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Georgia's Imitation Game: Hungary, Russia and the Rise of the Anti-Liberal International

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INTRODUCTION

Georgia is Victor Orbán's foreign policy success. While much has been written about Hungary's illiberal regime and how Victor Orbán managed to consolidate power domestically, lesser attention has been paid to its foreign political dimension. Orbán has built an exportable model, becoming a source of inspiration and emulation for closet autocrats worldwide, especially in Europe. His influence on the EU candidate countries of the Western Balkans such as Serbia, BiH and North Macedonia has not gone unnoticed.¹ However, one of the closest copies of Orbán's regime has been developed in Georgia, arguably with a good dose of guidance and encouragement from Fidesz. This raises two interrelated questions: what makes the Hungarian model so attractive for the current Georgian leadership and what is Hungary gaining from supporting Georgia? It also invites the discussion of Russia's potential gains from emerging anti-liberal partnerships and of their broader impact on the global order fragmenting under the pressures of heightened geopolitical competition.²

This study examines why and to what extent Georgia has been mimicking the Hungarian model under the leadership of the ruling Georgian Dream party and the broader implications of this phenomenon. It is also concerned with understanding the modalities of influence projection by Budapest and the main drivers behind it. What has changed in the international environment that has enabled the rise of anti-liberal authoritarianism worldwide and what broader conclusions can be drawn from the cases of Georgia and Hungary? In addressing these questions, this paper highlights the defining features of the two regimes and explores how much Georgia has copied from the Hungarian original. The comparison is made both in terms of power mechanics and ideological framing. While similarities are striking, this paper demonstrates that there are also important differences between the two, particularly when it comes to political costs and long-term strategic implications. The Georgian Dream might be mimicking Hungary but in doing so it is drifting back into the Russian orbit, leaving Moscow the prime winner of its imitation game.

Hungary, intentionally or not, serves as a useful conduit for Russia's interests not only within the EU but also more broadly. In addition to undermining European unity by challenging the EU line on Russia and Ukraine, Hungary acts as an example of a country that can remain part of the institutional West and pursue anti-Western policies; it can be culturally part of the West with a strong European identity yet geopolitically adopt the posture of multi-alignment; it can benefit from European programs and funding and at the same time, reject any criticism in the name of sovereignty and pluralism. In other words, when Hungary adopts Russian-style legislation such as the one on transparency of foreign influence or LGBTQ propaganda, it makes it easier for other governments with autocratic tendencies yet pro-European populations to emulate and justify. For the regime in Tbilisi, Hungary has served both as an example and an alibi for its growing ideological and geopolitical alignment with Russia.

This study has not delved into the exact mechanisms of how Fidesz, Hungary's ruling party, is helping the Georgian Dream (GD) and neither has it uncovered any behind-the-scenes deals. This is not an exercise in investigative journalism, but rather an analysis of open-source materials. A

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1. For an in-depth discussion of Hungary's influence in the Western Balkans, see 'Balkan Csárdás: Hungarian Foreign Policy Dance,' CEU Democracy Institute available at [hungary-ENG-06-1.pdf](https://www.ceu.edu/hungary-ENG-06-1.pdf) ([bezbednost.org](https://www.bezbednost.org)).
 2. The use of the term anti-liberal as opposed to illiberal is preferred since it implies a deliberate and often aggressive rejection of liberalism, often described as a foreign imposition.

combination of secondary and primary sources was used as well as open-ended interviews conducted on the condition of anonymity. The primary sources included official statements, speeches, and relevant policy documents. The author benefitted from access to the BBC monitoring service, which provided translations of Hungarian language news and analysis. The paper was also informed by the author's experience as Head of the Georgian Mission to the EU in the period of 2013-2021.

The main focus of the study is Georgia. It closely examines Hungary's influence on Georgia's turn to authoritarian politics. However, it would be a mistake to ignore the domestic roots of this phenomenon linked to the traditions of one-party dominance, zero-sum political culture, extreme majoritarianism, unicameral parliament and the weakness of political parties and institutions that make the state susceptible to capture. This paper begins by discussing the domestic factors, structural as well as cultural, that led to the erosion of Georgian democracy and made it vulnerable to malign influences both domestic and foreign. The second part of the paper examines the Hungarian model and the power mechanics behind Fidesz's success. It then draws comparisons to the Georgian case, highlighting similarities and differences. The paper concludes with reflections on the broader implications of the global rise of hybrid authoritarianism.

