



The Security Risks of State Capture: Georgia's Cautionary Tale

by **Rosaria Puglisi**

State capture is widely studied within democratic backsliding processes, yet its security implications remain insufficiently explored. By subordinating national interests to elite survival, captured governance weakens institutional resilience, distorts strategic decision-making and undermines security-sector effectiveness. State capture is, as such, an endogenous security threat. Once a frontrunner of democratic reform in the EU's Eastern Partnership, Georgia has experienced sustained autocratisation. Through patronage and the monopolisation of state resources, a personalised system of rule has subordinated institutions, including the security sector, to partisan interests – privileging loyalty over competence, hollowing out oversight and fragmenting coordination. In a country exposed to Russian military and hybrid pressure, institutional erosion carries strategic consequences. The Georgian case underscores the centrality of governance to security. Systems that are accountable, pluralistic and socially cohesive are structurally better equipped to absorb shocks and sustain security over time. Consequently, good governance emerges as a structural quality of national security.

Rosaria Puglisi is an international relations and security governance expert with over twenty years of experience in international organisations, including as Head of the OECD Office in Kyiv (2023-24) and Head of NATO's regional offices in Georgia and the South Caucasus (2018-21) and Central Asia (2015-17).

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Two overarching trends define contemporary international politics: the erosion of democratic governance and the intensification of insecurity associated with renewed interstate conflict and systemic geopolitical rivalry. These dynamics are not merely concurrent; they are increasingly intersecting.

While democratic decline is often analysed in normative or institutional terms, its implications for national security remain, with some notable exceptions, insufficiently explored.¹ In policy debates, democratic backsliding and state capture are frequently treated as governance problems, analytically separable from questions of defence, deterrence and strategic autonomy. This separation is misleading. State capture is an endogenous security threat: by subordinating national interests to elite survival, it weakens institutional resilience, undermines societal cohesion, degrades defence capacity and constrains a state's ability to act strategically – particularly under sustained external pressure.

Georgia illustrates these dynamics with clarity. Long exposed to structural security challenges from Russia – heightened by the

¹ Gajić, Sonja Stojanović and Dušan Pavlović, "State Capture, Hybrid Regimes and Security Sector Reforms", in *Journal of Regional Security*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2021), p. 89-126, DOI 10.5937/jrs16-31828, <https://cis-fpn.rs/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/16-2-State-capture-hybrid-regimes-and-security-sector-reform.pdf>.



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August 2008 war and the subsequent stationing of Russian troops on 20 per cent of its internationally recognised territory – the country combines acute external vulnerability with a pronounced trajectory of internal institutional erosion.

Once considered the frontrunner of democratic reform in the EU Eastern Partnership, Georgia has experienced an incremental process of autocratisation since the Georgian Dream party secured a constitutional majority in the 2016 parliamentary elections. Through patronage, informal governance and the monopolisation of state resources, a highly personalised system centred on the party's patron Bidzina Ivanishvili has subordinated public institutions – including the security sector – to partisan and personal interests, weakening them and eroding societal resilience.

These dynamics have privileged party loyalty over professional competence, hollowed out oversight, weakened policy analysis and fragmented coordination across the security apparatus. Rather than enhancing stability, captured governance has progressively eroded the state's capacity to anticipate, coordinate and respond to genuine security challenges.

The process through which state capture reconfigures security-sector governance in ways that undermine national security and sovereignty is the object of this paper. Security vulnerabilities are not only the product of exogenous geopolitical pressures in an era of renewed power competition. In state-captured regimes, they also result from distorted decision-making processes in which policy preferences are shaped by narrow, particularistic interests rather than society-wide concerns.

The Georgian experience offers a cautionary tale for external actors seeking to strengthen resilience against military pressure, hybrid threats or destabilising influence. International assistance has often stove-piped technical capacity-building and the political dynamics shaping security governance, assuming that security and defence assistance can proceed on a parallel yet independent path of governance conditions. Such assumptions risk yielding limited and short-lived institutional gains. Effective support for resilience requires instead that governance conditions be treated not as a background variable but as a core element of security assistance design from the outset.²

² Methodologically, the argument is based on a qualitative case-study approach combining institutional analysis with primary and secondary sources, including policy documents, media reporting, and scholarly literature. The analysis is further informed by the author's professional engagement with Georgian civil society, public officials and foreign diplomats operating in Georgia, including confidential interviews conducted in Tbilisi in the period 2017-2023. Names and roles of interlocutors are withheld to protect their security.



