomes of democratization. Along these narratives, Belarus portrays itself as a peaceseeker in the region. Euromaidan is an important aspect of pro-Lukashenka narratives to dramatize protests as Western-controlled. The literature and expert interviews suggested that, in addition to narrative borrowing, Russian assistance was important for media, financial, and security measures. Authoritarian learning literature also suggests that authoritarian learning, as a counter-revolutionary measure, started from Belarus-Russia cooperation.

On the other hand, given the significance of context, Hungary offered a different form of authoritarian repertoire: Russia-compatible illiberalism. Hungary's case cannot be oversimplified into a claim of being controlled by Moscow, but its relevance is different. Hungary demonstrates how Russia-compatible illiberalism discourse can operate within Western space. Hungary's case is particularly important for Georgia, as by the start of the thesis's timeframe, Georgia still had a strong partnership with the European Union and, even more, was granted candidate status during this time. Therefore, Hungary is crucial to finding the logic behind the authoritarian repertoire. To characterize Hungary under Orbán in recent years, we can focus mainly on sovereignty narratives. In Hungary, the EU was widely blamed for acting against national self-determination and for dismantling state sovereignty through external and internal foreign-agent activities. In Hungary, traditional values, moral panics, family, children, and culture were often used as a justificatory mechanism. During the Ukraine war, Hungary also had Russia-compatible positions. Sanctions were portrayed as dragging Hungary into the war, which was said to be against pragmatism and national interests. Moreover, Hungary was portrayed as an actor staying out of war, despite being an EU member, making reforming the EU a goal rather than leaving it.

To strengthen the authoritarian-promotion framework of authoritarian learning, we can unpack the general logic of authoritarian rule in Russia to identify patterns and create a strong anchor for analyzing the Georgian case. Firstly, delegitimizing the democratic process and justifying authoritarianism starts with stability and order narratives. Russian narratives link authoritarianism to chaos. They often use the West's imperfections, such as crackdowns and legislation like FARA, to damage its reputation and legitimize domestic decisions. Other than that, sovereignty is an umbrella justification for authoritarian decisions. They created the foreign agents legislation in its current form and its justifications. Reframed civil society as Agents and linked it to defending sovereignty. Traditional values are actively used to damage Western reputation and legitimize domestic repressive legislation. Russia justifies war in Ukraine using several pillars of narratives, but one of the most important is repeatedly blaming the West for using Ukraine as an instrument. Russia frames itself as a self-defending state against Western hypocrisy. Russia actively uses "Ukraine is losing the war" narratives domestically. Other than that, allegations of drug addiction are often used against Ukrainian officials.

Georgia has a specific context compared to the other reference regimes we discussed. Georgia is not Belarus, as it has stronger ties with Western partners and a security architecture that is more distant from Russia. Unlike Hungary, Georgia is not an EU member and does not have the capacity to weaken it from within. Georgian Dream's strategy at that time was contradictory. It preserved formal pro-EU language, while adopting instruments and narratives that made European integration impossible. That is an important feature that makes authoritarian learning useful as an explanatory framework: Georgian Dream selectively adapts Russia-compatible narratives and contextually adjusts them to fit the domestic context, a process that also involves features of authoritarian learning. That explains why this thesis does not treat Russia, Belarus, and Hungary as units of comparative analysis. These cases are selected to identify authoritarian logics. Nevertheless, power logic clarifies the role that authoritarian promotion plays in the Georgian case. It is impossible to scientifically prove Russia's direct instructions, but authoritarian gravity-center logic provides a sharp lens for analyzing observable measures.

The most important aspect of the authoritarian promotion is its significant contribution to geopolitics. Authoritarian gravity centers can promote authoritarianism not only from a comparative politics perspective but also from a geopolitical and national-interest perspective. Especially in the post-Soviet sphere, where democracy is linked to Europeanization and "colored revolutions," and authoritarianism secures the gravity center from shrinking influence