DEMOCRACY HIJACKED: AN UNEXPECTED BROMANCE BETWEEN GEORGIA AND HUNGARY

Georgia seems to be stuck in a vicious cycle. Parties sweep to power, often on the wave of popular protest, and never want to leave. They overstay their welcome, clinging to power the way one clings to life. And the more they cling, the lesser are chances that they do survive the loss of power, fuelling the sense that elections are an existential struggle for political life or death. Opponents are not mere rivals to be defeated but mortal enemies to be eliminated. If anything changes in this pattern, it is that each new set of rulers ends up being worse than the previous. The methods they use grow more sophisticated as they translate the mandate of popularity into the tyranny of the majority more effectively than the party-in-power before them. Compromise is seen as a sign of weakness and power-sharing as political suicide.³ Consequently, Georgian politics have become highly personalized and polarised, while political parties have remained weak, lacking a tradition of coalition-building and experience of losing and returning to power.

In that sense, the Georgian Dream is not an exception but part of the historical trend. It came to power defeating the increasingly unpopular United National Movement of now imprisoned Micheil Saakashvili, the first and only leader who conceded defeat in post-independence Georgia. However, he did so under heavy pressure both from the population and from Western partners. In addition, the UNM's monopoly over administrative resources was offset by the resources of the opposition coalition led by the one and only Georgian billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili. He was the founder and the main funder of the Georgian Dream party, which came to power with the promise of ending the cycle of power abuses, human rights violations, and instrumentalization of the judiciary for political pressure in the 2012 elections.

Twelve years later, Ivanishvili's hold on power is unmatched by any other ruling party in Geor-

3. For more, see Natalie Sabanadze (2023), 'Who is Afraid of Georgian Democracy', at <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/05/who-is-afraid-of-georgian-democracy?lang=en¢er=europe>

gia's history. Ivanishvili not only controls administrative resources, courts, and major economic assets in the country. He also has personal wealth, which according to some estimates is one-third of Georgia's total GDP.⁴ This has allowed him to offer extraordinary pre-election benefits such as paying off people's micro debts or distributing generous rewards to popular sports personalities to secure their endorsement. He can also afford to hire expensive political consultants to shape the GD's campaigns. Unsurprisingly, the political playing field is so much tilted in favour of the ruling party that the change of government through the ballot box once again presents a Herculean endeavour.

There are many reasons why Georgia has failed to break this cycle such as weak institutions, Soviet legacies, economic inequalities, and self-serving political elites. Most important, however, are structural factors, including a unicameral parliament that does not impose extra checks and extreme majoritarianism that also allows for one-party domination without any built-in resistance mechanisms. Consequently, having a majority in parliament has allowed Georgia's ruling parties to adjust the system to their preferences, rather than making it resilient to power grabs.⁵ The 2024 parliamentary elections offer an opportunity to at least partly end this practice through the shift to the proportional representation model. However, as discussed below, the GD has introduced a whole series of measures to compensate for the loss of the majoritarian advantage.

Conversely, the main restraints on Georgia's ruling elites have been civil society and international pressure. When it came to foreign policy orientation, all successive Georgian governments prioritized integration with Western institutions as Georgia's historical destiny and a matter of national security. This meant that the progress on the foreign policy front required efforts at democratisation as part of the domestic policy. Moreover, Georgia depended on foreign assistance, which helped build its state institutions and allowed the country to weather the turbulent transition. Georgia, therefore, was always seeking international, especially American and European validation, which in turn was conditioned on domestic reforms.