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1. STATE CAPTURE

In contrast to Cold War trends, when nearly three quarters of democratic breakdowns occurred through *coups d'état*, today “democracy erodes slowly, in barely visible steps”, typically at the hands of leaders who were legally elected to uphold it.³ In academically documented processes of democratic backsliding and autocratisation, democratic institutions decline incrementally, crumbling from within.⁴ The erosion occurs “under legal disguise”, while multiparty, legally elected regimes slowly lose their meaning.⁵ In a “discontinuous series of incremental actions” qualities associated with democratic governance dissolve and eventually democracy evaporates.⁶ Elections serve as a first source of legitimacy, but once in office, autocrats deploy legal warfare tools (lawfare) to reform institutions from within and undo democratic norms, thus laying the ground for the hollowing out or even the full dismantling of institutions once the norms sustaining them have weakened.⁷ Structures that resist power concentration – like courts or local governments – are “enervated”, while laws are passed to dismantle checks and balances, “hamstringing the press, disenfranchise voters, and weaken opposition parties”.⁸ Relentless reforms turn institutions into dysfunctional and ineffective bodies, placing them under executive control. As “executive takeovers” consolidate, courts are “weaponised”, horizontal accountability is dismantled and disinformation and polarisation are deployed to suppress opposition and marginalise civil society.⁹

State capture can be the outcome of this process. Under conditions of state capture, the ruling elite acquires exclusive control over administrative resources – including the state budget, public administration and the security apparatus – and employs it primarily to advance its interests, even at the expense of the national common good. State capture thrives in illiberal and autocratic contexts marked by weak democratic institutions,¹⁰ but differs analytically

³ Levitsky, Steven and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, New York, Crown, 2018, p. 4.

⁴ Daxecker, Ursula E., “Global Challenges to Democracy: The Main Issues”, in *International Studies Review*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (June 2023), Article viad019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viad019>.

⁵ Lührmann, Anna and Staffan I. Lindberg, “A Third Wave of Autocratization is Here: What Is New About It?”, in *Democratization*, Vol. 26, No. 7 (2019), p. 1095-1113 at p. 1095, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1582029>.

⁶ Waldner, David and Ellen Lust, “Unwelcome Change: Coming to Terms with Democratic Backsliding”, in *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 21 (2018), p. 93-113 at p. 95, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-050517-114628>.

⁷ Bermeo, Nancy, “Questioning Backsliding”, in *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (2022), p. 155-159, DOI 10.1353/jod.2022.0054.

⁸ Gandhi, Jennifer, “The Institutional Roots of Democratic Backsliding”, in *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 81, No. 1 (2018), p. e11-e16 at p. e11, <https://doi.org/10.1086/700653>.

⁹ Levitsky, Steven and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, cit., p. 8.

¹⁰ Applebaum, Anne, *Autocracy, Inc. The Dictators Who Want to Run the World*, New



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from totalitarian mobilisation: where the latter hyperactivates state institutions for collective ideological ends, including in the security domain, the former parasitises them, hollowing out capacity for private or factional gain. The many faces of state capture include patrimonialism, understood as the personalisation of political authority and the treatment of state institutions as private extensions of power;¹¹ clientelism, whereby access to state resources is distributed through informal patron-client exchanges in return for loyalty;¹² and kleptocracy, in which political elites systematically appropriate public resources for private enrichment.¹³

Crucially, state capture elevates party patronage to a critical pillar of regime consolidation rewarding party members for loyalty and activism through appointments to roles in public and semi-public institutions, turning the party into an “organisational resource”, primarily to win elections and organise access to power.¹⁴

This process is particularly evident in Georgia's trajectory over the last decade, when mechanisms like lawfare, the weakening of checks and balances and a gradual but relentless executive takeover have shaped the country's governance, inevitably also of the security sector.

In 2012, the Georgian Dream (GD) – the party founded and financed by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili – came to power through free and fair elections, reflecting the widespread public dissatisfaction with the ruling of incumbent Mikhail Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM). By 2016, when the next parliamentary elections took place, however, GD had moved to acquire control over key state institutions, paving the way for the parliamentary “super-majority” that would lock in constitutional reforms, substantially reshape the legal framework and ultimately consolidate a process of state capture.

In 2017-18 sweeping constitutional reforms sanctioning the shift from a presidential to a parliamentary system were drafted and adopted unilaterally, while the opposition, largely marginalised, resorted to walkouts and boycott tactics. A presidential veto was overridden. Although the shift to a parliamentary system was seen both domestically and internationally as an opportunity to increase political inclusiveness, entrenched parliamentary super-majorities

York, Doubleday, 2024.

