

Power Shifts in Post-Soviet States: Political Opportunities and the Role of Political Parties

Comparative Analysis

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Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

The paper examines power shifts in post-Soviet states through a comparative analysis of Georgia, Armenia, Moldova, Ukraine, and Belarus. Utilizing political process theory and democratization theories as a framework, the study explores key factors—such as regime type, elite divisions, state repressive capacity, and the influence of external actors—that shape the political opportunity structure for peaceful power transitions. It also highlights the capacity of political parties to effectively leverage these opportunities for facilitating political change.

The findings reveal that, due to differences in political opportunity structures, hybrid regimes such as Moldova and Ukraine have achieved political change through elections, while Georgia, also a hybrid regime, experienced a peaceful revolution. In Armenia, a semi-consolidated authoritarian regime, peaceful revolution was enabled by key structural openings: internal elite fragmentation, credible opposition leadership, minimal external interference, and shifting information dynamics that eroded centralized control over public discourse. In contrast, Belarus remains a stark exception, where entrenched authoritarianism has prevented political change, despite mass social movements and efforts by opposition parties.

Lessons from these cases underscore significant challenges for contemporary Georgia, where the consolidation of power by the ruling party, the absence of a unified opposition, and the lack of charismatic leadership continue to impede prospects for democratic transitions.

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Introduction

In weakly institutionalized countries, where democratic governance mechanisms operate either formally or with limited capacity, achieving political change through elections is a challenging endeavor. Concentration of state resources in the hands of the ruling political elite, coupled with the weaknesses of opposition political parties and civil society, poverty and the economic dependence of a large number of citizens on the government, diminishes the role of elections as a conduit to political change. This dynamic often enables the prolonged dominance of a single political elite, further undermining the already fragile democratic institutions and obstructing prospects for regular democratic transitions.

Despite these obstacles, evidence indicates that political leadership change is possible even in weakly institutionalized settings. This paradox is exemplified in the recent history of post-Soviet countries, where, under broadly similar conditions, some nations have experienced government transitions, while in others, elections have remained largely ceremonial, and mass social mobilization against the ruling elite has failed to produce tangible results. Moldova (2019) and Ukraine (2019) serve as clear examples of successful political transitions in such contexts, where transitions were prompted by elections and peaceful post-electoral revolutions acted as catalysts of change in Armenia (2018) and Georgia (2003). Belarus emerges as a unique exception, where no transformation occurred.

The issue of power transitions is particularly relevant for contemporary Georgia, where the ruling Georgian Dream party keeps its iron grip on power for the fourth consecutive term¹ following highly-controversial parliamentary elections². This marks the first time in the history of modern Georgia that a political party has remained in power for such an extended period. This historical anomaly has

¹ Kobakhidze, I. (2021, March 29). *ირაკლი კობახიძე - ვადამდელი არჩევნები არ იქნება, ეს არის მოცემულობა და არა ულტიმატუმი, ულტიმატუმებით საუბრობს ოპოზიცია* [Irakli Kobakhidze - Early elections will not take place, this is a given and not an ultimatum, the opposition speaks with ultimatums]. 1TV. <https://1tv.ge/news/irakli-kobakhidze-vadamdeli-archevnebi-ar-igheba-es-aris-mocemuloba-es-ar-aris-ultimatumi-ultimatumebit-saubrobs-opozicia/>

² Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). 2020. Republic of Georgia – Parliamentary elections, 31 October 2020: OSCE/ODIHR limited election observation mission final report. <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/584029>
International Republican Institute. 2024, December 23. IRI International Election Observation Mission to Georgia: Final Report of the 2024 Parliamentary Election. International Republican Institute. <https://www.iri.org/resources/iri-international-election-observation-mission-to-georgia/>
European External Action Service. 2024, October 29. Georgia: Statement by the High Representative Josep Borrell on the latest developments following the Parliamentary elections. European Union. <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/georgia-statement-high-representative-josep-borrell-latest-developments-following-parliamentary-en>
Civil.ge. 2024, October 28. Blinken: U.S. Condemns Breaches of Int. Norms During Oct. 26 Elections, Calls for Investigation. Civil Georgia. <https://civil.ge/archives/631791>

already had significant negative consequences for the country. Prolonged tenure, among other factors, has allowed the ruling party to consolidate power and make unilateral political decisions that contradict the aspirations of the vast majority of the Georgian population, both in domestic and international contexts. The law on “Transparency of Foreign Influence”, introduced by the Georgian Dream in the spring of 2023, sparked widespread protests across the country. Due to its contextual and substantive similarity to the Russian Federation's 2012 law on "Agents of Foreign Influence,"³ Georgian citizens and the country's Western partners perceived this initiative as a step toward consolidating authoritarianism⁴. Georgian Dream was forced to retreat and retract the initiative, vowing never to reintroduce the law ever again. The protest movement intensified following the reintroduction of the law in the spring of 2024. The scale and intensity of the protests created conditions that seemed favorable for a potential change in government, however, the ruling elite retained power through a campaign of organized violence and widespread electoral fraud⁵, that reflected in the a scathing report by the OSCE/ODIHR⁶. Despite no democratic country having recognized the election results and mass demonstrations taking place in Tbilisi demanding new elections⁷, the ruling party, now widely regarded as illegitimate by domestic citizens and key international partners, remains steadfast in its refusal to relinquish power or allow new elections⁸.

Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to identify the key factors that facilitate power transitions through a comparative analysis. It elucidates the conditions that facilitated such transformations in

³ Politico. 2024, February 9. Georgian Dream reintroduces Russian-style foreign agent law. Politico.

<https://www.politico.eu/article/georgian-dream-ruling-party-reintroduce-russian-style-foreign-agent-law>
Atlantic Council. 2024, February 9. Georgia launches new push to adopt Russian-style foreign agent law. Atlantic Council.
<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/georgia-launches-new-push-to-adopt-russian-style-foreign-agent-law>

⁴ Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI). (2023). Russian law is not the will of Georgia.
<https://idfi.ge/en/russian-law-is-not-the-will-of-georgia>

⁵ Civil.ge. (2024). President: “These elections failed”, proposes way forward. Civil Georgia.
<https://civil.ge/archives/636253>

⁶ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). (2024). Georgia: Parliamentary elections, 26 October 2024. ODIHR Election Observation Mission final report. https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/1/6/584029_0.pdf

⁷ 1TV.ge. (2025). ვან ლანშოტი - პროტესტის მონაწილეები ითხოვენ ახალ არჩევნებს, ერთი წლის წინ საქართველომ მიიღო კანდიდატის სტატუსი ხალხის გამო, ხალხი გვიყურებს, რომ ვიმოქმედოთ. <https://1tv.ge/news/van-lanshoti-protestis-monawileebi-itkhoven-akhal-archevnebs-erti-wlis-win-saqartvelom-miigho-kandidatis-statusi-khalkhis-gamo-khalkhi-gviyurebs-rom-vimoqmedot/>

⁸ Interpressnews.ge. (2025). ირაკლი კობახიძე - ვერავითარ ხელახალ არჩევნებზე ვერ იქნება საუბარი - 2025 წელი უნდა იყოს საქართველოში „კოლექტიური ნაცემობის“ სრული განეიტრალების წელიწადი.
<https://www.interpressnews.ge/ka/article/827716-irakli-kobaxize-veravitar-xelaxal-archevnebz-ver-ikneba-saubari-2025-celi-unda-iqos-sakartveloshi-kolektiuri-nacemozraobis-sruli-ganeitralebis-celicadi/>

Moldova, Ukraine, Armenia, and Georgia (in 2003), while clarifying why similar changes were unattainable in Belarus and seem nearly impossible in contemporary Georgia.

The structure of the paper is as follows: first, it presents the theoretical framework and research methodology. Next, it examines the contextual factors of each country under consideration. It then identifies the strategies and characteristics of opposition political parties in study cases. Finally, based on this analysis, the paper aims to provide an explanation of current political situation in Georgia.

1. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

1.1. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this paper is grounded in Political Process Theory⁹ and theories of democratization, with a specific focus on the role of political parties.¹⁰

The political opportunity structure is a central concept in Political Process Theory that explains why social movements emerge and either succeed or fail. According to the theory, access to political decision-making and the extent to which marginalized or opposition groups can influence it significantly shape the nature and strategies of social movements. For instance, democratic systems with open institutions may provide pathways for activism through legislative initiatives or petitions, while authoritarian systems often restrict direct access, pushing movements toward non-institutional methods such as protests.

The political opportunity structure reflects the dynamic interaction between institutional and political factors that influence a movement's capacity to mobilize, sustain itself, and achieve its goals. These factors include:

1. *Divisions among elites*

- Divisions among elites (political leaders, economic oligarchs, or military figures) are critical in creating political opportunities for social movements. When elites are unified, they can suppress dissent and maintain control more effectively. However, fractures within the elite—stemming from ideological differences, personal rivalries, or competition for resources—provide openings for movements to exploit weaknesses.
- These divisions are closely tied to elite control over key state institutions (executive, legislative, judiciary, and media). When a single elite group exercises control over all branches and media, resistance to social movements is often coherent and effective. Conversely, elite divisions may lead to fragmented responses, reducing the state's ability to suppress movements and enabling opposition forces to gain traction.

2. *State Capacity and Willingness to Suppress Dissent*

⁹ Jenkins, J. C. (1995). *Social movements, political representation, and the state: An agenda and comparative framework*. In J. C. Jenkins & B. Klandermans (Eds.), *The politics of social protest: Comparative perspectives on states and social movements* (pp. 14–35). University of Minnesota Press.

¹⁰ Dahl, R. A. (2008). *Polyarchy: Participation and opposition*. Yale University Press.

O'Donnell, G. A., Schmitter, P. C., & Whitehead, L. (Eds.). (1986). *Transitions from authoritarian rule: Southern Europe*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

- This factor highlights how the state's approach to repression shapes the environment in which dissent operates. A state with high capacity and willingness to repress dissent increases the risks and costs for participants, deterring mobilization. Conversely, a weak or divided state, or one reluctant to use repression, creates opportunities for movements to grow.
- When the state's security apparatus is fragmented or sympathetic to protesters, movements often gain momentum, as seen in cases where enforcement agencies defect or remain neutral during social unrest.

3. *The Influence of External Actors*

Political opportunity theory emphasizes the role of external factors that can provide or limit opportunities for collective action, social movements, or political change.

- In terms of providing opportunities for the political shifts, ruling elites might be further motivated by commitments to international partners or concerns over potential sanctions, may yield to public demands and relinquish power, thereby facilitating peaceful political transitions.
- However, the theory also recognizes how external factors can have negative effect. External forces, like foreign governments, international organizations, or even foreign corporations, can act to suppress political movements. They may support the status quo or a particular regime that resists democratic reforms or social change. Additionally, governments may leverage external alliances, such as military or political ties, to reinforce their power and suppress opposition. This can happen through diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions, or even military intervention.

While Political Process Theory emphasizes the importance of elite influence, repressive capacity, and external factors in creating political opportunities, theories of democratization focus on the role of political parties in the success of social movements. Political parties that have facilitated smoother democratic transitions share common characteristics, including:

1. *Aggregating Societal Grievances*

Political parties provide a platform for dissent by articulating demands for political change and mobilizing citizens around shared grievances.

2. *Organizing and Unifying Fragmented Opposition Groups*

Effective opposition parties form coherent coalitions that can negotiate with or confront authoritarian regimes, thereby increasing their capacity to challenge entrenched power structures.

Picture 1. Political Opportunity Structure



Source: The author combines insights from Political Process Theory and Theories of Democratization to develop this interpretation.

The framework outlined above guides the analysis of political transitions in post-Soviet states, focusing on how variations in regime type, elite divisions, and the strategies of political parties shape transition outcomes. By applying this theoretical perspective, the paper seeks to explain the factors enabling or hindering power transitions in Georgia (2003), Armenia (2018), Moldova (2019), Ukraine (2019), and Belarus (2020) and draw parallels to contemporary Georgia.

This study explores the dynamics of political power transitions in post-Soviet states by addressing two key research questions:

- 1. To what extent political opportunity structure correlates with successful power transitions in the case studies?*
- 2. How do opposition parties' capacities to aggregate societal grievances and unify fragmented opposition groups against established ruling elites facilitate smooth power transitions in the case studies?*

To answer these questions, the study employs a qualitative methodology through a comparative case study analysis. This approach examines and compares political events, structures, and processes across multiple countries to identify patterns, similarities, and differences.