These mutually reinforcing links between Georgia's foreign policy aspirations and domestic democratisation are now broken. In the past few years, the GD government began to openly ignore international opinion and push back on external criticism as an unjustified interference in domestic affairs and disrespect of Georgia's sovereignty. Hungary under Victor Orbán, who is known for his indifference to international outcries, provided both an inspiration and a convenient cover. The GD could say that they were doing the same as an EU member state and that Brussels first had to deal with its double standards before claiming moral authority.⁶ This was particularly useful domestically where popular support for European integration has remained consistently high and it was necessary to demonstrate that Georgia still had approving friends in Europe, willing to lobby for its accession. In October 2023, Victor Orbán paid a three-day official visit to Georgia, endorsing the government's narrative and showcasing its Christian devotion. He echoed the government's talking points about how unfairly Brussels has treated Georgia by delaying its candidate status. As Thornike Gordadze observed, 'for Georgia's ruling party, having Viktor Orbán in the EU is a gift from heaven, an excellent alibi proving that the ultra-conservative,

4. <https://www.politico.eu/list/politico-28-class-of-2024/bidzina-ivanishvili/>

5. For example, Saakashvili strengthened the role of presidency when he held the office and as he approached the end of his term, he boosted the role of the PM in the expectation that he could do a Putin-Medvedev type of a swap. He could not realise the plan since he lost to the Georgian Dream, which has in turn proceeded to destroy the remaining checks and balances and is on its way of building a one-party state.

6. For example, see speaker of Parliament Shalva Papuashvili lashing out against European double standards at <https://info.imedi.ge/en/politics/3205/parliament-speaker-says-double-standard-approach-damaging-europes-image-in-eyes-of-georgian-public>.

sovereignist agenda is compatible with Europe.⁷

While the benefits of the GD in cozying up to Orbán are clear, what is in it for Hungary? In contrast to the Western Balkans, where Hungary has clear economic and national security interests, Georgia has until recently been peripheral to Budapest. There is a history of cooperation and friendly relations between the two countries and peoples but not much else. However, as the GD began to follow closely the Hungarian playbook for consolidating and retaining power, Georgia became a resource for Orbán's foreign political ambitions. Budapest is interested in increasing the number of like-minded states to boost its political clout and reduce risks of isolation and backlash. As more and more states shift to the right, the Hungarian-style illiberalism becomes increasingly normalized, affecting the balance of political forces in Europe. The spread of the Hungarian model also allows Victor Orbán to position himself as an ideological father figure, expanding Hungary's influence and bargaining power, particularly vis-à-vis EU member states.

Orbán's ambition is to promote Hungary as a leader of an anti-liberal revolt engaged in a so-called heroic struggle against powerful global elites. He described Hungary as a 'David-sized nation standing against woke Goliath,' scoring points at home but also indicating that he is patiently waiting to turn the tide and multiply allies across the world. He skilfully manipulated national and religious sentiments, using media, education and advertising to put forward a vision of a proudly defiant Hungary. As political philosopher Erica Benner describes, it was a vision of a country 'that needs to stand up against floods of immigrants, its own partners in the EU, diseased liberal values and the cosmopolitan elites who spread them. As a strategy for staying in power as long as possible, it has worked well.'⁸ It has also worked as a strategy for encouraging like-minded regimes and multiplying friends from MAGA republicans in the US to the ruling parties in the Balkans and the Caucasus.

Hungary is not shy about supporting allies and shielding them from external scrutiny. Orbán is also interested in diversifying Hungary's economic partners and developing business ties to reinforce his vision of the country's political interests. During his 2023 visit to Georgia, the two governments held joint consultations, discussing plans on how to deepen cooperation and increase bilateral economic ties beyond the current 90 million trade turnover. The two sides focused on energy transit issues, including the Black Sea Strategic Submarine Electric Cable project and investment opportunities for Hungarian businesses that, reportedly, tend to be close allies of Orbán. The parties have signed several documents and memoranda on cooperation, including in the field of the 'protection of families.'⁹ Georgian Prime Ministers, beginning with Irakli Gharibashvili in 2022 attend as honorary guests the annual gathering of CPAC Hungary, Orbán's hosting of the American ultra-conservative's annual event known as the Conservative Political Action Conference, and the cooperation at the level of foreign ministers has endured despite frequent ministerial changes on the Georgian side. Most importantly, as Georgia has been losing its traditional supporters among the EU/NATO member states, Hungary has become its primary champion. Budapest has been lobbying for Georgia's candidate status in the EU and threatening to block any punitive measures against the Georgian government for its democratic backsliding.