in the region. Therefore, the way Georgian Dream consolidated power, the time period in which it did so, and the words it used to justify itself are directly linked to geopolitics. Based on that, the war/peace narratives were crucial in Georgia, similarly to the reference states. In these countries, most importantly for this thesis, in Georgia, war/peace discourse became not only a topic of international politics, but also a legitimacy formula. Similar to Hungary and Belarus, the ruling party used "peace-keeper" and "staying out of war " narratives. This narrative was used to delegitimize domestic opposition, but it also had an important big-picture aspect. Ukraine was portrayed as a sacrificed country, an instrument of "big powers" who provoked war. Russian aggression was not promoted because of the historical context, but undermining Russia's guilt was an ongoing narrative. The authoritarian logic of this discourse was to convert fear into legitimacy. Using conspiracy theories, Georgian Dream attacked opposition and civil society, using their pro-European positions as a "Dragging into war" conspiracy. Similarly to Russia, order and stability were portrayed as the most crucial goals, and accordingly, protests with a revolutionary aim to replace the Georgian Dream were linked to the threat of war. Easily, Georgian Dream directly linked government criticism to national survival. All the struggles and concerns regarding the authoritarian turn or the party's mistakes were portrayed as secondary, in contrast to the highest value, peace. We can catch similar logics in comparison to reference regimes. In Russia, war has been used to define external pressure on the state. In Belarus, the logic of portraying protest and opposition as externally supported to destabilize and undermine sovereignty is identical. In Hungary, the liberals and pro-Europeans were alleged to be war-oriented, while the government sought peace. Similarity extends beyond vocabulary to the structures of labeling, justification, argumentation, and perspectivization.

The war narrative was strengthened with intense anti-Westernism. The Georgian case is specific, as the ruling party could not reject Europe straightforwardly. Georgian society was strongly supportive of Georgia's EU path; the government had to leverage European legitimacy to apply for and secure candidate status. However, the discourse became contradictory. According to expert interviews and discourse analysis, Georgian Dream gradually sharpened its tone towards the EU and normalized its vocabulary in its direction. Georgian Dream sought to separate the desirable Europe, which aligned with Georgia's civilizational choice, from "real" and "current" Europe, which pursued a liberal, war-seeking agenda. This approach allowed the government to delegitimize critics coming from Western partners by claiming that the current version of the EU is managed by Brussels bureaucracy, liberal elites, "Deep state", and "Global war party. However, Europe was not rejected on its own. To strengthen this position, Hungary was given as an example. With this approach, European integration was

sabotaged, euroscepticism was planted in society, while still maintaining the symbolic legitimacy of the European path.

This logic also recurs in the Hungarian repertoire. In Hungary, the government also frames itself as defender of "real" Europe against liberalism, gender politics, etc. Both cases separate Europe as a civilizational symbol from liberalism, portraying it as a threat. Other than the identical strategy used in Hungary, we can find the foundations of those narratives in the Russian and Belarusian political contexts. In Russia, similar narratives are used against civil society, democratic promotion, and minority rights. In Belarus, Western actors are blamed for sponsoring protests and regime changes. Georgian Dream's vocabulary does not simply copy the vocabulary; rather, its general architecture is similar and shares the same foundations. Expert interviews supported this interpretation. The Georgian Dream's shift in narratives was seen as an appeasement of Russia. The role of authoritarian learning here was to solve the contradiction. Georgian Dream did not directly reject EU legitimacy, as in Yanukovych's case, but also gradually shifted narratives to justify power consolidation and a shift in foreign policy.

The narratives of foreign influence and their legislative response were the strongest "Litmus test" for tracing authoritarian learning in Georgia. Since the initiation of law, civil society has been increasingly portrayed as non-autonomous and influenced by foreign actors. Activists and protests, NGOs and media were placed under suspicion due to links to Western actors. Its political effect was to reduce oppositional capacity to play a watchdog role, monitor elections, criticize state institutions, and advocate for EU integration. These actors were reinterpreted as mechanisms of foreign interference.

This logic directly repeats the Russian foreign agents model. In this case, repetition refers not only to the textual similarity of legislation but also to the evolution of the law from its initial formulation and its justificatory arguments and aims. In both cases, "political activity" was vague, leaving room for selective enforcement. The main aspect was stigmatization in both cases, labeling democratic actors as spies and betrayers. Foreign agents isolated organizations, damaged their reputation and credibility, and justified future repressions, making it seem morally acceptable. Both Georgia and Russia justified laws with transparency narratives and FARA analogs from the USA. However, after analyzing these three laws, Georgian law is much closer to, and in some cases even stricter than, Russia's law than American law.

The Foreign Agents Law also links authoritarian learning to geopolitics and to the promotion of authoritarianism. Georgian political experts described the Foreign Agents Law as the most visible example of learning from Russia, with implications for geopolitics as well. The legislature's foreign agents law is already a statement of authoritarian consolidation in

itself. It not only consolidated authoritarianism in Georgia through repressive mechanisms towards democratic actors, but also damaged Georgia's Europeanization process.