For contextual analysis, the paper relies on secondary data sources, including reports, academic articles, government documents, and media coverage. This methodological approach allows for a comprehensive examination of the conditions and factors influencing political transitions in the selected post-Soviet states.

1.2. Research Scope

This study focuses on five post-Soviet countries: Georgia (2003), Armenia (2018), Ukraine (2019), Moldova (2019), and Belarus (2020). These cases were chosen based on the presence of social movements that sought to influence or contribute to political power transitions. While the selection of five cases may seem limited for rigorous analysis, the substantial contextual and political differences among them provide a robust foundation for ensuring the validity and relevance of the findings.

Georgia, Armenia, Moldova, Ukraine, and Belarus are post-Soviet countries with relatively short histories of independence. Despite this shared characteristic, most of these nations have undergone significant political transformations in recent years. In Georgia, Armenia, Moldova, and Ukraine, entrenched, ineffective, clan-based, and oligarchic governances have been replaced by non-corrupt, reformist leaderships. Political forces amid growing social discontent. These political transitions have facilitated the implementation of key reforms and strengthened cooperation with Western partners.

After the Rose Revolution in 2003, Georgia emerged as a regional leader in combating corruption, and achieved top rankings in the World Bank's global ease-of-doing-business indices. The revolution also marked the beginning of Georgia's significant advancements in Euro-Atlantic integration.

Georgia prioritized NATO membership by joining the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) in 2005¹¹, focusing on defense reforms and NATO interoperability. It deepened EU ties through the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) in 2004 and the Eastern Partnership in 2009¹², advancing reforms for market and political integration. Additionally, the U.S.-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership in 2009 formalized cooperation in defense, democracy, and economic development.¹³

Armenia, on the other hand, advanced its democratic score, transitioning from a semi-consolidated autocracy to a hybrid regime.¹⁴ However, Armenia's geopolitical reliance on Russia for security and economic needs has constrained the Pashinyan government from pursuing deeper cooperation with NATO and the United States.¹⁵ Amid regional shifts following the 2020 Karabakh war and the European Union's more favorable stance on enlargement after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Pashinyan government began distancing itself from Russia's influence and took a precise steps to strengthen its relationship with the EU¹⁶ On March 12, 2024, the European Parliament passed a resolution confirming that Armenia meets the Maastricht Treaty Article 49 requirements and may apply for EU membership¹⁷ and in 2025, the Armenian government approved the bill to launch EU

¹¹ Civil.ge. (2013, June 18). *Georgia joins NATO's Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP)*. Civil Georgia. <https://civil.ge/archives/108498>

¹² Jones, S. (2010). *Georgia and the United States: A Strategic Partnership*. *The National Bureau of Asian Research*, 21(2), 45-59.

¹³ U.S. Department of State. (2009, January 9). *United States-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership*. U.S. Department of State. <https://www.state.gov/united-states-georgia-charter-on-strategic-partnership>

¹⁴ Balci, B. (2021). *Armenia's Democratic Transition: From a Semi-Consolidated Autocracy to a Hybrid Regime*. *European Political Science Review*, 13(4), 577-593.

¹⁵ Reuters. (2023, September 3). *Armenian PM says depending solely on Russia for security was strategic mistake*. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/armenian-pm-says-depending-solely-russia-security-was-strategic-mistake-2023-09-03>

El País. (2025, January 15). *Armenia se aleja más de la órbita de Rusia al firmar un acuerdo de cooperación estratégica con EE. UU.* *El País*. <https://elpais.com/internacional/2025-01-15/armenia-se-aleja-mas-de-la-orbita-de-rusia-al-firmar-un-acuerdo-de-cooperacion-estrategica-con-ee-uu.html>

¹⁶ Cadena SER. (2025, January 9). *El gobierno de Armenia pone en marcha el proceso para entrar en la Unión Europea y alejarse de la órbita de Rusia [The Armenian government launches the process to join the European Union and move away from Russia's influence]*. Cadena SER. <https://cadenaser.com/nacional/2025/01/09/el-gobierno-de-armenia-pone-en-marcha-el-proceso-para-entrar-en-la-union-europea-y-alejarse-de-la-orbita-de-rusia-cadena-ser>

¹⁷ European Parliament. (2024). *Resolution on Armenia's EU membership and the implementation of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA)*. European Parliament. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2024-0163_EN.html

accession bid^{18 19}. Following political shifts, both Moldova and Ukraine launched de-oligarchization agendas.²⁰ Due to their commitments to democratic reforms, both countries were granted EU candidate status in 2022²¹ and officially began accession negotiations in 2024²². In contrast, the case of Belarus stands out, as the mass social movement in 2020 failed to replace the ruling political elite with democratic forces.

The study of these cases is particularly significant because, although transitions in political elites across these countries were peaceful, the nature of the political regimes at the time of change varied considerably. In Georgia and Armenia, political shifts occurred through peaceful revolutions. In 2003, Georgia was categorized by Freedom House as "partly free," or a hybrid regime, characterized by fragile democratic institutions and substantial challenges to the protection of political rights and civil liberties²³. By contrast, Armenia in 2018 was classified as a semi-consolidated autocracy, a regime that maintained a facade of democracy, relied on informal power structures, and demonstrated limited respect for democratic institutions and practices.²⁴

In Moldova and Ukraine, political power transitioned through elections in 2019, with both countries classified as hybrid regimes²⁵ during this period. Conversely, Belarus represented a consolidated

¹⁸ Reuters. (2025, January 9). Armenian government approves bill to launch EU accession bid. Reuters.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/armenian-government-approves-bill-launch-eu-accession-bid-2025-01-09>

¹⁹ European Parliament. (2024). Resolution on Armenia's EU membership and the implementation of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA). European Parliament.

https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2024-0163_EN.html

²⁰ Moldpres. (2023, December 7). Moldova's National Commission for European Integration approves plan to limit oligarchic influence. Moldpres. <https://www.moldpres.md/en/news/2023/12/07/23009931>

Snyder, T. (2021, October 7). De-oligarchization of Ukraine is President Zelenskyy's top priority. Atlantic Council. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/de-oligarchization-of-ukraine-is-president-zelenskyyvs-top-priority/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

²¹ European Commission. (2022, June 23). EU leaders grant candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova. European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ac_22_4125

²² European Commission. (2024, October 30). Commission adopts 2024 Enlargement Package. European Commission. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-adopts-2024-enlargement-package-2024-10-30_en

²³ Freedom House. (2003). Freedom in the world. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/Freedom_in_the_World_2003_complete_book.pdf

²⁴ Freedom House. (2018). Armenia. Country Report. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/armenia/nations-transit/2018>

²⁵ Freedom House. (2019). Moldova. Country Report <https://freedomhouse.org/country/moldova/nations-transit/2019>

Freedom House. (2019). Ukraine. Country Report <https://freedomhouse.org/country/ukraine/nations-transit/2019>

autocracy, characterized by the absence of political competition and pluralism, with widespread violations of fundamental political, civil, and human rights.²⁶ This variation in political contexts underscores the need for further exploration of theoretical factors, such as the political opportunity structure, that contribute to the success or failure of movements within each specific case.

²⁶ *Freedom House. (2020) Belarus. Country Report: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/belarus/nations-transit/2020>*

2. Georgia

2.1. The Ruling Elite in Georgia at the Time of the Rose Revolution (2003)

Studies of post-Soviet states and societies frequently employ the terms "clans" and "families" when discussing Georgia in 2003. The ruling party, the Citizens' Union of Georgia (CUG), was led by President Eduard Shevardnadze, a powerful representative of the Soviet nomenklatura, who had governed the country since 1992 (and, prior to that, acted as a leader of Soviet Georgia from 1972 to 1985).²⁷ Although Shevardnadze initially enjoyed certain popular support due the collapse of all state institutions and social services in the aftermath of a military coup d'état, resulting in mass desperation as well as his reputation as an internationally connected power broker and reformer²⁸, his family soon emerged as a dominant clan, holding significant business and political positions within the country.²⁹

2.2. The Path to the Rose Revolution: The Evolution of Social Movements

The socioeconomic situation in Georgia began to deteriorate significantly from 1998, with the decline becoming more severe by the early 2000s. The country faced weak governance and institutional decay, and the Shevardnadze administration was widely perceived as corrupt and inefficient. Public dissatisfaction grew due to worsening living conditions, high unemployment, systemic corruption, and ineffective governance.³⁰ Although large-scale, coordinated movements had not yet emerged, significant protests before 2003 reflected growing discontent with Shevardnadze's government.

Shevardnadze's re-election in 2000 was marred by accusations of electoral fraud³¹, prompting scattered protests by opposition parties and civil society groups, who accused the government of

²⁷ Chiaberashvili, Z., & Tevzadze, G. (2005.) *Power elites in Georgia: Old and new. From revolution to reform: Georgia's struggle with democratic institution building and security sector reform, 187-207.*

²⁸ Wheatley, Jonathan. (2017). *Georgia from national awakening to Rose Revolution: delayed transition in the former Soviet Union.* Routledge.

²⁹ Chiaberashvili, Z., & Tevzadze, G. (2005). *Power elites in Georgia: Old and new. From revolution to reform: Georgia's struggle with democratic institution building and security sector reform, 187-207.*

³⁰ The Human Rights Information and Documentation center (HRIDC). (2002.) *An alternative report on economic, social and cultural rights in Georgia: 5-9*

³¹ Kandelaki G. (2006). *Georgia's Rose Revolution: A Participant's Perspective.*

<https://www.usip.org/publications/2006/07/georgias-rose-revolution-participants-perspective>

corruption and election manipulation³². Scandals involving Shevardnadze's close allies and family members further eroded public trust in his leadership.

One of the most significant protests occurred in 2001 when the government attempted to shut down the independent television station Rustavi 2, known for its critical stance toward Shevardnadze's administration. This move triggered large-scale demonstrations in Tbilisi, led by journalists, civil society activists, and students, who demanded press freedom and government accountability. The protests forced Shevardnadze to dismiss several high-ranking officials, including the Minister of Internal Affairs,³³ marking a pivotal moment in the growing public discontent that would later culminate in the Rose Revolution.

The rigged parliamentary elections of 2003 further exacerbated tensions, leading to an escalation of public demonstrations. These events culminated in the peaceful Rose Revolution on November 23, 2003. Subsequently, a presidential election was held on January 4, 2004, in which Mikheil Saakashvili, the leader of the protest movement, won an overwhelming 96% of the vote.³⁴

2.3. The Role of Parties

The 2003 Rose Revolution was primarily driven by a coalition of opposition parties and leaders who temporarily set aside their ideological differences to confront the ruling party of Eduard Shevardnadze. This unity played a pivotal role in mobilizing public support and organizing mass protests, ultimately leading to Shevardnadze's resignation. The opposition, consisting of Mikheil Saakashvili (United National Movement), Zurab Zhvania (United Democrats), and Nino Burjanadze (Burjanadze-Democrats), united in their objective of ousting President Shevardnadze.³⁵

The coalition's unity was based on pragmatic considerations rather than ideological alignment.³⁶ These leaders worked together during the parliamentary election campaign and the subsequent

³² Tsitsishvili D. (2010). *GEORGIA: CORRUPTION DEVELOPMENTS AND ANTI- CORRUPTION ACTIVITIES SINCE 1990S*. Working paper. Hertie School.

³³ Kandelaki G. (2006). *Georgia's Rose Revolution: A Participant's Perspective*. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2006/07/georgias-rose-revolution-participants-perspective>

³⁴ Civil.ge.(2004).Parallel Vote Tabulation Suggests 96% of Votes for Saakashvili: <https://civil.ge/archives/104981>

³⁵ USAID Georgia. (2005). *Causes of the Rose Revolution and lessons for democracy assistance*.

³⁶ In July 2008, Burjanadze founded the "Foundation for Democracy and Development." In October of the same year, she established the party Democratic Movement - United Georgia, criticizing the incumbent government's handling of the Russia-Georgia war. The party became one of the organizers of the protests held in April and May 2009, calling for the resignation of Mikheil Saakashvili.

protests, presenting a unified front against the CUG government. The coalition focused on a shared narrative centered on anti-corruption, democratization, and free and fair elections. They accused Shevardnadze's government of electoral fraud, nepotism, and an inability to address Georgia's pressing socioeconomic issues.³⁷

The opposition successfully mobilized large segments of the population, including civil society groups, students, and ordinary citizens, to participate in peaceful protests against the government. This widespread mobilization was a key factor in the success of the Rose Revolution.