¹¹ Hale, Henry E., *Patronal Politics. Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014.

¹² Anghel, Veronica, “State Capture: How Informal Networks Subvert Democratic State Building”, in *Eastern Focus*, No. 03, Autumn 2019, p. 28-33, <https://www.global-focus.eu/?p=1384>.

¹³ Gessen, Masha, “The Poligarchs, Oligarchs and Stooges of the Paradise Papers”, in *The New Yorker*, 6 November 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/the-poligarchs-oligarchs-and-stooges-of-the-paradise-papers>.

¹⁴ Gajić, Sonja Stojanović and Dušan Pavlović, “State Capture, Hybrid Regimes and Security Sector Reforms”, cit., p. 94.



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in fact undermined institutional consensus-building.¹⁵

In 2018 Georgians elected a president in a direct ballot for the last time before the new constitution transferred this authority to parliament. In a deliberately incendiary political climate, the elections were marred by intimidation, aggressive rhetoric, misuse of state resources and the blurring of lines between party and state, contributing to an overall negative and divisive campaign.¹⁶ Political forces became entangled in a protracted and disruptive crisis, which left little room for political dissent, genuine debate and democratic deliberation, let alone a peaceful transition of power. Divisive and manipulative media strategies amplified pro-government messaging and attacked critics, fuelling societal polarisation. Coordinated, inauthentic and government-connected Facebook networks were found to promote discriminatory identity-politics,¹⁷ while a sophisticated disinformation infrastructure involving pro-government figures and outlets targeted opposition parties, civil society and Western partners.¹⁸

Against this background, a process of executive takeover unfolded through legal amendments that increased government control over the electoral process, weakened the parliament and other institutional mechanisms of accountability, and subordinated the public administration to partisan priorities. Decision-making authority became progressively concentrated within the governing party and adjacent informal networks. Even after the shift to a parliamentary system, GD's constitutional majority enabled the swift

¹⁵ Venice Commission, *Georgia: Opinion on the Draft Revised Constitution* (CDL-AD(2017)013), 19 June 2017, [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2017\)013-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2017)013-e); EU Delegation to Georgia, *Statement by the Spokesperson on the Constitutional Reform in Georgia*, 10 October 2017, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/33619_en; US Embassy in Georgia, *Statement on the Constitutional Amendments*, 13 October 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20171015014707/https://ge.usembassy.gov/u-s-embassy-statement-constitutional-amendments-october-13/>.

¹⁶ Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), *Georgia: Presidential Election, 28 October and 28 November 2018: Final Report*, 28 February 2019, <https://odihr.osce.org/node/412724>.

¹⁷ Examples of such value-based narratives include the portrayal of LGBTI rights as a foreign imposition incompatible with Georgian traditions; the framing of European integration as a threat to national identity, religion and sovereignty; and the amplification of anti-immigrant and anti-foreign discourses. These narratives were disseminated through coordinated online networks and reflect patterns of information manipulation documented in Georgia's digital environment. See International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), *Divisive Narratives on Facebook during the 2018 Elections*, November 2019, <https://isfed.ge/eng/sotsialuri-mediis-monitoringi/propagandistuli-narativebi-Facebook-ze-2018-tslis-archevnebis-periodshi>; Facebook, *Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior from Georgia, Vietnam and the U.S.*, 20 December 2019, <https://about.fb.com/news/2019/12/removing-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-from-georgia-vietnam-and-the-us/>; European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), *ECRI Report on Georgia (Fifth Monitoring Cycle)*, Strasbourg, Council of Europe, March 2016, <https://rm.coe.int/fourth-report-on-georgia/16808b5773>.

¹⁸ ISFED, *Divisive Narratives on Facebook*, cit.; Facebook, "Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior", cit.



Georgia Dream governments subordinated civil service and public administration to political imperatives rather than governance norms

adoption of government-driven initiatives with minimal debate or effective opposition, thereby reinforcing a “rubber-stamp” dynamic and depriving the legislature of a substantive scrutiny role.¹⁹ Parliamentary monitoring remained superficial:²⁰ committees rarely exercised their formally strong oversight powers.²¹ Violations of anti-corruption rules by parliamentarians were seldom addressed, further undermining parliamentary credibility.²²

In continuity with earlier practices, GD governments subordinated civil service and public administration to political imperatives rather than governance norms.²³ Despite adopting legal frameworks designed to mirror international standards, appointments in the public administration remained primarily political, enforcement of civil service rules weak and oversight limited. GD retained firm administrative control, using positions, discretionary budgets and local authority to co-opt officials and consolidate electoral dominance.²⁴