A significant discursive pattern found in this thesis is the framing of sovereignty and the portrayal of authoritarianism as defensive. Like Russia, Belarus, and Hungary, Georgia presents its attack on democracy as a defense of sovereignty, national identity, and peacemaking, which is challenged by foreign interference and the liberal agenda. Even though this strategy is common among authoritarian actors, we can still notice logical patterns for how it is used. Sovereignty is the most important concept used against Western criticism and protest mobilization. This narrative is similar to the Russian language of sovereign democracy. In this framework, external criticism is framed as interference that demands decisions, thereby undermining stability. Even though Russia already violates Georgian sovereignty, Georgian dreams offered the notion that "sovereignty" is merely protection from Western actors. This new form of sovereignty focuses on avoiding accountability to the government. In the expert interview, the sovereignty was explained. Nodia interpreted it as a shift in sovereignty from the democratic nation to the ruler (Interview, 30 March 2026).

Other than that, sovereignty is given a moral dimension. As in reference countries, national identity, religion, and family values are under threat from liberal Western influence in Georgian Dream's discourse as well. This is close to the Russian and Hungarian moral conservatism in opposition to the liberal agenda. The proof that the logic of this conservative approach is similar can be demonstrated by the strong linkage between Orban and the Prime Ministers of Georgia, publicly framed as moral and cultural similarity. This approach helps the government to divide society into "real" national actors and liberal agents. This strategy shapes the whole of authoritarian legitimacy. Sovereignty, national values, and child protection create a moral monopoly for authoritarian-minded people in the political field. These narratives helped the ruling party justify why EU criticism should not be taken into account, why NGOs should be regulated, and why the opposition should not be trusted.

Another important aspect to pay attention to is the construction of the enemies domestically. Georgian Dream's rhetoric increasingly merged the party's opposition, civil society, protests, media, and Western actors into a single political actor. These actors are treated as radical agents of foreign influence who want to drag Georgia into war. Against them, rhetorical, institutional, and operational attacks are organized. The result is not only damaging the opposition but also delegitimizing pluralism itself. This logic strongly matches Russian and Belarusian color-revolution narratives, where protest is often presented as an externally funded issue aiming at chaos.

On the operational level, these narratives prepare society and lay the moral groundwork for tolerating repression. If protesters are radicals, NGOs are foreign agents, and political parties are destabilizing forces, restrictive measures are easier to justify in public. We cannot generalize repressive measures as authoritarian learning, as during the expert interviews, it was underlined that authoritarian regimes often use similar methods of protest control or crackdowns. However, the justificatory logic, context from the other dimensions, and pace of repressive decisions support the authoritarian learning logic.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Having synthesized the findings from CDA, the secondary literature review, and expert interviews, the final section returns to the research question and explains what this combined evidence reveals about authoritarian learning as a tool of consolidation in Georgia. Firstly, authoritarian learning reduced the ruling party's experimentation costs. Georgian Dream did not invent new tools from scratch; rather, it adjusted existing authoritarian practices that seemed useful in the Georgian context. Reducing experimentation costs increases the efficiency of the measures and accelerates consolidation. The Foreign Agents Law is the sharpest example. The ruling party used a legal and rhetorical model already in place in Russia. They justified foreign agents' legislation with the same arguments, then used that legislation to support similar arguments, and finally used the framework against similar actors. Following the same logic, Georgian Dream not only reduced the risk of failure of repressive measures but also rapidly adapted to a new geopolitical environment.

Secondly, authoritarian learning provided a legitimizing language playbook for Georgian Dream. As coercion alone was insufficient for consolidation, Georgian Dream had to reorganize its narratives to align with a new political agenda, both domestically and externally. Georgian Dream used authoritarian learning not only to determine what to do, but also to justify it and reduce pressure from opponents. Peace justified settlement with Russia and raised suspicion towards the opposition; Sovereignty justified an anti-Western trajectory; Transparency justified the legislature of foreign agents; Traditions justified a shifted civilizational trajectory; and conspiracy theories made those justifications sound legitimate and unquestionable.