Saakashvili's charismatic leadership and image as a crusader against the old political elite played a pivotal role in mobilizing society around the coalition. Both media outlets and scholars frequently highlight Saakashvili's ability to channel widespread public discontent into a peaceful revolution that ultimately led to Shevardnadze's resignation. His communication style, combined with his readiness to directly engage with the public, was instrumental in garnering mass support. Saakashvili adeptly presented himself as a reformist leader capable of bridging the divide between Georgia and the West. A crucial aspect of Saakashvili's leadership was his ability to persuade followers that success hinged on a decisive "final push," symbolized by the peaceful storming of the parliament before its formal convocation. This act underscored his determination and was a turning point in the revolution. Without this intervention, the parliament would likely have convened (the session had already started), raising uncertainty about whether the opposition possessed the capacity or resolve to effect change through subsequent street demonstrations. In the absence of this "final push," the outcome of the movement would have remained unpredictable, leaving Georgia's political trajectory in the realm of speculation.³⁸

Civil.ge. (2008, July 7). Burjanadze launches foundation. <https://civil.ge/archives/108498>

Civil.ge. (2008, October 27). Burjanadze launches party. *Civil Georgia.* <https://civil.ge/archives/108498>

The Guardian. (2009, April 9). Thousands gather for street protests against Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/apr/09/georgia-protests-mikheil-saakashvili>

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Chivvis, C. S., Kavanagh, J., Lauji, S., Malle, A., Orloff, S., Wertheim, S., & Wilcox, R. (2024). *Georgia: Strategic change in U.S. foreign policy.* Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

2.4. The Political Opportunity Structure in Georgia

The success of the Rose Revolution was shaped by a complex interplay of domestic and international factors. These influences contributed to the environment in which the revolution ultimately succeeded.

Until the Rose Revolution, it became evident that Shevardnadze's grip on power was weakening, not only due to growing public discontent and rampant corruption but also because of the emergence of a reformist opposition. By 2000, the control of Shevardnadze's clan over all branches of government was gradually eroding. Starting in 2001, tensions between the reformist wing of the ruling coalition and members of the former Communist nomenklatura (state bureaucracy) came to a head. Reformers within CUG began openly disagreeing with the president. Among them, Mikheil Saakashvili, then Minister of Justice, frequently voiced strong opposition during government meetings, particularly targeting ministers accused of corruption or criminal activities.³⁹

As internal disagreements escalated, CUG's parliamentary majority collapsed in September 2001, leading to the emergence of three prominent opposition groups: the United National Movement (led by Saakashvili), the United Democrats (led by former Speaker of Parliament Zurab Zhvania), and the New Rights Party (led by young politicians of various business backgrounds). This fragmentation of parliament significantly weakened the influence of the Shevardnadze clan.

The situation further deteriorated after CUG's crushing defeat in the June 2002 local elections, where it secured less than 2% of the nationwide vote.⁴⁰ The Tbilisi City Council, chaired by Saakashvili since November 2002, became the government body controlled by the opposition. Despite these setbacks, Shevardnadze maintained control over key executive government bodies, law enforcement agencies, the judiciary, and the procuracy, with courts and police remaining susceptible to political pressure.⁴¹

Shevardnadze's full control over the executive and law enforcement bodies enabled him to avoid relinquishing power through elections, making a revolution the only viable path for change. However, he ultimately ceded power, unable to withstand the will of the people. Public mobilization was influenced by the fact that the Shevardnadze government did not have full control over the media.⁴²

³⁹ Mitchell, L. A. (2004). *Georgia's Rose revolution*.

⁴⁰ *Civil.ge*. (2002). საკრებულოს თავმჯდომარის არჩევნები ოპოზიციის თანამშრომლობას აცერხებს. <https://civil.ge/ka/archives/128596>

⁴¹ Ghia Nodia, *Nations in Transit - Georgia (2003)*, Freedom House, 29 May 2003, <https://www.refworld.org/reference/annualreport/freehou/2003/en/50810>.

⁴² *Ibid*.

At the time, Rustavi 2, the most influential television channel, played a crucial role in disseminating information and expanding the protest movement to the vast majority of Georgian citizens.⁴³ Regarding the incumbent's capacity to suppress dissent, the Shevardnadze government attempted to resist social movements ⁴⁴ by leveraging its control over law enforcement agencies. However, it ultimately failed to employ the state's repressive apparatus effectively against opponents. This failure was primarily due to the administration's eroded legitimacy, particularly within the police and military. Extremely low salaries—often delayed due to economic challenges—the absence of social protection mechanisms, inadequate working conditions, and insufficient equipment were the conditions under which the police and military were expected to fulfill their professional duties⁴⁵. Consequently, many within these institutions shared more in common with citizens angered by corruption than with the narrow group of individuals who benefited from the state at the expense of wider society. Although the Minister of Internal Affairs at the time warned protesters about the potential use of force⁴⁶, the police refrained from intervening, thereby enabling the demonstrators to occupy the parliament.⁴⁷

On the other hand, the West, and the US in particular, played a pivotal role in the success of Georgia's Rose Revolution. The American support for democratic changes in Georgia was shaped by the shift in foreign policy priorities following 2001. Following the 9/11 attacks, the George W. Bush administration launched an expansive and indefinite Global War on Terror (GWOT), which embraced the idea of preventive war, led to the invasion of Iraq, and lowered the priority given to China and Russia.⁴⁸ To reach the goals, the US established counterterrorism as the United States' top strategic priority. This shift involved not only a significant increase in resources for military operations but also a reallocation of national security tools to address emerging threats. As part of its approach, the

⁴³ Anable, D. (2006). *The role of Georgia's media and Western aid in the Rose Revolution*. *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 11(3), 7–43. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1081180X06293586>

⁴⁴ Civil.ge. (2003, September 29). *ოპოზიცია პოლიციას ბოლნისში ამომრჩეველთა დაშინებაში ადანაშაულებს*. *Civil Georgia*. <https://civil.ge/ka/archives/130430>

⁴⁵ World Bank. (2012). *Fighting Corruption in Public Services Chronicling Georgia's Reforms*. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/518301468256183463/pdf/664490PUB0EPI0065774B09780821394755.pdf>. Washington D.C.

⁴⁶ Civil.ge. (2003). *პოლიცია არ გამოიჩინებს ძალის გამოყენებას ქვეყანაში*. <https://old.civil.ge/geo/article.php?id=5232&search=>

⁴⁷ Civil.ge. (2003). *ოპოზიციის მომხრეებმა პარლამენტის შენობა დაიკავეს*. <https://old.civil.ge/geo/article.php?id=5418&search=>

⁴⁸ Chivvis, C. S., Kavanagh, J., Lauji, S., Malle, A., Orloff, S., Wertheim, S., & Wilcox, R. (2024). *Georgia: Strategic change in U.S. foreign policy*. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*.

administration sought to promote democracy, often through coercive measures such as military-backed nation-building efforts.⁴⁹ This initiative was predicated on the belief that authoritarian governance contributed to the root causes of terrorism. By fostering broad sociopolitical transformation, particularly in the Middle East, the administration aimed to reshape the region's security environment. Central to this strategy was the Bush Doctrine, which posited that sustainable national success relied on "freedom, democracy, and free enterprise."⁵⁰ A key component of this vision was winning the "battle of ideas" by advancing a U.S.-centric notion of freedom and human dignity through democracy promotion, with the ultimate goal of addressing the underlying causes of terrorism.⁵¹ The establishment of a democratic and pro-Western government in Georgia aligned with the United States' revised foreign policy priorities. On the one hand, it enhanced the stability of the transit corridor for Caspian energy pipelines, and on the other hand, it contributed to reducing Russia's influence in the South Caucasus.

Accordingly, democracy advocates, both official and non-governmental, implemented various strategies that significantly increased the likelihood of a democratic election and ultimately contributed to power shift in Georgia. High-level U.S. diplomatic efforts, including a pre-election visit by former Secretary of State James Baker, were instrumental in pressuring the government to allow for greater electoral transparency⁵². Baker urged the Shevardnadze administration to accept the implementation of parallel vote tabulation (PVT) and reforms to the electoral commission.⁵³ Following the release of official election results on November 20, State Department Deputy Spokesman Adam Ereli publicly expressed the U.S. government's deep disappointment, stating, "we have seen the results released today... [and] are deeply disappointed in these results, and in Georgia's leadership."⁵⁴ He further called on the Georgian government to launch an independent and transparent investigation and hold accountable those responsible for violations.⁵⁵ The U.S.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Mankoff, J. (2009). *Russian foreign policy: The return of great power politics*. Rowman & Littlefield.
Civil.ge. (2024, January 29). *Georgia's ruling party drops electoral reform law amid opposition protest*.
<https://civil.ge/archives/109505>

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *U.S. Department of State.* (2003, November 20). *Statement by Deputy Spokesman Adam Ereli on Georgian election results*. U.S. Department of State. <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2003/26539.htm>

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

government's unequivocal criticism of the Shevardnadze administration and its visible alignment with the opposition likely bolstered public confidence in the opposition's ability to succeed.

Additionally, the political opportunity structure for the Rose Revolution was also influenced by Russia's inability to project its power abroad, due to its overall weakness and a variety of internal factors. Vladimir Putin, who had been president for less than 4 years, was focused on consolidating power domestically and addressing issues such as war in Chechnya, oligarchic influences, crushing independent Media, etc.⁵⁶

Thus, it can be argued that the success of the social movement culminating in the Rose Revolution was facilitated by the ruling elite's limited capacity to suppress dissent and the favorable international context for peaceful political shift in Georgia in 2003.

⁵⁶ Lynch, D. (2005). *Russia's engagement with the South Caucasus: Georgia in Russian foreign policy*. In *Central Asian Survey*, 24(3), 249-269.

3. Armenia

3.1. The Ruling Elite in Armenia at the Time of the Velvet Revolution (2018)

For the majority of its 32 years of post-Soviet independence, Armenia functioned as a one-party political system. From 1995 to 2018, the country was dominated by the Republican Party, which consistently won elections by large margins. Beginning in 1998, the party also secured control over the executive branch. The 1998 presidential election marked a turning point when Levon Ter-Petrosyan, Armenia's first president, was replaced by Robert Kocharyan, an ostensibly independent candidate closely affiliated with the Republican Party⁵⁷.

From that point onward, Armenian governance fell under the influence of the so-called "Karabakh Clan," whose two leaders controlled the country for two decades: Robert Kocharyan (1998–2008) and his successor Serzh Sargsyan (2008–2018). During this period, the Karabakh Clan representatives monopolized Armenian politics. The Republican Party won every parliamentary election, with the presidency held either by a party member or by a nominally independent candidate aligned with the party's agenda.⁵⁸

For two decades, this South Caucasian state was governed by a single political elite characterized by clientelism, nepotism, and pervasive corruption. The authorities deployed extensive resources to influence voter behavior, using intimidation and pressure, particularly targeting individuals employed in the public sector. This consolidation of power enabled the Republican Party to dominate all political institutions, including the presidency, parliament, local self-governance bodies, and the judiciary⁵⁹.

At the same times, the media landscape was characterized by significant government influence over traditional outlets, particularly television, which was the primary news source for many Armenians. This control often resulted in limited access for opposition figures to mainstream media platforms.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Libaridian, G. J. (2004). *Modern Armenia: people, nation, state*. Transaction Publishers.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Freedom House. (2018). *Armenia: Freedom in the World 2018*. Freedom House.
<https://freedomhouse.org/country/armenia/freedom-world/2018>

3.2. The Path to the Velvet Revolution: The Evolution of Social Movements

Under the leadership of figures like Serzh Sargsyan and Robert Kocharyan, the ruling elite in Armenia became synonymous with corruption, nepotism, and cronyism. The regime was widely perceived by the public as self-serving and disconnected from the everyday realities of Armenian citizens. High-profile corruption scandals involving the misuse of state funds and oligarchic networks further damaged the reputation of the Republican Party of Armenia (RPA), dominated by the Karabakh clan representatives. Adding to these issues was persistent economic stagnation during their rule, characterized by high unemployment, rising emigration rates, and widespread poverty, particularly in rural areas. The government's inability to stimulate economic growth or attract foreign investment deepened societal grievances and further alienated the population.⁶¹

Before 2018, Armenia witnessed several protest movements, yet the leadership often responded with suppression rather than addressing legitimate grievances. The first serious protest erupted in Armenia in 2004, when, according to the Central Election Commission of Armenia, then incumbent President Robert Kocharyan won the runoff election with 70% of the vote. Opposition candidate Stepan Demirchyan rejected the election results and began a long series of protests on Yerevan's Freedom Square, demanding the resignation of the government. The demonstrations were dispersed by police and the protests died out. Following the dispersal of the demonstrations, Kocharyan managed to legitimize the results of the presidential election.⁶² The 2008 presidential election, which declared Serzh Sargsyan the winner, became a flashpoint for widespread unrest. The opposition, led by former President Levon Ter-Petrosyan, accused the government of orchestrating massive electoral fraud. Tens of thousands of Armenians took to the streets of Yerevan, demanding accountability and justice. However, the protests ended in tragedy on March 1, 2008, when the government launched a violent crackdown, leaving 10 people dead and many injured.⁶³ This tragic event left a deep scar on the nation's political consciousness, cementing public distrust in the ruling elite and shaping the trajectory of future political discourse.