Informality played a defining role in this system of governance. After a brief interlude as prime minister in 2012-2013, Ivanishvili – a businessman with longstanding links to Moscow and personal wealth estimated at approximately 20 per cent of Georgia's GDP – no longer held elected office.²⁵ Yet he continued to dominate politics, including through the self-appointed role of “honorary chair” of the party, which granted him the informal but decisive prerogative of selecting GD's prime ministerial candidate.²⁶ Access to state resources also depended on informal ties to Ivanishvili's circle, intertwining political loyalty and private gain.²⁷ During the 2018 presidential race, Ivanishvili's Cartu Foundation financed the write-off of some

¹⁹ Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2020 Country Report. Georgia*, https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/country_report_2020_GEO.pdf.

²⁰ UN Development Programme (UNDP), *Integrity in Civil Service (Georgia)*, March 2022, <https://www.undp.org/georgia/publications/integrity-in-civil-service>.

²¹ Democracy Research Institute (DRI), *The Significance of Parliamentary Oversight of the Security Sector and Ongoing Challenges (2020-2022)*, 28 February 2023, <https://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/1132/>.

²² Transparency International Georgia (TIG), *National Integrity System Assessment: Georgia*, 2020, <https://transparency.ge/en/node/11707>.

²³ Kvashilava, Bakur, “The Political Constraints for Civil Service Reform in Georgia: History, Current Affairs, Prospects & Challenges”, in *Journal of Politics and Democratization*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (October 2017), p. 42-63, <https://jpd.gipa.ge/index.php/jpd/article/view/6906/6877>.

²⁴ UNDP, *Integrity in Civil Service (Georgia)*, cit.

²⁵ TIG, *Oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili – The Real Ruler of Georgia and the Architect of Georgia's Pro-Russian Shift*, 29 May 2024, <https://transparency.ge/en/node/13708>; Genté, Régis, “Bidzina Ivanishvili, A Man Who Plays According to Russian Rules?”, in *Caucasus Survey*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2013), p. 117-126; Genté, Régis, “Broken Dream: The Oligarch, Russia, and Georgia's Drift from Europe”, in *ECFR Policy Briefs*, December 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/?p=99761>.

²⁶ TIG, *Oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili*, cit.

²⁷ Kupatadze, Alexander, *Informal Governance and Corruption: Georgia Country Report*, Basel, Basel Institute on Governance, July 2018, https://baselgovernance.org/sites/default/files/2019-04/georgia.informalgovernance.country_report.pdf.



The ruling party preference for accommodation with Russia reflected Ivanishvili's personal worldview

600,000 citizens' bad debts.²⁸ In 2013-2024, companies linked to GD reportedly won approximately 1.1 billion euros in state tenders.²⁹ The European Commission repeatedly flagged these practices under its "de-oligarchisation" conditionality, noting how Ivanishvili's informal influence distorted the political and economic playing field.³⁰

2. STATE CAPTURE AND SECURITY-SECTOR GOVERNANCE IN GEORGIA

The 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine revived traumatic memories of the 2008 war for many Georgians. Anxiety set in as citizens questioned whether the country would be prepared for a potential spill-over from the war. State institutions remained largely silent. Appeals for public debate were disregarded and official assessments of risks – including those associated with the influx of Russian citizens – were withheld. A letter signed by twenty parliamentarians calling for a parliamentary debate received no response. Rumours circulated that, assuming a swift Russian victory, constitutionally enshrined references to NATO membership aspirations would be removed.³¹

Amid growing tensions, the opposition criticised GD for deliberately maintaining ambiguity in a war that, for both historical and geopolitical reasons, touched Georgia closely.³² The ruling party opted to refrain from "provoking" Russia, an approach critics likened, not without irony, to a form of self-deterrence, given that its practical effect was less to deter a Russian aggression than to preemptively stifle any domestic debate on the matter.³³ GD's preference for accommodation with Russia rather than solidarity with Kyiv and policy alignment with traditional partners like the EU and the United States reflected Ivanishvili's personal worldview and it was later presented as a "pragmatic approach" to reality, in line with his earlier claims that Georgia should be aware of its place and avoid overstepping its relative limits.³⁴

This posture was not an isolated diplomatic choice but symptomatic of a broader pattern of captured security governance. Four processes sustained the entanglement of Ivanishvili's personalistic interests

²⁸ TIG, *Oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili*, cit.

²⁹ Ibid.

