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GEORGIA'S GOVERNMENT IS PLAYING WITH FIRE

INTERNAL POLARISATION INVITES EXTERNAL INTERFERENCE

Georgia's government distrusts the West and democratic institutions – despite formally supporting Euro-Atlantic integration. It seeks to merge transactional foreign policy with ultra-conservative values and illiberalism. Current policies are polarising the nation, alienating the West, and making Georgia vulnerable to Russia's interference.

At a pro-government rally in April 2024, the honorary chairman of the Georgian Dream (GD) party and the *de facto* leader of Georgia, billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, referred to the political opposition and civil society as “a pseudo-elite nurtured by a foreign country”. He also claimed that the “global party of war”, which, according to him, dominates both the EU and NATO, was responsible for Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia, as well as its 2014 and 2022 invasions of Ukraine.

Ivanishvili's revealing rant was exceptional; he usually refrains from making public statements, preferring to lead from behind the scenes. After all, the governing GD party, which Ivanishvili founded in 2012 and through which he continues to control Georgian politics, still officially supports Georgia's EU and NATO membership, as do almost

79 and 67 per cent of Georgians, respectively. However, Ivanishvili's paranoid distrust of the EU and NATO, as well as his contempt for the political opposition, appear to be irreconcilable with that goal.

While GD claims to be a pro-Western party, the political and administrative reforms it has implemented during its 12 years in power have taken Georgia in the opposite direction. GD's political tactics resemble those witnessed in so-called illiberal democracies, such as Hungary and Turkey. State capture by the ruling elite often starts with the gradual erosion of the rule of law and democratic institutions. Typically, the independence of the judiciary is diluted, and media ownership is concentrated in the hands of a pro-government business elite. Political practices are

manipulated by the use of disinformation and administrative resources to ensure election results. Several ‘stealth authoritarian’ states have also adopted strict oversight rules that restrict the operation and fundraising of NGOs and associations.

Following this pattern, in May the government pushed a law through parliament requiring civil society groups receiving more than 20 per cent of their funding from outside Georgia to register as “organisations serving the interests of a foreign power”. The Council of Europe, the EU and the United Nations have all condemned the legislative process and the law. According to the Council of Europe, the rushed process did not comply with the principles of inclusive democracy, and the law itself violates European democratic

and human rights standards. The label and the reporting obligations will essentially discredit and restrict the functioning of almost all NGOs that are not indirectly linked to the ruling elite.

Since the law was passed, tens of thousands of Georgians have repeatedly taken to the streets in Tbilisi and other major cities. Hired thugs are reported to have intimidated and assaulted protesters – an ominous sign of increasing brutality and further erosion of democratic practices.

On 28 May, parliament overruled President Salome Zurbishvili's veto of the bill, which means that the law will enter into force in late July. In practice, this will bring Georgia's European integration process to a halt – contrary to the wishes of the majority of 3.7 million Georgians. However, this will not be a major disappointment for Ivanishvili and the ruling elite.

GD's vision for Georgia seems to be essentially a Hungary of the South Caucasus: a transactional, ultra-conservative, and stealth authoritarian state that takes full advantage of its geographical location at the crossroads of civilisations and geographical regions. Georgia's

current political leadership is attempting to strike a balance between European and Western relations on the one hand, and deepening its ties with Turkey, Russia, and China on the other. These three countries were also Georgia's top trading partners in 2022 and in the top four in 2023.

For many, it is particularly hard to understand Ivanishvili's push for Georgia's rapprochement with Russia. After all, since Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, Russia has occupied 20 per cent of Georgian territory and is considered Georgia's number one security threat. Georgia's trade and links with Russia have expanded rapidly, particularly since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Georgia has remained outside the EU's sanctions regime, re-established direct flights between Moscow and Tbilisi, and welcomed over 100,000 Russians fleeing the mobilisation and repressive practices in Russia.

Georgia's latest policy moves cannot be explained merely as preparation for the approaching October parliamentary election. A more plausible explanation is that Ivanishvili is changing tack because he anticipates Russia's victory

in Ukraine and the consequent strengthening of Russia's role in the region. For the 68-year-old Ivanishvili, who made his billions in Russia, navigating a Russian-dominated world is second nature.

However, Ivanishvili appears to be overplaying his hand both politically and geopolitically. To younger Georgians, Ivanishvili's worldview seems alien and distant. Furthermore, many Georgians have only recently – through participation in demonstrations – woken up to his anti-Western agenda and erosion of democracy. This may lead to increased cooperation among the traditionally quarrelsome pro-Western opposition forces ahead of the October election.

Geopolitically, Ivanishvili is certainly playing with fire. By deviating from the European path, the regime is polarising the nation and alienating Georgia's European supporters – while making the country extremely vulnerable to increasing Russian interference in different realms. As a small state that borders Russia and has two unresolved conflicts on its territory, Georgia cannot afford to prioritise short-term interests over its sovereignty and security. /