⁶¹ Iskandaryan, A., (2018). *The Velvet Revolution in Armenia: How to lose power in two weeks. Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 26(4), pp.465-482.

⁶² Alchetron.com. (2016). *2003–04 Armenian Protests - Alchetron, the Free Social Encyclopedia*. <https://alchetron.com/2003%E2%80%9304-Armenian-protests>.

⁶³ Humann Rights Watch. (2009). *Democracy on Rocky Ground.Armenia's Disputed 2008 Presidential Election, Post-Election Violence, and the One-Sided Pursuit of Accountability*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/02/25/democracy-rocky-ground/armenias-disputed-2008-presidential-election-post-election>

In 2013, Armenia experienced another wave of unrest following a disputed presidential election in which Sargsyan was re-elected. Opposition candidate Raffi Hovannisian led mass demonstrations, accusing the government of manipulating the election results. Thousands of protesters gathered in Yerevan, demanding Sargsyan's resignation and electoral reforms. Despite the intensity of the protests, they failed to generate sufficient momentum to bring about significant political change, leaving many Armenians disillusioned but still yearning for accountability.⁶⁴

By June 2015, public frustration culminated in the Electric Yerevan protests,⁶⁵ triggered by a proposed hike in electricity prices by a Russian-owned utility company. This price increase, deemed unjust in the context of widespread poverty and governmental inefficiency, mobilized thousands of Armenians to block major streets in Yerevan in peaceful demonstrations. The movement, notable for its grassroots organization and resilience, successfully pressured the government into subsidizing the price hike, marking a rare victory for protesters. However, while the immediate demands were met, the protests underscored broader dissatisfaction with corruption and inequality under Sargsyan's administration.

Public discontent with the governance of ruling elites affiliated with the Karabakh clan reached its peak in April 2018, when Sargsyan, who had already served two terms as president, attempted to remain in power by assuming the position of prime minister following constitutional reforms that shifted executive authority to the prime minister's office. Opposition leader and former journalist Nikol Pashinyan mobilized mass protests across the country, uniting citizens in their frustration with the entrenched regime. Despite initial resistance from the government, sustained protests, accompanied by strikes and road blockades, ultimately forced Sargsyan to resign on April 23, 2018, marking a pivotal moment in Armenia's political transformation.⁶⁶

3.3. The Role of Political Parties

The movement that culminated in the 2018 Velvet Revolution was led by Nikol Pashinyan, initially the leader of the small opposition party Civil Contract, which later became part of the My Step Alliance. This movement was primarily grassroots-driven and centered on Pashinyan's leadership,

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Avedissian K. (2015). *The power of Electric Yerevan*. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/electrified-yerevan/>

⁶⁶ BBC News. (2018, April 23). *Armenia prime minister Serzh Sargsyan resigns amid protests*. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43868433>

rather than being the product of a pre-existing coalition of opposition parties. While Pashinyan's movement began as a localized protest initiative, it gradually garnered broader support from other opposition parties and civil society actors, thereby forming a de facto united front against Serzh Sargsyan's government. The unifying factor for this opposition was not a shared, detailed political agenda but a collective goal: the removal of Serzh Sargsyan and the dismantling of the Republican Party of Armenia's (RPA) political dominance.⁶⁷

Pashinyan's leadership during the revolution was marked by his ability to engage diverse social groups and mobilize large-scale participation. His background as a journalist and opposition activist, combined with his straightforward rhetoric and populist style, made him relatable to ordinary Armenians. By positioning himself as a "man of the people," Pashinyan emphasized themes of transparency, anti-corruption, and accountability. His leadership in orchestrating peaceful, disciplined protests further demonstrated his charisma and strategic acumen. Academic analyses frequently underscore Pashinyan's personal charisma as a key factor in unifying a fragmented opposition and transforming widespread public discontent into a coherent political movement.⁶⁸

3.4. Political Opportunity Structure in Armenia

The success of the Velvet Revolution can also be understood within the framework of the political opportunity structure, as it was significantly influenced by divisions among elites.

Kocharyan and Sargsyan's alliance was forged during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict of the late 1980s and early 1990s, which solidified their reputations as national leaders. Kocharyan served as the de facto leader of Nagorno-Karabakh before rising to prominence as Armenia's Prime Minister in 1997 and subsequently as President from 1998 to 2008. Sargsyan, a trusted ally, held key positions in Kocharyan's administration, including Minister of Defense and National Security, becoming an indispensable figure within Armenia's power structure. Together, they came to symbolize the so-called Karabakh clan, a network of elites from Nagorno-Karabakh that dominated Armenia's political, economic, and security sectors.

⁶⁷ Iskandaryan, A., (2018). *The Velvet Revolution in Armenia: How to lose power in two weeks. Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 26(4), pp.465-482.

⁶⁸ Iskandaryan, A., (2018). *The Velvet Revolution in Armenia: How to lose power in two weeks. Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 26(4), pp.465-482.

However, tensions began to surface during the 2008 transfer of power, when Kocharyan's presidential term ended, and he supported Sargsyan as his successor. Kocharyan expected Sargsyan to maintain their shared policies and uphold their mutual dominance over Armenian politics. Once in office, however, Sargsyan began consolidating his own power, sidelining Kocharyan's influence, and gradually distancing himself from his predecessor; this shift marked the onset of their rivalry.⁶⁹

Their diverging leadership styles further deepened the divide. Kocharyan was known for his assertive, authoritarian approach, emphasizing loyalty and centralized control. In contrast, Sargsyan adopted a more pragmatic style, attempting to balance various political and economic factions. This approach alienated some of Kocharyan's allies and created fault lines within the Karabakh clan.

The rivalry between Sargsyan and Kocharyan extended beyond politics and spilled into economic interests and key policy decisions. Both leaders cultivated networks of oligarchs and business elites, resulting in competition over resources. Kocharyan maintained close ties with influential figures such as Gagik Tsarukyan, the prominent businessman and leader of the Prosperous Armenia Party (PAP), who occasionally challenged Sargsyan's dominance.⁷⁰ The tensions escalated during the 2015 constitutional referendum, which was spearheaded by Sargsyan. The referendum proposed transitioning Armenia from a presidential to a parliamentary system, a move widely perceived as a strategy for Sargsyan to extend his rule by shifting executive power to the prime minister's office. Kocharyan publicly opposed the reforms, accusing Sargsyan of manipulating democratic processes to monopolize power.⁷¹ As public dissatisfaction with the Karabakh clan's governance grew in the late 2010s, the two leaders adopted divergent strategies to address the mounting crisis. Kocharyan took a confrontational stance, positioning himself as a potential alternative to Sargsyan's leadership. Sargsyan, on the other hand, focused on maintaining his grip on power, underestimating the scale of public frustration. This miscalculation ultimately culminated in the Velvet Revolution of 2018, which signaled the downfall of of the political leadership affiliated with the Karabakh clan.⁷²

Meanwhile, despite the government's control over traditional media, the 2018 protests highlighted the declining effectiveness of state influence over information. Social media activism, live-streamed

⁶⁹ *Regionplus.az. (2011). Serzh Sargsyan in Search a Team. <https://regionplus.az/en/articles/view/3030>*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Paturyan, Y.J., (2015). The 2015 Referendum in Armenia. East European Quarterly, 43(4), pp.293-301.*
Oxford Analytica. (2015). Constitutional reform will be Armenia's dividing line. https://www.regional-studies.org/images/documents/publications/oxford_analytica/2015/Armenian_constitutional_reform_3.18.15.pdf

⁷² *Deng, S. and Tuzova, P., (2022). Armenia's 2018 Revolution, Motivations and New Media. European Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 2(4), pp.31-37.*

protest coverage, and increasing public distrust of pro-government television channels played a crucial role in mass mobilization, ultimately leading to the resignation of Serzh Sargsyan.⁷³

In terms of external factors' influence, different from Georgia's case, external factors were less influential in Armenia. Armenia's political and economic reliance on the Russian Federation compelled Nikol Pashinyan to carefully navigate the revolution with consideration for external powers. Unlike Ukraine or Georgia, Armenia avoided portraying the Velvet Revolution as a geopolitical realignment; instead, Pashinyan deliberately framed it as a domestic, democratic process rather than an anti-Russian movement, thereby reducing the likelihood of intervention from Moscow.

⁷⁴ Consequently, Russia refrained from openly opposing the revolution. This was largely attributable to Pashinyan's assurances that Armenia's foreign policy orientation would remain unchanged, ensuring stability in the Russia-Armenia partnership.⁷⁵ Despite, the Western statements strongly suggested that any repressive measures taken by the Armenian government would have adverse consequences for the country's international relations and reputation, neither the European Union (EU) nor the United States (US) offered explicit support for the revolution⁷⁶.

Accordingly, it can be argued that, although the Karabakh clan representatives maintained control over all branches of power and theoretically possessed the capacity to retain authority, internal divisions within the clan further eroded internal cohesion as they competed for influence and resources and facilitated the conditions for a transfer of power through peaceful revolution.

⁷³ Grigoryan, A. (2019). *Armenia's 2018 Velvet Revolution: The Role of Social Media in Political Mobilization*. In *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, No. 110 <https://css.ethz.ch>

⁷⁴ U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe. (2018). *Revolution in Armenia*. <https://www.csce.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/RevolutioninArmenia.pdf>

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

4. Moldova

4.1. The Ruling Elite in Moldova at the Time of the Parliamentary Election (2019)

Moldova became the first country from the Associated Trio to face criticism from the European Union and the broader Western community for issues related to oligarchic control and state capture.⁷⁷ Vladimir (Vlad) Plahotniuc, a prominent Moldovan oligarch and politician, exerted substantial influence over Moldova's government, parliament, and judiciary. Following the 2014 parliamentary elections, the Democratic Party of Moldova (PDM), under Plahotniuc's de facto leadership, employed strategic political maneuvering to consolidate power despite lacking an outright majority. Through the practice often referred to as "poaching," Plahotniuc persuaded members of other parties and independent MPs to join the PDM, thereby securing a dominant parliamentary majority. This allowed the PDM to control legislative proceedings, marginalize opposition voices, and pass laws that directly advanced Plahotniuc's political and economic interests. Opposition parties, such as the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM) and the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS), were too fragmented and resource-constrained to mount an effective challenge to the PDM's dominance.

With a loyal parliamentary majority, Plahotniuc shaped Moldova's legislative agenda to protect and expand his influence. Key initiatives included judicial and electoral reforms designed to entrench the PDM's control. For instance, in 2017, the government replaced the proportional representation system with a mixed electoral system, a move widely criticized for favoring the PDM in single-member districts where the party wielded significant local influence. Additionally, legislation further strengthened the party's control over state institutions, consolidating Plahotniuc's grip on power.⁷⁸

Plahotniuc's influence over Moldova's judiciary and state institutions exemplified the broader phenomenon of "state capture." Reports highlighted how he manipulated judicial appointments and decisions to serve his interests, using law enforcement agencies to target political opponents and business rivals. This undermined judicial independence and the rule of law, further eroding public trust in state institutions. Plahotniuc's control extended to the executive branch, despite not holding an official government position. His influence was evident in the appointment of loyal figures to key roles, including Pavel Filip as Prime Minister in January 2016. Filip, a high-ranking PDM member and close ally, ensured that government policies aligned with Plahotniuc's interests. Similarly, key

⁷⁷ Haynes, R., (2020). *Moldova: A history*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

⁷⁸ Burkhardt, F., (2020). *Moldova-key challenges and political developments*. *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen*, 60(01-02), pp.147-159.

ministerial positions were occupied by individuals loyal to Plahotniuc, cementing his dominance over the cabinet.⁷⁹

In terms of media control, Plahotniuc owned a majority of the country's media outlets, including television and radio channels, as well as newspapers. Furthermore, he exerted significant influence over the Broadcasting Coordination Council, thereby further consolidating his control over the media landscape.⁸⁰

4.2. The Path to the Parliamentary elections in 2019: the Evolution of Social Movements

The protests in Moldova reflected deep-seated frustration with the political elite, particularly the influence of oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc, who was widely perceived as controlling key state institutions. A notable example of this public discontent was the series of anti-corruption demonstrations in 2015–2016.⁸¹ These protests began in the spring of 2015 and quickly escalated into large-scale demonstrations amid a worsening economic situation and pervasive corruption scandals. The movement reached its peak in September 2015, when approximately 100,000 people participated in the largest protest since Moldova's independence from the Soviet Union in August 1991.⁸² The protests were sparked by the "Billion-Dollar Bank Scandal" of 2014, during which approximately \$1 billion (nearly 12% of Moldova's GDP) was embezzled from three Moldovan banks. This scandal caused widespread public outrage, triggering a financial crisis and severe economic hardship. Protesters demanded the resignation of top government officials, including then-Prime Minister Valeriu Streleț, as well as the prosecution of those responsible for the fraud. Other key demands included early elections and comprehensive reforms to combat corruption. Tens of thousands of Moldovans took to the streets, with major rallies organized by opposition groups and civil society organizations, such as the Dignity and Truth Platform. The protests resulted in the

⁷⁹ Calus.K. 2016. *Moldova's Political System Took Shape due to the Six-Year Rule of the Alliance for European*. https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/commentary_208.pdf.