The third finding of this thesis concerns the promotion of authoritarianism. Georgian Dream’s power consolidation must not be understood as isolated internal democratic backsliding. Using Russia-centered regime-survival strategies, sovereignty was redefined to favor the ruling party’s autonomy from the West rather than Georgia’s independence as a democratic state. This anti-Western, isolationist turn played two functions at once. Domestically, it played a power-consolidation role, delegitimized opposition parties, civil society, and protests, and legitimized the ruling party’s repression and authoritarianism. However, geopolitically, it weakened the linkages with the Western institutions. In this sense, the Foreign Agents Law and anti-Western narratives not only benefited Georgian Dream's political survival but also aligned with Russia’s strategic interests in the region to limit Western

influence and preserve a Russia-compatible government in Georgia. This turned the region's geopolitical power dynamics upside down. The trade-off is central: Georgian Dream portrayed its confrontation with the West as a defense of sovereignty, but in practice, the outcome was to narrow Georgia's real sovereign choice for European integration and increase the influence of a country that controls 20% of Georgia's territory. In short, authoritarian promotion supplied the regime with survival tactics, which were narrated as national sovereignty, while those tactics served Russia's regional interests.

To sum up, this thesis contributes to the study of authoritarian learning by showing how it can be analyzed through discourse, legal instruments, political timing, and expert interpretation. The research gap addressed here covers how authoritarian learning is translated in authoritarian regimes. This thesis connects diverse strategies and their discursive justificatory arguments to unpack the logic of authoritarian promotion. Beyond the logic of authoritarian learning, this thesis shows the outcomes of borrowed repertoires, making consolidation more legitimate and less costly.

Future research could conduct a comparative study of countries, not based on secondary literature but on primary sources. This would allow us to identify direct links with greater significance and unpack borrowed strategies more deeply. Other than that, authoritarian promotion needs international political frameworks to analyze its outcomes at the geopolitical level, which would allow us to link the goals of authoritarian learning to its implications.

Overall, this thesis argues that Georgian Dream's post-2022 consolidation was not only another phase of domestic democratic erosion, but also shaped by authoritarian promotion. Through war, peace, sovereignty, foreign influence, traditional values, and anti-Western narratives, the ruling party adapted external authoritarian repertoires in Georgia. In this sense, Georgian Dream was assisted by authoritarian learning with legitimizing language and reduced experimentation cost. However, a new feature of authoritarian promotion emerged: a trade-off between regime survival and national sovereignty, which, in Georgia's case, expanded political space for Russian influence.

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Appendix 1. Discourse analysis corpus

	Author	Date	Link
Q_1	Irakli Kobakhidze	2/16/2022	Link
Q_2	Irakli Kobakhidze	2/15/2022	Link
Q_3	Irakli Kobakhidze	3/1/2022	Link
Q_4	Irakli Kobakhidze	3/1/2022	Link
Q_5	Irakli Kobakhidze	3/2/2022	Link
Q_6	Irakli Kobakhidze	3/4/2022	Link
Q_7	Irakli Kobakhidze	3/28/2022	Link
Q_8	Irakli Kobakhidze	4/1/2022	Link
Q_9	Irakli Kobakhidze	4/4/2022	Link
Q_10	Irakli Kobakhidze	4/7/2022	Link
Q_11	Irakli Kobakhidze	4/9/2022	Link
Q_12	Irakli Kobakhidze	4/11/2022	Link
Q_13	Irakli Kobakhidze	4/11/2022	Link
Q_14	Irakli Kobakhidze	4/13/2022	Link
Q_15	Irakli Kobakhidze	4/13/2022	Link
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Q_17	Irakli Kobakhidze	4/14/2022	Link
Q_18	Irakli Kobakhidze	4/28/2022	Link
Q_19	Irakli Kobakhidze	5/2/2022	Link
Q_20	Irakli Kobakhidze	4/10/2022	Link
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Q_27	Irakli Kobakhidze	5/4/2022	Link
Q_28	Irakli Kobakhidze	5/7/2022	Link
Q_29	Irakli Kobakhidze	5/9/2022	Link
Q_30	Irakli Kobakhidze	5/9/2022	Link

Q_31	Irakli Kobakhidze	5/15/2022	Link
Q_32	Irakli Kobakhidze	5/15/2022	Link
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Q_34	Irakli Kobakhidze	5/17/2022	Link
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Q_42	Irakli Kobakhidze	7/25/2022	Link
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Q_44	Irakli Kobakhidze	9/13/2022	Link
Q_45	Irakli Kobakhidze	9/13/2022	Link
Q_46	Irakli Kobakhidze	9/21/2022	Link
Q_47	Irakli Kobakhidze	10/20/2022	Link
Q_48	Irakli Kobakhidze	11/3/2022	Link
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Q_61	Irakli Kobakhidze	2/23/2023	Link
Q_62	Irakli Kobakhidze	2/24/2023	Link