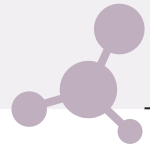
³⁰ European Commission, 2023 *Communication on EU Enlargement Policy* (COM/2023/690), 8 November 2023, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex:52023DC0690>.

³¹ Author's confidential interview with a senior Georgian official, Tbilisi, April 2023.

³² Menabde, Giorgi, "Georgian Parliament Supports Ukraine, but Fears Mentioning Russia", in *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 19, No. 16 (9 February 2022), <https://jamestown.org/georgian-parliament-supports-ukraine-but-fears-mentioning-russia>.

³³ Author's confidential interview with a former senior Georgian official, Tbilisi, April 2023.

³⁴ Genté, Régis, "Broken Dream", cit.



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and security decision-making: (i) personnel policy prioritising loyalty over professional competence; (ii) weak accountability mechanisms fostering secrecy; (iii) limited regard for coherent policy documents articulating a shared vision of national interests and threats; and (iv) fragmented decision-making protecting individual turfs while hindering coordination.

2.1 Personnel policy

As in other institutional settings, senior appointments in security and defence were frequently drawn from Ivanishvili's business associates or inner circle and were reportedly made directly by him, at times bypassing legal procedures.³⁵ Several senior officials, including former Defence Minister and Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, State Security Service Head Grigol Liluashvili, former State Security Service Head and later Interior Minister Vakhtang Gomelauri and General Prosecutor Shalva Tadumadze, had prior professional ties to Ivanishvili through his Cartu Bank or Fund or through roles in his personal security and legal circle.³⁶

This patronage system permeated the institutional hierarchy, reaching middle and lower levels. Irregular practices persisted across the wider administration despite the constraints formally introduced by the 2017-2021 Public Administration Reform, extending into security institutions. Party and personal loyalty, rather than competence, drove promotions and enabled rapid career advancement; independent or critical voices commonly fell out of favour.³⁷ Politically motivated and clientelist decision-making reached a visible peak in 2024-2025 with a massive "reorganisation" at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the removal of diplomats who had defended Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic commitments.³⁸ Approximately seven hundred civil servants were dismissed across agencies, including the Ministry of Defence, in a process the prime minister termed "self-cleansing".³⁹

2.2 Weak accountability

Formally strengthened by the 2019 Rules of Procedure, parliamentary oversight over state security matters nonetheless remained largely

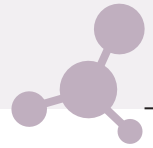
³⁵ Author's confidential interview with several former senior Georgian officials, Tbilisi, April 2023.

³⁶ TIG, *Is Georgia a Captured State?*, 11 December 2020, <https://transparency.ge/en/blog/georgia-captured-state>.

³⁷ Author's confidential interviews with senior Georgian officials, Tbilisi, April 2023.

³⁸ Civil Georgia, *Dozens out of Foreign Ministry amid 'Reorganisation'*, 2 July 2025, <https://civil.ge/archives/689566>.

³⁹ "Georgia Fired 700 Civil Servants for Supporting Pro-EU Protests, Watchdog Says", in *Reuters*, 15 April 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/georgia-fired-700-civil-servants-supporting-pro-eu-protests-watchdog-says-2025-04-15>.



Weak oversight entrenched arbitrariness and selective policing, deepening the estrangement of security institutions from society

perfunctory. GD-appointed ministers and agency heads reported infrequently to a chamber dominated by GD parliamentarians, while sensitive discussions were held behind closed doors in formats inaccessible to both the opposition and the public.⁴⁰ On security grounds and alleged risks of external infiltration, opposition members were *a priori* denied access to classified information, while vetting procedures were systematically delayed.⁴¹ Access was further constrained through the Trust Group, responsible for overseeing classified defence and security spending. With a composition heavily tilted toward the ruling party, the Group rarely exercised its investigative authority.⁴²

Weak oversight entrenched arbitrariness and selective policing, deepening the estrangement of security institutions from society. In May 2018, police raids on Tbilisi nightclubs provoked mass protests and allegations of excessive use of force that remained largely unaddressed. In February 2021, riot police stormed the opposition UNM party's headquarters and detained its leader in an operation widely perceived as legally ungrounded and politically motivated.⁴³ In July 2021, during the planned Pride "March for Dignity", far-right groups attacked organisers and journalists; police failed to intervene. Over 50 journalists were injured and one later died from his injuries.⁴⁴

Amid intensifying identity-politics confrontations, fuelled by disinformation and polarising narratives, law enforcement appeared less as a guarantor of rights than an instrument of political control. This dynamic further eroded public trust.⁴⁵ A pervasive culture of secrecy insulated institutions from scrutiny. A 2021 leak of Security Services' files revealing large-scale surveillance of journalists, clergy and NGOs was largely ignored by oversight bodies.⁴⁶ Monitoring organisations also reported declining access to public information, hampering scrutiny of defence budgets and procurement.⁴⁷

⁴⁰ TIG, *Parliamentary Control – Assessment of 2019-2020*, 16 June 2021, <https://transparency.ge/en/node/12237>.