Calus. K. (2017). *Moldova's odd couple: Plahotniuc and Dodon* <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2017/06/01/moldova-s-odd-couple-plahotniuc-and-dodon/>

⁸⁰ Open Democracy.org. (2016). *Who really rules the airwaves in Moldova?* openDemocracy. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/who-really-rules-airwaves-in-moldova>

⁸¹ Cenușa D. (2016). *Moldova, Between Protests and "State Capture"*. <https://www.cidob.org/publicaciones/moldova-between-protests-and-state-capture>

⁸² *Ibid.*

resignation of several high-ranking officials, including Prime Ministers Chiril Gaburici in mid-2015 and Valeriu Streleț later that year.⁸³

However, public dissatisfaction persisted due to the lack of meaningful accountability and ongoing perceptions of manipulation by oligarchic elites. The period between 2015 and 2019 was marked by growing political polarization, as civil society and opposition groups intensified their efforts to challenge entrenched power structures. In 2018, mass protests erupted following the annulment of the Chișinău mayoral election, which had been won by opposition candidate Andrei Năstase.⁸⁴ The court's decision to invalidate the results was widely regarded as politically motivated, further fueling public outrage. Protesters demanded the reinstatement of the election results, the resignation of key judiciary figures, and an end to oligarchic dominance of the political system. Thousands participated in the protests, which were led by prominent opposition figures, including Andrei Năstase and Maia Sandu.⁸⁵

Although these protests did not lead to immediate political change, they significantly heightened political tensions and paved the way for increased mobilization ahead of the 2019 parliamentary elections. In those elections, pro-European forces, including the ACUM bloc led by Maia Sandu and Andrei Năstase, achieved significant political gains, signaling a shift in Moldova's political landscape.⁸⁶

4.3. Role of political parties

United opposition challenged the incumbents in Moldova in 2019, particularly during the parliamentary elections and the subsequent political developments. Since 2016, the idea of strengthening pro-European and anti-corruption forces has been circulated, and in 2017 opposition parties PAS and the DA Platform announced that they would form a common platform for the 2019 Moldovan parliamentary election. The strengthening of opposition forces also reflected in the designation of a joint candidate from the PAS and the DA platform for 2016 Moldovan presidential

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Jamestown. n.d. *State of Play ahead of Moldova's Parliamentary Elections*. <https://jamestown.org/program/state-of-play-ahead-of-moldovas-parliamentary-elections/>.

⁸⁵ Freedom House. (2018, June 22). *Why the annulment of the mayoral election was a blow to Moldova's democracy*. Freedom House. <https://freedomhouse.org/article/why-annulment-mayoral-election-blow-moldovas-democracy>

⁸⁶ Cretu, Felicia. (2019). *"Moldova's Unprecedented Power Struggle: A Drama in Five Acts."* *Www.euractiv.com*. June 12, 2019. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/news/moldovas-unprecedented-power-struggle-a-drama-in-five-acts/>.

election and for the 2018 Chişinău mayoral election. Following the invalidity of the mayor's election, won by the joint candidate Andrei Năstase, the PAS, DA Platform Party, and LDPM announced the creation of the National Resistance Movement "Now". On 16 December 2018, the PAS and the DA Platform, Maia Sandu and Andrei Năstase, signed the agreement establishing ACUM for the parliamentary elections of 24 February 2019, and on 21 December 2018 the bloc was registered by the Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Moldova.⁸⁷ The Liberal Democratic Party (PLDM) then joined the bloc "NOW DA/PAS", and some representatives of the PLDM found themselves in the list of the bloc's candidates on the national constituencies, and others will run from the bloc in some uninominal districts.⁸⁸ While the ideological differences between the opposition forces were significant, the temporary united front against the incumbent PDM and its oligarchic leader qualifies as a coordinated effort to achieve democratic power change.⁸⁹

The main narrative lines during Maia Sandu's 2019 election campaign for the parliamentary elections in Moldova centered around several key themes, including anti-corruption, European integration, economic reform, and rule of law. Sandu, as the leader of the pro-European ACUM Bloc, positioned herself as a reformist, promising to dismantle Moldova's entrenched oligarchic structures and fight systemic corruption. Sandu's primary campaign message focused on fighting corruption, which had become a defining issue in Moldovan politics due to high-profile corruption scandals.⁹⁰ She criticized the existing political elite, particularly the oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc, accusing them of capturing state institutions and undermining democracy. Sandu consistently emphasized the need for de-oligarchization—dismantling the oligarchic structures that had captured the state and controlled key sectors of the economy.⁹¹ Her narrative called for breaking the influence of powerful elites over politics, media, and business, ensuring that the state serves the interests of ordinary Moldovans rather than a few wealthy individuals. Sandu pledged to restore the independence of the judiciary, strengthen anti-corruption institutions, and ensure that those involved in corruption would be held

⁸⁷ *Alegeri.md. (2025). Blocul electoral "ACUM Platforma DA și PAS" la alegerile parlamentare din 2019:*
https://alegeri.md/w/Blocul_electoral_%E2%80%9CACUM_Platforma_DA_%C8%99i_PAS%E2%80%9D_la_alegerile_parlamentare_din_2019

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Council of Europe.(2019). The functioning of democratic institutions in the Republic of Moldova.*
<https://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=28241>

⁹⁰ *Smith, D. (2021). Landslide Victory for Reformists in Moldova.*
https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/KI_210721_Moldovan%20Elections_Cable%2070-v1r1.pdf

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

accountable. Her campaign emphasized the need for transparent governance and alignment with European best practices. Sandu's success is associated with her integrity, intellectual credibility, and reform-oriented agenda,⁹² which set her apart in Moldova's political landscape.

Worth mentioning that in Moldova several influential media outlets played a significant role in shaping public opinion in the context of the country's electoral processes in 2019. Despite of the Palahniuk's dominance over the media landscape, some of these outlets were either controlled by or aligned with key political players, while others worked to provide independent or critical coverage.⁹³

4.4. Political Opportunity Structure in Moldova

In Moldova's case, the political opportunity structure was fundamentally shaped by the interplay between divisions within the elites and external factors.

Since late 2015, Vlad Plahotniuc, an oligarch and the wealthiest individual in Moldova, as well as the leader of the ruling nominally pro-European Democratic Party (PDM), has been the de facto dominant figure in Moldovan politics and business. Despite his considerable influence, Plahotniuc was an extremely unpopular politician, often accused of transforming Moldova into a textbook example of a "captured state." However, his political strategy necessitated cooperation with Igor Dodon, the country's nominally opposition and pro-Russian President, who enjoyed the highest levels of public trust, as well as with the Socialist Party of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM), which supports Dodon. Together, these leaders created a unique system of governance resembling a political cartel.⁹⁴ Both Plahotniuc and Dodon benefited significantly from Moldova's oligarchic structure, which granted them access to political power, economic privileges, and control over state institutions. Their cooperation ensured that no reformist or opposition movement could pose a serious challenge to this system. Plahotniuc, with public support of only 1–2%, could not govern independently without risking widespread public resistance or alienating Western partners. On the other hand, Dodon, despite his popularity, lacked sufficient institutional control and relied on

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Berg, L. L., & McDonald, R. R. (2020). "Moldova's Struggle for Media Independence: Electoral Pressures and Oligarchic Control." *Journal of Democracy and Media Studies*, 6(1), 32-55.

Popescu, N., & Stoian, D. (2019). "State Influence on Media Coverage of Elections in Moldova: A Study of the 2019 Presidential Elections." *Journal of Political Communication*, 25(2), 203-220.

⁹⁴ Camil.K. (2018). *Moldova's Political Theater: The Balance of Forces in the Election Year*.

<https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2018-01-31/moldovas-political-theatre-balance-forces-election-year> Center for Eastern Studies.

Plahotniuc's system to maintain his influence and secure financial benefits.⁹⁵ The two leaders also manipulated their geopolitical alignments to manage external relationships with the EU, the United States, and Russia. Plahotniuc's pro-Western stance and Dodon's pro-Russian rhetoric served as tools to engage with these global actors and extract concessions or support. Dodon's popularity allowed Plahotniuc to position himself as a counterweight to pro-Russian forces, convincing Western partners that his role was essential in preventing a geopolitical shift toward Moscow. Conversely, Plahotniuc leveraged Dodon's ties to Russia to reinforce his image with the West as a "necessary evil" for maintaining Moldova's pro-European trajectory.⁹⁶

The collaboration extended to legislative initiatives, such as the controversial 2017 electoral reform law, which favored Plahotniuc's Democratic Party. Although Dodon held the presidency at the time, he maintained close ties with the opposition Socialist Party and operated with limited institutional accountability due to Moldova's semi-parliamentary system. Plahotniuc exploited Dodon's pro-Russian affiliations to bolster his own image in Western circles, while Dodon benefited from Plahotniuc's pro-Western orientation to avoid direct confrontations with external actors and reinforce his domestic appeal as a pro-Russian figure. Reports also indicate that Dodon received financial support from Plahotniuc, enabling him to sustain and expand his political operations.⁹⁷

Despite their cooperation, the system they established was inherently unstable and short-term in nature. Their ultimate objectives—Plahotniuc's aspiration for total control and Dodon's ambition to dominate Moldovan politics—were fundamentally incompatible, setting the stage for eventual conflict. This conflict materialized during the 2019 parliamentary elections. Igor Dodon, as the leader of the Socialist Party of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM), played a pivotal role in forming an unprecedented coalition between his pro-Russian party and the pro-European ACUM Bloc to oust Plahotniuc. In the 2019 elections, Plahotniuc's Democratic Party secured 30 parliamentary seats, making it the second-largest party in the legislature. The Socialist Party obtained 35 seats, while the ACUM Bloc, led by Maia Sandu's Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) and Andrei Năstase's Party of Dignity and Truth (PPDA), secured 26 seats. Despite the Democratic Party's significant parliamentary presence, Dodon's decision to collaborate with Maia Sandu and Andrei Năstase created a united front against Plahotniuc. This coalition undermined Plahotniuc's ability to form a parliamentary majority, ultimately leading to his resignation and subsequent flight from the country.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

However, both Russia and Western actors, including the European Union and the United States, played a pivotal role in shaping the dynamics between the pro-European ACUM bloc and the pro-Russian Socialist Party (PSRM), aligning in their shared interest to remove Vladimir Plahotniuc from power in Moldova, albeit for different reasons: for the EU and the US, Plahotniuc's regime had undermined Moldova's democratic credentials and strained its relationship with them. From the Russian perspective which had long-term strategic interests in Moldova, Plahotniuc was viewed as a destabilizing figure who obstructed its influence in the country. The Kremlin instead supported Igor Dodon's Socialist Party, which aligned more closely with Russian interests.⁹⁸

Due to intertwined interests, the formation of a coalition between the pro-Western ACUM and Dodon's pro-Russian Socialist Party was mediated and supported by both Russian and Western diplomats during the political crisis following the election, when early elections appeared to be the most likely scenario. International actors, including EU Commissioner for European Neighborhood Policy Johannes Hahn, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitri Kozak, and US State Department representative Bradley A. Freden, encouraged the two political forces to find common ground. Johannes Hahn emphasized that early elections could jeopardize the country's macro-financial stability by disrupting support from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the EU.⁹⁹ For Russia establishment of a government composition that would maintain Moldova's multi-vector foreign policy orientation was a priority. Hence, here is substantial evidence suggesting that Russian influence played a decisive role in convincing President Dodon and the Socialist Party to accept almost all of ACUM's conditions.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ *Cenusa, D. (2025). Moldova's political crisis: Overcoming the geopolitical complex and the strategic crossroads. Independent Press Agency. https://www.ipn.md/en/moldovas-political-crisis-overcoming-the-geopolitical-complex-and-the-7978_1049216.html*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