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Q_89	Irakli Kobakhidze	7/28/2023	Link
Q_90	Irakli Kobakhidze	9/13/2023	Link
Q_91	Irakli Kobakhidze	9/18/2023	Link
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Appendix 2. Experts Interviewed

Name	Date of Interview	Interview Type	Language	Affiliation/Expertise	Anonymity preference
Lia Gurchiani	24 March 2026	Online	Georgian	University of California, Davis – School of Law / Expert of "Foreign Agents" legislature	Real name and affiliation may be used
Giorgi Badridze	25 March 2026	Online	Georgian	Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS); / Former diplomat; Expert of Georgian foreign policy and Euro-atlantic integration	Real name and affiliation may be used
Amelie Tolvin	26 March 2026	Online	English	University of Toronto - Department of Political Science / Expert of Authoritatianism in Belarus, protest repression, security-service cohesion	Real name and affiliation may be used
Giga Bokeria	26 March 2026	In person	Georgian	Chairperson of Georgian political pary "Federalists" / Former Secretary of the National Security Council; One of the Leaders of Rose revolution; Expert of Georgian foreign policy, democratic transition	Real name and affiliation may be used
Anastasya Zavyalova	27 March 2026	Online	English	Rice University - Jones Graduate School of Business /	Real name and affiliation

				Expert of “Foreign Agents” legislature	may be used
Tinatin Inauri	30 March 2026	Online	Georgian	Central European University – Department of Political Science / Researcher of Georgian Dream’s Political discourse and illiberal political communication	Real name and affiliation may be used
Ghia Nodia	30 March 2026	Online	Georgian	Chairperson of Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development; Ilia State University / Former Minister of Education and Science; Political scientist; expert of Georgian Politics, Comparative Politics	Real name and affiliation may be used
Stephen Hall	31 March 2026	Online	English	University of Bath - Russian and Post-Soviet Politics / Scholar of authoritarian Learning	Real name and affiliation may be used
Givi Targamadze	17 April 2026	Online	Georgian	“United National Movement” / Former Chairman of Defense and Security Committee of Georgian Parliament; Political actor with first-hand experience of authoritarian networks; One of the Leaders of Rose revolution	Real name and affiliation may be used

Appendix 3. Participant Information Sheet

Provisional Title of Study: Between Brussels and Moscow: Authoritarian Learning as a Tool of Power Consolidation in Georgia

Department: Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies, University of Tartu

Researcher: Nikoloz Rogava, Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies, Email: rogava@ut.ee

Supervisor: Dr. Shpend Kursani, Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies, University of Tartu. Email: shpend.kursani@ut.ee

Dear Sir or Madam,

You are invited to participate in the research provisionally titled "Between Brussels and Moscow: Authoritarian Learning as a Tool of Power Consolidation in Georgia," conducted by a graduate student at the Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies, University of Tartu.

You have been selected for the interview because you have expertise in authoritarian learning or the broader dynamics of authoritarian consolidation.

This sheet is designed to explain the study and help you decide whether you wish to participate:

If you have any questions, please get in touch with the researcher at rogava@ut.ee.

This research investigates how authoritarian learning has shaped Georgia's democratic backsliding after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. While Georgia formally continued the EU integration process- joining the Associated Trio and applying for candidate status- the Georgian ruling party, Georgian Dream, simultaneously adopted tactics that sabotaged the process it was supporting officially. Despite public support for EU membership, the government weakened democratic institutions, attacked NGOs, adopted "Foreign agent" laws, and used rhetoric.

Therefore, it raises the question of whether Georgian Dream's actions reflect a process of authoritarian learning, in which regimes selectively adopt effective illiberal practices from others. This learning process is strategic and sensitive to context. This ongoing democratic

backsliding underscores the critical nature of Georgia's political trajectory. This creates the urgent need to understand how and why authoritarian learning happens in Georgia.

This research aims to determine whether Georgia's ruling party used authoritarian strategies to consolidate power to sabotage EU integration and, if so, whether this learning is linked to Russia's geopolitical orbit or is merely a diffusion of authoritarian trends.