⁴¹ Author's confidential interview with a senior Georgian official, April 2023.

⁴² DRI, *The Significance of Parliamentary Oversight of the Security Sector and Ongoing Challenges*, cit.

⁴³ Civil Georgia, *Police Storm UNM Office, Detain Nika Melia*, 23 February 2021, <https://civil.ge/archives/400099>; Amnesty International, *Georgia: Police Storm Opposition Headquarters to Arrest Leader Nika Melia*, 23 February 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/?p=87607>.

⁴⁴ Committee to Protect Journalists, *Georgian Camera Operator Aleksandre Lashkarava Dies after Beating by Anti-LGBTQ+ Demonstrators*, 12 July 2021, <https://cpj.org/?p=116797>.

⁴⁵ According to June 2021 public opinion surveys, only 26 per cent of respondents believed the country was moving in the right direction, against 62 per cent who believed it was moving in the wrong direction, amid concerns about political pressure and selective application of the law. See International Republican Institute (IRI), *Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Georgia*, June 2021, https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/iri_poll_presentation_georgia_june_2021_public_release.pdf.

⁴⁶ Civil Georgia, *Probe into Alleged Mass Wiretapping Ineffective, Watchdogs Say*, 18 May 2022, <https://civil.ge/archives/491014>.

⁴⁷ Author's confidential interview with several civil society representatives, Tbilisi,



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At the institutional level, watchdogs were weakened or dismantled. The State Inspector's Service – established to monitor law-enforcement abuses and data protection – was dissolved in December 2021 after denouncing violations in the handling of former President Saakashvili's detention. Its functions were fragmented into hastily established bodies, reducing the coherence and independence of oversight.⁴⁸ Civil society consistently described security institutions as increasingly inaccessible, insulated and resistant to dialogue or scrutiny.⁴⁹

2.3 The limits of strategic planning

Last revised in 2011, Georgia's Security Concept – intended as the cornerstone of the country's security architecture – is now out of step with geopolitical realities. Its failure to incorporate the changes triggered by Russia's war against Ukraine hampers interagency coordination and crisis response. Efforts to update the document began belatedly in 2021 through an interagency working group convened by the National Security Council, with nominal input from civil society. By the time the draft approached parliamentary approval, however, shifting regional dynamics had already overtaken its assumptions, rendering it obsolete. Reflecting procedural inertia, the ruling elite's limited appreciation of the document's strategic importance, and a reluctance to openly identify Russia as a threat, a revised Security Concept has yet to be adopted.

This omission was not merely a bureaucratic failure, but it reflected *de facto* an unstated security concept aligned with the ruling elite's Russia policy rather than with Georgia's constitutionally-enshrined ambition of EU and NATO integration. Since late 2022, this alignment has become progressively more explicit, as GD officials recast Euro-Atlantic institutions as a hostile "Global War Party" seeking to draw Georgia into confrontation with Russia. This shift gathered pace as EU and US pressure on Ivanishvili personally intensified, through the European Parliament's call for his sanctioning and the freezing of his assets in 2024.⁵⁰ For a system of rule built on informal control rather than institutional accountability, accommodation with Russia posed a far smaller threat to Ivanishvili's position than did the EU's

April 2023.

⁴⁸ ODIHR, *Opinion on the Legislative Amendments on the State Inspector's Service of Georgia* (GEN-GEO/436/2022), 18 February 2022, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/d/1/512728.pdf>.

⁴⁹ Author's confidential interview with several civil society representatives, Tbilisi, April 2023.

⁵⁰ Civil Georgia, *Ivanishvili among Disrupters in Politico's 2024 Ranking of Europe's Most Influential People*, 29 November 2023, <https://civil.ge/archives/571741>; Civil Georgia, *EP Adopts Resolution on Georgia, Calls to Sanction Ivanishvili and His 'Network of Enablers'*, 13 February 2025, <https://civil.ge/archives/662182>.



In Georgia, the National Security Council (NSC) was left marginal to day-to-day security governance

insistence on de-oligarchisation.