5. Ukraine

5.1. Ruling Elites in Ukraine at the time of Presidential Election in 2019

Petro Poroshenko was elected President of Ukraine in May 2014, during a turbulent period marked by the Euromaidan Revolution, Russia's annexation of Crimea, and its military intervention in the Donbas region. Poroshenko's campaign focused on promises of European integration, anti-corruption reforms, economic recovery, and a resolution to the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Under his leadership, Ukraine signed the Association Agreement with the European Union and secured a visa-free regime for Ukrainian citizens in the Schengen Zone in 2017. Poroshenko oversaw significant efforts to modernize the Ukrainian military in response to the ongoing conflict in Donbas. A key achievement of his presidency was securing autocephaly (independence) for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church from the Russian Orthodox Church in 2019 which strengthened his nationalist appeal. He maintained strong ties with Western nations, securing financial and military aid to counter Russian aggression.¹⁰¹

In terms of political influence, Poroshenko dominated the executive branch as president, with the Prime Minister and cabinet largely aligned with his policies. Key appointments, including ministers and regional governors, were often made based on loyalty to him. The executive branch was central to advancing Poroshenko's European integration agenda and implementing military reforms. However, his influence over the Parliament (Verkhovna Rada) was more limited. Poroshenko's party, the Petro Poroshenko Bloc (BPP), formed a coalition government following the 2014 parliamentary elections. While this coalition granted him considerable influence over the legislative agenda, his control was constrained by coalition partners and opposition parties. The Verkhovna Rada frequently resisted his initiatives, particularly those aimed at reforms that threatened entrenched interests.¹⁰²

Poroshenko faced accusations of manipulating the judiciary to safeguard his political and business interests. The judiciary remained heavily influenced by vested interests, with many judges maintaining close ties to political elites. Efforts to reform the Constitutional Court and other judicial bodies were criticized as attempts to consolidate control rather than promote judicial independence.

¹⁰¹ *Britannica. n.d. "Ukraine - the Maidan Protest Movement." Encyclopedia Britannica.*

<https://www.britannica.com/place/Ukraine/The-Maidan-protest-movement>.

BBC News. (2014). "Petro Poroshenko Claims Ukraine Presidency," May 25, 2014, sec. Europe.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-27569057>.

¹⁰² *Minakov M. (2017). Reconstructing the power vertical: the authoritarian threat in Ukraine.*

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/reconstructing-power-vertical-authoritarian-threat-in-ukraine/>

Key judicial appointments, including to the Supreme Court and the Constitutional Court, were allegedly influenced to ensure loyalty to his administration. Critics argued that the judiciary lacked independence and often ruled in favor of Poroshenko's government.¹⁰³

Moreover, Poroshenko maintained substantial control over law enforcement and security institutions, including the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Prosecutor General's Office, and the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU). These bodies were frequently accused of being used to target political opponents or suppress dissent, raising concerns about their politicization under his leadership.¹⁰⁴

5.2. The Path to the Presidential elections in 2019: the Evolution of Social Movements

Despite his accomplishments, Petro Poroshenko faced significant public dissatisfaction, particularly regarding corruption and governance issues. As a wealthy businessman and oligarch, Poroshenko was criticized for failing to dismantle the oligarchic system deeply entrenched in Ukrainian politics. Critics accused him of maintaining close ties with oligarchic elites, undermining his reformist image. High-profile corruption scandals, including allegations of profiteering in the military sector, further eroded his credibility.¹⁰⁵

Economic recovery following the 2014 crisis was sluggish, compounding public frustration. Austerity measures, rising utility costs—partially linked to IMF loan agreements—and high unemployment rates fueled discontent. Social inequality and poverty remained pressing challenges, further straining public confidence in Poroshenko's leadership.¹⁰⁶

In the aftermath of the Euromaidan Revolution, protests and rallies demanding deeper anti-corruption reforms became a recurrent feature of Ukraine's political landscape. In 2017, a large number of Ukrainian demonstrators took to the streets to demand the establishment of an independent anti-corruption court and the dismissal of officials implicated in corruption. These

¹⁰³ Freedom House. (2017). *Ukraine, Country Report*. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/ukraine/nations-transit/2017>

¹⁰⁴ Minakov M. (2017). *Reconstructing the power vertical: the authoritarian threat in Ukraine*. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/reconstructing-power-vertical-authoritarian-threat-in-ukraine/>

¹⁰⁵ For historical and political context of Ukraine, the authors consulted Serhy Yekelchuk, *Ukraine: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020) For rise of Zelensky: Joanna Rohozinska; Vitaliy Shpak, "The Rise of an "Outsider" President," *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 3 (July 2019): 33-47

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

protests were part of a broader civil society movement advocating for greater governmental transparency and accountability. Civil society organizations and activists frequently organized demonstrations to pressure Poroshenko's government to implement promised reforms and hold corrupt officials accountable.

The protests highlighted growing dissatisfaction with the slow pace of reform and persistent corruption, despite the significant political changes of 2014. By 2019, Poroshenko's approval ratings had plummeted due to unfulfilled promises of systemic reform, perceived cronyism, and public fatigue with his leadership style. This widespread discontent paved the way for Volodymyr Zelenskyy's landslide victory in the 2019 presidential election.

5.3. The Role of Political Parties

Unlike typical scenarios where opposition parties form coalitions to challenge entrenched rulers, Ukraine's 2019 election was marked by fragmentation among opposition parties and the emergence of a new, non-traditional political figure: Volodymyr Zelensky. Zelensky ran an independent campaign rather than aligning with an established opposition bloc, which set him apart from traditional political actors.¹⁰⁷

Zelensky's 2019 election campaign focused on several key themes that resonated with a broad spectrum of Ukrainian voters and contributed to his decisive victory. His campaign narratives were carefully designed to differentiate him from the political establishment and position him as a fresh alternative. The central pillar of his campaign was a rejection of the entrenched political elite, whom he accused of corruption and self-serving behavior. He pledged to root out corruption at all levels of government, presenting himself as a political outsider who would bring a new, honest approach to governance. His slogan, "Let's Break the System Together," emphasized dismantling the old political structure and creating a more transparent and accountable government. Zelensky portrayed himself as a fresh face in politics, untainted by past scandals and free from the political baggage of Ukraine's long-standing elites. His lack of political experience, rather than being seen as a disadvantage, was framed as a strength—a symbol of political renewal and a definitive break from the status quo. This

¹⁰⁷ Skorkin, Konstantin. (2019). *Review of Victory for Zelensky in Ukraine — but the Real Battle Starts Now*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 23, 2019. <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/78963>.
Warsaw Institute. . (2019). *Apparent Revolution – Presidential Elections in Ukraine*.
<https://warsawinstitute.org/apparent-revolution-presidential-elections-ukraine/>.

message resonated particularly strongly with younger voters and those disillusioned by years of political stagnation and corruption.¹⁰⁸

Zelensky's outsider status also significantly contributed to his party's electoral success. He was not part of the traditional opposition but entered politics as a political outsider, running on an anti-establishment platform that criticized both the ruling elite and the established opposition. This approach attracted voters dissatisfied with both the incumbent, Petro Poroshenko, and the traditional opposition figures, some of whom also ran as candidates in the election.

5.4. The Political Opportunity Structure in Ukraine

Unlike Moldova, the international factor did not play a central role in Ukraine's political transition during the 2019 presidential election, which further incentivized Petro Poroshenko to peacefully transfer power to Volodymyr Zelensky's administration. This outcome can be attributed to Ukraine's relatively higher level of democratic development compared to other post-Soviet countries is closely linked to the particular nature of its oligarchic system, which has profoundly shaped the country's political landscape over the past two decades.¹⁰⁹ Notably, Ukraine's entrenched oligarchic structure has eroded the foundations of universalistic governance by fostering selective rule enforcement, privileging elite interests over equal treatment under the law, and institutionalizing clientelism at the expense of merit-based public administration and democratic accountability. At the same time, the significant presence of multiple oligarchs has generated intense intra-elite competition¹¹⁰; this rivalry has contributed to a fragmented power structure, weakening vertical political control and limiting centralized authority over political parties, parliamentary deputies, and media outlets.¹¹¹ During the study period although Petro Poroshenko was closely associated with power, his wealth and influence were rivaled by other prominent figures. In this context, Ihor Kolomoisky (after Rinat Ahmetov) emerged as one of Ukraine's most powerful oligarchs, exerting substantial influence across

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

IRI (2018). *Public Opinion Survey of Residents of Ukraine*. https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/legacy/iri.org/2018.12.4_ukraine_poll.pdf.

¹⁰⁹ Wojciech Konończuk, Denis Cenuşa and Kornely Kakachia. (2017). *Oligarchs in Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia as key obstacles to reforms*. https://gip.ge/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Oligarchs_14-June_FINAL_0.pdf

¹¹⁰ Andrusiv, Ustenko, Romanenko. (2018). *The future of Ukrainian Oligarchs*.

¹¹¹ Pleines, H. (2016). *Oligarchs in Ukraine: The role of oligarchic groups in Ukraine's political and economic system*. Forschungsstelle Osteuropa Bremen. Retrieved from <https://www.forschungsstelle.uni-bremen.de/UserFiles/file/pleines2016-Oligarchs-UA.pdf>

multiple sectors, including government, the economy, media, and the judiciary. Kolomoisky was a co-owner of PrivatBank,¹¹² Ukraine's largest bank, until its nationalization in 2016 following allegations of large-scale fraud. Despite this, he retained significant economic leverage through his energy holdings, industrial enterprises, and control over key industries such as ferroalloys and oil refining, primarily through Ukrtatnafta and Ukrnafta. Kolomoisky also owned 1+1 Media Group,¹¹³ one of Ukraine's largest television networks, further consolidating his influence over public opinion and the media landscape.

Kolomoisky and then-President Petro Poroshenko had a contentious relationship, which became particularly evident following the nationalization of Kolomoisky's PrivatBank. Kolomoisky accused Poroshenko of orchestrating a politically motivated takeover. As the owner of the popular 1+1 Media Group, Kolomoisky frequently used his media outlets to criticize Poroshenko, portraying him as corrupt and disconnected from ordinary Ukrainians.¹¹⁴ This media-driven rivalry became one of the defining political dynamics in Ukraine during the 2019 parliamentary election campaign.

Kolomoisky's 1+1 Media Group also aired *Servant of the People*, a hit comedy series in which Volodymyr Zelensky played a fictional president who rises to power as an anti-corruption reformer. The show struck a chord with Ukrainians disillusioned by traditional politicians. In addition to *Servant of the People*, 1+1 frequently featured Zelensky and his comedy troupe, Kvartal 95, reinforcing his image as a beloved public figure. Although Kolomoisky denied providing direct financial support to Zelensky, his media empire played a pivotal role in boosting Zelensky's candidacy through favorable coverage.¹¹⁵ This led to accusations that Kolomoisky was using Zelensky as a proxy to regain political influence and protect his business interests. Critics, including former President Petro Poroshenko, labeled Zelensky as Kolomoisky's "puppet," alleging that his presidency would serve Kolomoisky's agenda, particularly in the ongoing legal disputes over PrivatBank.¹¹⁶

¹¹² *Politico.com*. (2023). *Ukraine launches criminal case against oligarch Kolomoisky*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/ihor-kolomoisky-ukraine-criminal-case/>

¹¹³ *Media Ownership Monitor*. (2016). *Ukraine*. https://ukraine.mom-rsf.org/en/owners/companies/detail/company/company/show/1-1-media/?utm_source/

¹¹⁴ Lynch J. (2019). *The Oligarch Battle Behind Ukraine's Presidential Election*. <https://newrepublic.com/article/153627/oligarch-battle-behind-ukraines-presidential-election>

¹¹⁵ *Politico.com*. (2019). *The comedian and the oligarch*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/volodymyr-zelenskiy-ihor-kolomoisky-the-comedian-and-the-oligarch-ukraine-presidential-election/>

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*.

Regardless of whether there was direct collaboration between Zelensky and Kolomoisky, it is evident that Kolomoisky's conflict with Poroshenko, combined with his initial motive to remove Poroshenko from the political stage, significantly contributed to Zelensky's victory. This outcome was further facilitated by Ukraine's pluralistic environment, which was critical in enabling a power shift through democratic elections.