This study aims to explore how **authoritarian learning functions as a tool of authoritarian consolidation in Georgia since the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. (Research Question)**

To answer this question, the study pursues the following **objectives**:

6. Identifying key narratives of authoritarian learning in reference countries using a literature review
7. Identifying how ruling elites in Georgia construct narratives in the post-2022 period using discourse analysis
8. Analyzing how these narratives are built and adjusted over time across time periods.
9. Interpreting whether the observed narrative and its adjustments resemble discursive patterns in relevant reference regimes
10. Validating analysis using expert interviews

If you agree to participate, you will be invited to a semi-structured interview lasting approximately 30 minutes, conducted either in person or online (via Microsoft Teams). The interviews will be conducted in English or Georgian, as the researcher is a native Georgian speaker. Before the interview, you will be asked to sign a consent form agreeing to participate in a recorded interview. Date and location of the interview will be arranged by mutual agreement. The interview will consist of open questions regarding authoritarian consolidation/learning. A prepared interview guide will structure the interview, but the format will remain flexible, allowing you to elaborate on your area of expertise. Transcripts and other personal data will be securely stored. You may withdraw from the study anytime or refuse to answer any questions.

Your private information will be used under the agreed conditions of the Consent Form. Audio recordings and transcripts will be permanently deleted two months after the thesis is evaluated. Research findings can be published or presented, as agreed in the consent form. You have the right to access any personal data collected about you and request the correction of

inaccurate information. In case you believe your data protection rights were violated, you have the right to contact the Estonian Data Protection Inspectorate or start a court case.

The study will be completed in late May 2026, and the defense will take place in early June 2026. In the event of a successful defense, the final thesis will be published on the University of Tartu open-access library website. If you would like a copy of the final thesis, you may request it from the researcher.

Take time to decide your position on participation.

Thank you for reading the Information Sheet and for your interest in this research.

Contacts:

Researcher: **Nikoloz Rogava**, Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies, Email: rogava@ut.ee

Supervisor: **Dr. Shpend Kursani**, Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies,
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Appendix 4. Consent Form for Expert Interview Participation

Please complete and sign this form after reading the information Sheet/ or listening to an explanation about the research.

Provisional Title of Study: Between Brussels and Moscow: Authoritarian Learning as a Tool of Power Consolidation in Georgia

Department: Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies, University of Tartu

Researcher: Nikoloz Rogava, Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies, Email: rogava@ut.ee

Supervisor: Dr. Shpend Kursani, Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies, University of Tartu. Email: shpend.kursani@ut.ee

Thank you for your participation in this research project. Before agreeing, the researcher will provide a full explanation of the study and its objectives. If you have any questions, do not hesitate to ask the researcher for clarification before signing. You will receive a copy of this Consent Form for your records.
By marking each box below, I confirm my consent to that part of the study. The unmarked box will be considered, as I do not consent to that part. I understand that if I do not give consent for a part, I may not be able to take part in the study.

	Content Details:	**Mark Box with +**
1.	I confirm that I have received and understood the Information Sheet, including the purpose and expectations of this study. I had an oportunity to ask questions about the interview.	
2.	I understand that participation in this research is voluntary. I am allowed to withdraw at any time without providing a reason, withour	

	affecting my legal rights. I understad that I may request the removal of data collected from me within one week after the interview has been conducted.	
3.	I consent to the collection and use of my personal data (such as name, occupation, place of study) for the purposes explained by researcher.	
4.	I understand that research data, including interview transcripts and personal information will be securely stored. The data will be permanently deleted two months after the project's final evaluation at the University of Tartu. Research findings may be used through academic publications and presentations, with my identity remaining confidential unless I provide written permission (Point 11 in this consent form)	
5.	I understand that my data will be accessed by authorised University personnel for monitoring, and audit purposes.	
6.	I acknowledge that no financial or other benefits have been offered to participate and that the responsibility for managing collected data rests on the researcher.	
7.	I consent to the anonymized use of my data for future academic projects by the researcher.	
8.	I agree to the audio recording of my interview, with the understanding that recordings will be securely deleted after finalization of transcription.	
9.	I am aware that i have the right to access any personal data collected about me and request the correction of inaccurate information. If I think my data protection rights were violated, I understand that I have right to contact the Estonian Data Protection Inspectorate or start court case.	
10.	As a participant, I understand that my statements can be quoted directly in the research outputs. I agree that the researcher may use my words under following terms: **Mark one option**	

My real name and affiliation may be used alongside direct quotations. ☐

My affiliation may be mentioned, but my real name will not be published with the quotations. ☐

Neither my real name or affiliation will be published alongside any quotations. ☐

Name of Participant Date Signature

_____ _____ _____

Name of Researcher Date Signature

_____ _____ _____