In addition to being outdated, the Concept remains largely classified, compounding the problem by depriving oversight bodies and the public of insight into strategic priorities – a reflection of a secretive security culture in which legitimate confidentiality norms have been turned into a shield against scrutiny.

Partial disclosure would strengthen legitimacy and enable monitoring of implementation. More broadly, the absence of a revised Concept weakens the coherence of subordinate strategies and Georgia's ability to sustain a unified security architecture and effective whole-of-government coordination. Without mechanisms linking strategic objectives to governance frameworks, decision-making becomes vulnerable to *ad hoc* and particularistic priorities.

2.4 Fragmented decision-making

In international practice, national security councils function as inter-ministerial clearinghouses aligning strategy, coordination and budgeting. Practically they constitute the central hinge of security decision-making. This role is particularly critical in countries exposed to persistent security risks. In Georgia, by contrast, the National Security Council (NSC) was left marginal to day-to-day security governance meeting sparingly or not at all even through major security crises.⁵¹

The 2018 constitutional reform abolished an earlier version of it despite warnings that doing so would create strategic coordination gaps. Officials advocating the establishment of a new equivalent structure were reportedly told that, in a small country like Georgia, security coordination takes place over the phone.⁵² A new NSC chaired by the prime minister was eventually established in 2019 but never gained traction: senior appointments were delayed and ministerial offices instructed by their hierarchies to cooperate only nominally.⁵³ In 2019-22, despite multiple crises, the Council met just eight times; its first meeting of 2022 took place in November, more than eight months after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, following sustained parliamentary pressure. In 2025, the ruling majority abolished it again, transferring

⁵¹ For example, the National Security Council met once during the Covid-19 pandemic on 16 March 2020, and once during the Nagorno-Karabakh war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, on 3 October 2020. See Georgia National Security Council, *Due to Spreading of the New Coronavirus (COVID-19) Meeting of National Security Council Was Held*, 16 March 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250323095411/https://www.nsc.gov.ge/en/COUNCIL/Meetings-of-the-Council/due-to-spreading-of-the-new-co.html-1>; Civil Georgia, *Georgia's National Security Council on Karabakh Developments*, 3 October 2020, <https://civil.ge/archives/372884>.

⁵² Author's confidential interview with a former senior Georgian official, Tbilisi, April 2023.

⁵³ Ibid.



Security-sector control has become central to sustaining Georgian Dream's prolonged incumbency and the survival of its informal system of rule

its functions to other government agencies.⁵⁴ As a senior civil society representative explained, the ruling elite's hostility to the NSC stems from the fact inter-agency coordination implied 'giving up empires', that is, control over administration offices and networks and the resources that come with them.⁵⁵

3. GEORGIA'S CAUTIONARY TALE

The capture of security institutions is often analysed as a means through which ruling elites secure systemic privilege – by ensuring impunity, enabling selective enforcement, legitimising authority through securitisation narratives and consolidating economic rents for insiders.⁵⁶ The Georgian case reflects these dynamics clearly. Control over the security apparatus has facilitated the repression of dissent, the selective use of force and the weaponisation of judicial mechanisms, accelerating autocratisation and consolidating captured governance. Security-sector control has become central to sustaining Georgian Dream's prolonged incumbency and the survival of its informal system of rule, even at the price of violence and repression, as demonstrated by the systematic crackdown on the wave of street protests that has shaken the country since the government's decision to suspend EU accession negotiations in November 2024.⁵⁷

The implications of state capture for security, however, extend beyond the deployment of coercion. An analysis of the Georgian case points to four processes through which state capture degrades security governance, each with implications extending beyond this particular context.

First, state capture erodes institutional effectiveness by privileging loyalty over competence in appointments across state institutions and the public administration. Second, it undermines self-correcting mechanisms in decision-making processes by failing to comprehensively assess threats and timely revise strategic documents, by marginalising collaborative policy forums – such as the National Security Council – and by suppressing internal dissenting opinions. Third, through patronal governance, corruption and the repurposing of security institutions for regime survival, state capture

⁵⁴ Civil Georgia, *Georgian Dream to Abolish National Security Council*, 17 June 2025, <https://civil.ge/archives/687308>.

⁵⁵ Author's confidential interview with a civil society representative, Tbilisi, April 2023.

⁵⁶ Gajić, Sonja Stojanović and Dušan Pavlović, "State Capture, Hybrid Regimes and Security Sector Reforms", cit.