6. Belarus

6.1. Ruling Elites in Belarus at the Time of Presidential Election in 2020

Unlike the cases previously discussed, Belarus is classified as a consolidated autocracy by Freedom House, with its leader, Aleksandr Lukashenko, often referred to as "Europe's last dictator." Since assuming power in 1994, Lukashenko has maintained an iron grip on Belarus, shaping the country's political, judicial, and economic systems into a highly centralized and authoritarian regime. His presidency has been characterized by an unprecedented concentration of power, pervasive repression, and economic policies designed to maintain societal control while carefully managing dependency on Russia.¹¹⁷

From the outset of his presidency, Lukashenko worked to consolidate his influence across all branches of government. He systematically dismantled democratic institutions, transforming the executive branch into the dominant force in Belarusian politics. Through referenda in 1996 and 2004, Lukashenko expanded presidential powers, including the dissolution of parliament, control over state appointments, and the removal of presidential term limits.¹¹⁸

6.2. The Path to the Parliamentary Elections in 2020: the Evolution of Social Movements

The authoritarian methods of governance in Belarus, characterized by systemic human rights violations, economic stagnation, inefficiency, and corruption, have led to periodic crises. The "Jeans Revolution" or "Denim Revolution"¹¹⁹ protests erupted following the 2006 presidential election, widely regarded as rigged to secure Alexander Lukashenko's continued rule. The opposition, led by Alexander Milinkevich, demanded fair elections and democratic reforms. Denim became a symbol of freedom for the opposition, with activists using it as a rallying emblem. However, the demonstrations were forcibly dispersed by security forces, resulting in numerous arrests.¹²⁰

After the 2010 presidential election, opposition candidates and their supporters organized mass protests in Minsk, alleging electoral fraud. Tens of thousands gathered in Independence Square to

¹¹⁷ Wilson, A. (2021). *Belarus: the last European dictatorship*. Yale University Press.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Markus, U., (2010). *Belarus*. In *The Colour Revolutions in the Former Soviet Republics* (pp. 136-153). Routledge.

¹²⁰ Korosteleva, E., (2014). *Questioning democracy promotion: Belarus' response to the 'colour revolutions'*. In *Coloured Revolutions and Authoritarian Reactions* (pp. 37-59). Routledge.

demand free and fair elections. The government responded with a violent crackdown, arresting hundreds of protesters, including seven of the nine opposition candidates.¹²¹

In 2011, amid worsening economic conditions, protests known as "silent protests" emerged. Protesters gathered in public spaces, clapping or remaining silent as symbolic gestures of dissent. The government cracked down on these protests by detaining participants and banning public gatherings. Leading up to the 2015 presidential election, smaller-scale protests took place, calling for democratic reforms. Although these protests were less intense than previous movements, they continued to voice opposition to Lukashenko's rule. However, the opposition remained weak and fragmented, and the protests failed to gain significant traction. In 2017, widespread protests erupted against the so-called "parasite tax," which imposed a levy on those unemployed for more than six months. Thousands gathered in multiple cities, with large demonstrations in Minsk. The government once again resorted to repression, arresting hundreds of protesters, journalists, and activists. While protests before 2020 were significant, each earlier movement faced harsh crackdowns that limited their ability to sustain momentum or achieve meaningful political change.¹²² The unprecedented mass support for Svetlana Tikhanovskaya in 2020 was evident in the large rallies she organized in Belarus, both before and after the election. The official election results provoked widespread anger among the Belarusian population, sparking large-scale protests that persisted for several months despite significant personal risks for demonstrators. These protests underscored the population's deep dissatisfaction with the results announced by the Central Election Commission.¹²³

6.3. The Role of Parties

During the 2020 presidential election campaigns in Belarus, Sviatlana Tsikhanovskaya emerged as the primary opposition candidate following the arrest of her husband. She gained the support of other key opposition figures, including Maria Kalesnikava, who represented Viktor Babaryka—a prominent banker and opposition figure who had been disqualified and arrested—and Veronika

¹²¹ Hansen, Michael A., and Nicolè M. Ford. "Placing the 2020 Belarusian Protests in Historical Context: Political Attitudes and Participation during Lukashenko's Presidency." *Nationalities Papers* (2022): 1-17

¹²² *Ibid.*

Korosteleva, E., (2014). *Questioning democracy promotion: Belarus' response to the 'colour revolutions'*. In *Coloured Revolutions and Authoritarian Reactions* (pp. 37-59). Routledge.

¹²³ Euronews. (2020). *Meet the Three Women Teaming up to Take on 'Europe's Last Dictator'*. <https://www.euronews.com/2020/07/31/belarus-presidential-elections-meet-the-three-women-teaming-up-to-take-on-europe-s-last-di>.

Tsepkalo, representing Valery Tsepkalo, another disqualified presidential candidate.¹²⁴ The three women became symbols of unity among the various opposition factions, and their coordinated campaign posed a significant challenge to Alexander Lukashenko. The opposition forces united around a shared platform focused on common goals: free and fair elections, democratic reforms, and an end to political repression and corruption. This common agenda enabled them to rally widespread public support and present a credible alternative to Lukashenko's regime. The united opposition successfully mobilized large-scale public support both during the campaign and in the aftermath of the disputed election results.¹²⁵

6.4. Political Opportunity Structure in Belarus

In 2020, the political and economic elite structure in Belarus was highly centralized under the authoritarian rule of President Alexander Lukashenko, who had been in power since 1994. The elite and clan system in Belarus was characterized by a top-down, state-controlled framework in which loyalty to Lukashenko was essential for maintaining influence. Lukashenko controlled the key levers of power, including the government, security forces, and economy.¹²⁶

The elites primarily functioned as administrators of Lukashenko's policies rather than as autonomous power brokers. He maintained his authority through a patronage system, rewarding loyalists with key positions in government, state-owned enterprises, and regional administrations. Unlike other post-Soviet states, Belarus lacked powerful, independent oligarchs or clans due to Lukashenko's strict control over economic and political resources.¹²⁷

The economy was predominantly dominated by state-owned enterprises, which were tightly regulated by Lukashenko's administration. Managers of these enterprises constituted a significant segment of the economic elite but operated under the president's direct oversight. Unlike neighboring Russia or Ukraine, Belarus did not develop a strong oligarchic class. Wealthy business

¹²⁴ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. (2020). "Belarus Says over 30 Russian Mercenaries Detained ahead of Presidential Vote," July 30, 2020, sec. Belarus. <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-30-foreign-private-military-contractors-detained-minsk/30755231.html>.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ Sannikov, A., (2005). *The Accidental Dictatorship of Alexander Lukashenko*. *SAIS Review of International Affairs*, 25(1), pp.75-88.

¹²⁷ Frear, M., (2024). *The Lukashenko Regime in Belarus. Personalism and Personalist Regimes*, p.177.

figures were closely monitored, with their success heavily dependent on maintaining favorable relations with the regime.¹²⁸

Lukashenko maintained near-total control over Belarus's law enforcement agencies, including the police, the KGB (State Security Committee), and the military. These institutions were extensively used to suppress dissent. Protesters, activists, and opposition figures were routinely subjected to surveillance, arbitrary detention, and violence. The KGB, one of the few security agencies in the post-Soviet space to retain its Soviet-era name, played a pivotal role in monitoring and repressing political opposition. Lukashenko has cultivated a security elite loyal to his regime, ensuring that law enforcement and security forces act decisively to protect his rule. Frequent purges within these institutions serve to eliminate any perceived disloyalty, further consolidating his control. The unwavering support of the security apparatus has been a critical factor in the regime's ability to withstand protests.¹²⁹ This extensive loyalty among law enforcement and security forces is one of the primary reasons why the protests ultimately failed to achieve their goals.

In the case of Belarus, the social movement against Lukashenko had minimal prospects for success due to the absence of internal political opportunity structures, the consolidation of power, and the state's substantial repressive capacity. External mechanisms similarly failed to achieve meaningful results as well. Despite the imposition of significant economic and financial sanctions by the international community on Lukashenko's regime, these measures did not compel him to heed the will of the citizens. The rationale for this lies in Lukashenko's foreign policy priorities—he is a key ally of Vladimir Putin, and Belarus and Russia nominally form a "union state" intended to promote close political and economic integration.¹³⁰ Given Belarus's substantial economic dependence on Russia,¹³¹ the threat of sanctions was not a decisive factor in influencing Lukashenko to step down.

¹²⁸ Frear, M., (2024). *The Lukashenko Regime in Belarus. Personalism and Personalist Regimes*, p.177.

¹²⁹ Nikolaenko, O. (2020). *The fate of Alexander Lukashenko's regime rests on the loyalty of his security apparatus*. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2020/09/24/the-fate-of-alexander-lukashenkos-regime-rests-on-the-loyalty-of-his-security-apparatus/>

¹³⁰ *The Guardian*. (2020). *Russia to lend Belarus \$1.5bn as Lukashenko tells Putin 'a friend is in trouble'*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/14/alexander-lukashenko-vladimir-putin-sochi-belarus-russia>

¹³¹ *German Economic Team*. (2024). *Belarus' increasing economic dependence on Russia*. <https://www.german-economic-team.com/en/newsletter/belarus-increasing-economic-dependence-on-russia/>

However, while external influence failed to bring about political change, its negative effects ultimately contributed to Lukashenko's ability to retain power. Notably, Russia played a pivotal role in supporting President Lukashenko's regime during the widespread protests. Russia provided substantial political backing to Lukashenko, recognizing the election results and offering economic assistance; this support included a promise of a \$1.5 billion loan, which bolstered the regime's capacity to withstand internal dissent and international pressure.¹³² Facing resignations from Belarusian state media employees who opposed the government's narrative, Russian media professionals, including those from RT (formerly Russia Today), were deployed to fill these roles. This move ensured the continuation of pro-Lukashenko propaganda and aimed to shape public perception in favor of the regime¹³³. While direct Russian military intervention was not overtly documented, the Kremlin expressed readiness to provide security assistance if necessary. This implicit support served as a deterrent to protesters and signaled Russia's commitment to maintaining the status quo in Belarus.¹³⁴ Collectively, these actions underscored Russia's strategic interest in preserving Lukashenko's government and highlighted the depth of Moscow's influence in Belarusian affairs.

¹³² Wilson Center. (2022, January 25). Crisis in Belarus: Political and geopolitical implications. *Wilson Center*. https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/KI_220125%20Crisis%20in%20Belarus_Cable%2074-V1r1.pdf

¹³³ Manaev, O., Rice, N., & Taylor, M. (2021). The evolution and influence of Russian and Belarusian propaganda during the Belarus presidential election and ensuing protests in 2020. *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 63(3-4), 371-402. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00085006.2021.1997285>

¹³⁴ Leukavets, A. (2021). Russia's game in Belarus: 2020 presidential elections as a checkmate for Lukashenka? *New Perspectives*, 29(1), 90-101. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2336825X20984337>

7. Patterns and Divergences: Cross-Case Reflections

The cases under discussion provide illustrative examples of power shifts from entrenched, corrupt ruling elites to new, anti-establishment, and democratic political actors, achieved through non-violent means even in weakly institutionalized contexts. This phenomenon can be primarily explained using the political opportunity structure framework proposed by Political Process Theory.

In the case of Georgia in 2003, the success of the peaceful Rose Revolution was significantly influenced by the interplay between the international context and the eroded legitimacy of Shevardnadze's administration. On one hand, the United States' shift in foreign policy toward promoting democracy underpinned its overt support for the power shift in Georgia. On the other hand, the lack of legitimacy of Shevardnadze's administration weakened its repressive capacity, making a peaceful transition possible.

In the semi-consolidated authoritarian context of Armenia in 2018, divisions within the ruling elite created a critical opening that Nikol Pashinyan effectively leveraged to drive political change. These fractures within the leadership provided a window of opportunity for the opposition to mobilize public support and challenge the status quo.

By 2019, external influence and elite divisions played a decisive role in enabling the victory of the anti-corruption and democratic coalition in Moldova. Although earlier aligned with Plahotniuc in mutually beneficial arrangements — as reflected in the 2017 electoral reform law — President Dodon gradually began repositioning himself as a counterweight to Plahotniuc, amid growing public discontent and shifting international dynamics. This shift was not abrupt but evolved strategically as Dodon sought to preserve his domestic legitimacy while capitalizing on external support. His decision to form a governing coalition with the pro-European ACUM Bloc in June 2019 — a move encouraged by both Russia and the EU — marked the culmination of this repositioning. The coalition effectively dismantled Plahotniuc's political dominance and led to a significant reconfiguration of Moldova's power structure.

In Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky's victory in 2019 can also be attributed to elite divisions, albeit indirectly. The presence of numerous oligarchs competing within Ukraine's political and economic spheres paradoxically created a degree of pluralism, fostering greater democratic space. Although Zelensky was not the unified opposition's single presidential candidate, the media support provided by Ihor Kolomoisky significantly boosted his popularity as a non-established leader among Ukrainian voters, particularly when contrasted with traditional political elites.

The cases under discussion also highlight the importance of political parties and leaders in seizing momentum to mobilize citizens and persuade them of their capacity to implement meaningful reforms, emphasizing the urgency of decisive action.

Different scenario developed in Belarus in 2020. Although Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya cannot be considered a charismatic leader, she was undoubtedly a non-established candidate, representing the complete antithesis of Alexander Lukashenko, whose authoritarian rule had exhausted the patience of the Belarusian people. Belarusian opposition parties managed to coordinate their efforts during the 2020 presidential election, with Tsikhanouskaya serving as a unified candidate whose campaign narratives resonated with citizens. However, the movement ultimately failed to achieve its objectives. This failure can be attributed to the absence of political opportunities for change in Belarus at the time. The regime's consolidated power structure, its capacity and willingness to employ repression, the absence of independent political or financial elites capable of challenging Lukashenko, and the lack of effective mechanisms for international pressure collectively led to the defeat of the social movement.

Table 1. The Political Opportunity Structure and Opposition Political Parties' Ability to Capitalize on the Momentum

- ✓ Evident
- ◆ Not evident
- ❖ Partly evident
- Not relevant

		Political Opportunity Structure					Political Parties' Contribution		
		Power concentration over Governmental Bodies	Power concentration over Media	Division among Elites	States' Repressive Capacity	External Actor's Influence	Opposition Parties' Unity	Voter Mobilization	Charismatic Leader
Regime Type	Hybrid Regime	❖	❖	❖		✓	✓	✓	✓
		❖	✓	✓	◆	✓	✓	✓	✓
		❖	✓	✓	◆	○	✓	✓	✓
	Semi	✓	✓	✓	◆	○	✓	✓	✓
	Consolid	◆	◆	◆	✓	◆	✓	✓	✓
									Georgia in 2003
									Moldova in 2019
									Ukraine in 2019
									Armenia in 2018
									Belarus in 2020

Source: *The authors combines research findings of social movements' outcomes in study cases.*

Comparing the factors that led to government changes in Georgia in 2003, Armenia in 2018, and Ukraine and Moldova in 2019 with the situation in Georgia in 2024 reveals significant differences.

The political environment in Georgia leading up to the 2024 parliamentary elections indicated that achieving political change through elections was nearly impossible due to the absence of a functioning political opportunity structure.

Georgian Dream, which came to power in the 2012 parliamentary elections, has remained the ruling party to this day. The party's establishment and continued dominance are closely tied to oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, whose extensive influence over the party and state institutions and the media has led Transparency International to directly associate state capture in Georgia with his name.¹³⁵

Between 2012 and 2016, Georgian Dream governed as a coalition. Although the party dominated the coalition, members of other parties held significant positions during its first term. For example, David Usupashvili, chair of the Republican Party, served as Speaker of Parliament; Irakli Alasania, leader of the Free Democrats, held the position of Defense Minister (2012–2014), and Maia Panjikidze, also of the Free Democrats, served as Foreign Minister (2012–2014). However, the coalition dissolved during its first term, and in 2016, Georgian Dream contested the elections as an independent party. Since then, after securing parliamentary majorities in both the 2016 and 2020 elections, Georgian Dream has filled key executive positions with loyalists. The party became internally unified following the initiating of the repressive law on “Foreign Agents” in 2023, when several members left the party due to its increasingly clear anti-Western and anti-democratic stances. Hence, by 2024 parliamentary elections the Georgian Dream had become a monolithic party, allowing no room for internal dissent or debate.

Along with solidifying the power within the party, the GD party has also solidified control over all three branches of government by appointing obedient judges to critical positions in the judiciary.¹³⁶ Similarly, Georgian Dream loyalists head law enforcement agencies, further entrenching the party's dominance.¹³⁷ From the perspective of elite divisions, Bidzina Ivanishvili's decision-making regarding key appointments is rooted in obedience and trust. Ivanishvili sits at the apex of a highly centralized power structure, controlling the parliament, judiciary, government, CEC, law enforcement agencies, and secret services – the reports of high-level corruption on a mass scale demonstrate that loyal officials have unjustifiably accumulated immense wealth, suggesting that this

¹³⁵ *Transparency International Georgia. (2020.). Georgia: A captured state. Transparency International Georgia. <https://www.transparency.ge/en/blog/georgia-captured-state>*

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

cultivates an unhealthy dependence and subservience to Ivanishvili¹³⁸. The system he has constructed is so robust that no former officials who have distanced themselves from him have publicly challenged him in a way that could undermine the internal cohesion of the system. Consequently, this system exhibits no noticeable internal factions or dissent among officials, which might otherwise create space for political change, as seen in Armenia or Moldova.

Furthermore, unlike in Ukraine, Ivanishvili remains entirely unrivaled in Georgia in terms of wealth and influence. Despite Georgian Dream's repeated claims that all political parties in Georgia are backed by oligarchs, Forbes identifies Bidzina Ivanishvili as the wealthiest Georgian¹³⁹ (not counting Mikheil Lomtadze, a Georgian who does not reside in Georgia). The absence of equally powerful competitors contributes to Ivanishvili's consolidation of vertical power, directly correlating with the restriction of democratic space for political change in Georgia.

In terms of control over governmental branches, law enforcement bodies, and the absence of internal divisions among elites, Georgia closely resembles Belarus's one-man-ruled system among the cases discussed. However, this is not the only characteristic it shares with Belarus.

While the internal political opportunity structure did not exist in Georgia during the pre-election period, international pressure could have served as a potential source of leverage for democratic transition. This possibility was particularly relevant given Georgia's achievement of EU candidate status in December 2023 and the overwhelming support among Georgian citizens for the country's European integration. However, in the lead-up to the 2024 elections, Georgian Dream openly refused to implement the European Commission's recommendations for democratic reforms, prerequisites for initiating EU membership negotiations. Despite numerous warnings from international partners that their actions violated democratic principles, Georgian Dream passed the restrictive Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence and intensified its hostile rhetoric against Western partners. These actions demonstrated the regime's blatant disregard for external pressure. Western partners repeatedly warned that sanctions would be imposed on individuals undermining democracy if election fraud occurred. Nevertheless, Georgian Dream adopted a resolutely anti-democratic course,

¹³⁸ Transparency International-Georgia. (2024). მაგალი დონის კორუფციის შემთხვევები: განახლებადი ბოა.<https://transparency.ge/ge/blog/magali-donis-korupciis-savaraudo-shemtxvevebi-ganaxlebadi-sia>

¹³⁹ Forbes. (n.d.). Bidzina Ivanishvili. *Forbes*. Retrieved February 9, 2025, from <https://www.forbes.com/profile/bidzina-ivanishvili/>

Although Davit Kezerashvili, Mamuka Khazaradze, and Badri Japaridze possess financial resources that allow them to exert some influence over the political and media landscape, they do not control state institutions. Consequently, the imbalance remains so significant that their efforts are insufficient to counterbalance Bidzina Ivanishvili's dominance.

manipulating the election results. In this respect, the regime's approach also bears a strong resemblance to Lukashenka's strategy in Belarus, which relied on consolidating authoritarianism and anchoring foreign relations in an economic and political alliance with authoritarian Russia.

According to V-Dem, Georgia has transitioned from an electoral democracy to an electoral autocracy in 2024¹⁴⁰. Consequently, its political dynamics increasingly resemble those of Belarus's closed authoritarian regime, where democratic transitions are effectively unattainable. Opposition parties failed to fully recognize and adapt to this reality, a strategic miscalculation. During the pre-election period, opposition parties accused Georgian Dream of undemocratic governance, deliberate distancing from the West, and attempts to align Georgia more closely with Russia. However, they did not form a unified front to confront the ruling party, despite clear indications that Georgian Dream had no intention of relinquishing power democratically.

By the October 26 elections, only a portion of the opposition parties had managed to form an alliance. The largest opposition party, the United National Movement, joined forces with Strategy Builder, For New Georgia, Lelo, Citizens, the Party for the People, the newly established "Freedom Square" movement, Droa, and Girchi – More Freedom. However, these alliances were undermined by the leaders' lack of public trust. While many opposition platforms echoed public support for European integration, the official election results did not align with expectations based on public opinion trends, raising questions about the integrity of the electoral process. The divisions within the opposition became increasingly apparent following the announcement of the official election results. Despite widespread public outrage over the fraudulent elections, the opposition failed to organize a unified and coordinated protest movement, as it happened in Moldova in 2019 and Georgia in 2003, due to internal disagreements and fragmented actions. Consequently, they missed the opportunity to lead the mass protests that erupted on November 28, 2024, following Georgian Dream's unilateral decision to delay the country's EU integration process.¹⁴¹

Although Georgia's political environment shares several characteristics with consolidated autocracies such as Belarus — including increasing repression, media control, and political polarization — it cannot yet be classified as a fully consolidated autocracy according to the political

¹⁴⁰ Nord, Marina, David Altman, Fabio Angiolillo, Tiago Fernandes, Ana Good God, and Staffan I. Lindberg. 2025. *Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?* Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute.

¹⁴¹ Civil.ge. (2024, November 28). *GD Aborts EU Accession*. <https://civil.ge/archives/638801>

opportunity structure framework. This is due to the continued presence of competitive (albeit flawed) elections, a degree of pluralism in the party system, and an active, though embattled, civil society. However, these remaining democratic features are under growing threat. The decentralized protest movement that emerged on November 28, despite its mass mobilization, lacked central leadership or organizational cohesion, making it vulnerable to fragmentation and limiting its capacity to produce sustainable democratic change. This vulnerability is further exacerbated by Georgian Dream's intensified repression of demonstrators and shrinking civic space, which collectively signal a concerning trend toward autocratic consolidation.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of political transitions across post-Soviet states underscores a pivotal truth: the interplay between internal political opportunity structures and external influences is crucial in shaping the success or failure of democratic movements. The cases of Georgia (2003), Armenia (2018), Moldova (2019), and Ukraine (2019) highlight the transformative power of elite divisions, repressive state capacity, influence of foreign actors, and the strategic acumen of political parties in capitalizing on societal grievances. Conversely, the Belarusian example (2020) and the contemporary Georgian context (2024) reveal the formidable barriers erected by entrenched authoritarianism and the absence of conducive political opportunity structures.

In Georgia's case, the consolidation of power under Georgian Dream starkly mirrors the dynamics of closed authoritarian regimes, limiting the prospects for democratic change. Unlike in Moldova and Armenia, where elite fragmentation provided openings for opposition forces, Georgia's highly centralized power structure under oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili effectively neutralized such possibilities. Moreover, the regime's dismissive stance toward external pressures, particularly those tied to Georgia's EU aspirations, further entrenched its authoritarian trajectory.

The failure of opposition forces to coalesce into a unified and credible front further compounded these challenges. Despite widespread public support for democratic reforms and European integration, opposition parties faltered in presenting a cohesive strategy, resulting in incomplete voter mobilization, fragmented responses to election fraud and disorganized public protests. This strategic miscalculation has weakened their ability to harness public discontent into a coherent force capable of challenging the regime.

Given Georgia's classification as an electoral autocracy, prospects for democratic transition are steadily narrowing. Nevertheless, the decentralized protests following the 2024 elections reflect a resilient civil society that—despite the absence of centralized leadership—continues to pursue democratic aspirations. This fragmented yet persistent undercurrent of resistance points to the latent potential for future mobilization, should opposition actors overcome past divisions and adopt a more cohesive and strategic approach.

In sum, the trajectory of democratic change in Georgia hinges on the delicate balance between state repression, elite cohesion, and the capacity of opposition forces to effectively channel public discontent and international backing. While the current political landscape bears unsettling similarities to Belarus's entrenched authoritarianism, the country's vibrant and resilient citizenry, with its enduring aspirations for European integration, offers a cautious yet credible source of hope.

The extent to which these latent opportunities can be realized will depend not only on the strategic recalibration of opposition forces and the continued engagement of international actors, but also on broader internal and external dynamics that may shape Georgia's political future.