⁵⁷ Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, *Memorandum on the Human Rights Situation in Georgia*, 10 March 2025, <https://rm.coe.int/memorandum-on-the-human-rights-situation-in-georgia-by-michael-o-flahe/1680b4ba41>; European Commission, *Georgia 2025 Report* (SWD/2025/757), 4 November 2025, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex:52025SC0757>.



Academic literature and policy documents point toward whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches as key to ensuring resilience

simultaneously distorts resource allocation and degrades operational capacity – hollowing out security institutions from within while redirecting their functions away from genuine security provision and towards the consolidation of elite interests. Fourth, state capture fractures social cohesion and weakens societal resilience by eroding citizens' trust in state institutions – a dynamic manifest in electoral and media polarisation,⁵⁸ and in specific episodes such as the surveillance leaks, the night-club raids and the storming of the UNM headquarters.

In countries like Georgia already exposed to structural external pressures, the erosion of security governance induced by state capture becomes particularly consequential, amplifying strategic vulnerabilities precisely when the demands placed on the state are greatest. Capable and functional security institutions are a bastion protecting even a small country's sovereignty, ensuring its survival and defending its people's democratic expression of geopolitical preferences amid intensifying great power competition.

4. LESSONS FOR GOVERNANCE AND SECURITY

Where Georgia illustrates the security costs of captured governance, a growing body of academic literature and policy documents points toward whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches as key to ensuring resilience, that is, to absorb and adapt to adverse circumstances.⁵⁹ As a multi-level process, absorption and adaptation requires coordination across governmental, institutional and societal actors, not military or security capacity alone. Citizens who have lost confidence in state institutions will not readily mobilise in a crisis; polarised and fragmented societies lack the social cohesion that effective collective response demands.

Both the 2021 NATO Strengthened Resilience Commitment and the 2024 EU Niinistö Report reflect a convergent doctrinal shift – recognising governance quality and societal cohesion as constitutive of security, not merely complementary to it. The NATO Commitment calls on Allied governments to build national resilience through a whole-of-government approach integrating civil, private and societal actors, and formally identifies interference with democratic processes and good governance as a threat to Allied resilience.⁶⁰ The Niinistö Report adopts a comprehensive preparedness approach – a whole-of-

⁵⁸ See IRI, *Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Georgia*, cit.

⁵⁹ For example, Comfort, Louise K. et al. (eds), *Designing Resilience. Preparing for Extreme Events*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010.

⁶⁰ NATO, *Strengthened Resilience Commitment*, 14 June 2021, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2021/06/14/strengthened-resilience-commitment>.



government and whole-of-society model linking civilian and military readiness – and argues explicitly that no military defence can be sustained without maintaining essential governmental functions, economic continuity and societal resilience.⁶¹ Good governance is, from this perspective, a structural quality of national security.

Understanding the mechanisms through which security governance is captured is essential both for assessing the resilience of states confronting state capture and for designing effective international assistance. Because captured governance generates security vulnerabilities, external actors aiming to strengthen defence capacity and institutional resilience cannot treat security assistance as politically neutral technical support. Such efforts must be grounded in a careful appreciation of domestic governance dynamics and the political incentives shaping institutional behaviour, in line with the 2022 UN Secretary-General's report *Strengthening Security Sector Reform* and its call to enforce the primacy of politics.⁶² Given that weak governance undermines the effectiveness of security investments, governance assessment must form an integral element of security assistance from the outset – ensuring that capacity-building efforts incorporate safeguards against political instrumentalisation and are subject to regular verification.⁶³

The Georgian case makes this lesson concrete. A state facing persistent external pressure, governed by institutions repurposed for elite survival rather than national defence, and marked by deep polarisation and eroded public trust, is structurally ill-equipped to withstand security crises. Without the governance conditions that make resilience possible – accountable institutions, coherent strategic coordination and sustained social trust – no amount of technical capacity-building can deliver durable security. Georgia's trajectory under state capture shows it clearly: the quality of governance is not a background condition for security. It is its foundation.

⁶¹ Niinistö, Sauli, *Safer Together. Strengthening Europe's Civilian and Military Preparedness and Readiness*, Brussels, European Commission, 30 October 2024, p. 8-9, https://commission.europa.eu/node/33168_en.

⁶² UN Secretary General, *Strengthening Security Sector Reform* (S/2022/280), 15 March 2022, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3967599>.

⁶³ Scherrer, Vincenza and Jonathan Marley, "After Munich: Making Security Investments Today without Creating Tomorrow's Vulnerabilities", in *DCAF Insights*, 19 February 2026, <https://www.dcaf.ch/after-munich>.



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