For the Georgian leadership concerned with political survival, the Hungarian support was decisive and the appeal of its model unrivalled. It offered all benefits at little cost, providing a blue-

7. Thornike Gordadze (2024), 'The Georgian Government's Hungarian Rhapsody' at politicsgeo.com/article/25.

8. Erica Benner (2024) *Adventures in Democracy: The Turbulent World of People Power*, Penguin Random House, UK, p.169.

9. Gordadze at politicsgeo.com/article/25.

print for staying in power more or less indefinitely while still preserving the veneer of democratic legitimacy. Association with Orbán, as the head of the EU member state, had no political costs compared to Vladimir Putin. As a report by the CEU Democracy Institute noted, for autocratic regimes in need of legitimation, Orbán could replace Putin as an acceptable alternative in the eyes of their core votes.¹⁰ In places like Georgia, ties with Moscow might have been too risky to publicly demonstrate, but Hungary was a perfect alternative. As more and more states began to follow the path of hybrid authoritarianism, Georgia did not even risk appearing as a solitary pariah; it was simply becoming part of the growing trend. As Thomas de Waal aptly observed, opportunistic Georgia has joined a club of countries that can be described as a Eurasian branch of the Illiberal International.¹¹

It was not Hungary that caused Georgia's policy shift. As already discussed, it was a largely homegrown process and a result of deliberate political choices the GD leadership made based on partisan interests. Nevertheless, Hungary's apparent success enabled, directly or indirectly, Georgia's authoritarian turn. The broader international context has also provided additional incentives. The rise of global authoritarian powers such as Russia and China, the perceived decline of the West, the rise of the far-right within Western societies challenging the established order from within, and the growing geopolitical rift between the West and the Global South have all contributed to the creation and the expansion of the 'illiberal club.' These factors have made the rejection of liberal democracy not only acceptable but also less costly for local populist elites. The rise of China as a global power is particularly noteworthy in this context. The success of the Chinese model and its emphasis on development without democratization has undermined one of the fundamental assumptions of the post-Cold War order that liberal democracy and economic development were inseparable. The delinking of the democracy agenda from the prosperity agenda made an alternative social bargain between power-grabbing elites and the populace possible - one that promises prosperity and economic opportunities (however unequal) at the expense of fundamental rights and political pluralism.

ORBÁN'S MECHANICS OF POWER

Victor Orbán has built an exportable model of competitive authoritarianism, which he is eager to sell to the world as a successful alternative to liberal democracy. He is a nationalist leader with international ambitions. He does not wish to plunge Hungary into isolation - his ambition is to make his regime a norm rather than the exception and to build an influential fan base. Despite the fundamental problems Hungary has with the EU, he never initiated a leave campaign. On the contrary, he plans to stay and transform the EU in his image. 'My plan is not to leave,' he is quoted as saying 'but to take over Brussels.'¹² A telling example of Orbán's international PR campaign is the Tucker Carlson project. The Fox News presenter got a state-level reception in Hungary when he visited Budapest in August 2021 to laud the successes of the Hungarian conservative government. As observed by Zsuzsanna Szélényi, former Fidesz member turned critic, in her book *Tainted Democracy*, Carlson was there to showcase to the world and especially to American

10. 'Balkan Csárdás' at hungary-ENG-06-1.pdf (bezbednost.org)

11. Thomas de Waal (2024), 'Opportunistic Georgia Joins Europe's Illiberal Club' at <https://www.ft.com/content/80b6dea5-a905-41a4-b53a-d8b650dd99bc>.

12. EU Ukraine Aid Deal Is a Pawn in Orbán's Longer Populist Game - The New York Times (nytimes.com)

conservatives that a country ‘based on traditional values, national identity and Christian traditions can be successful, sometimes more successful, than a left-wing liberal government.’¹³

The Hungarian model has several defining features that distinguish it from other forms of governance. These can be grouped into three broad categories: legality of state capture, information dominance, and ideological anti-liberalism. Orbán has perfected the strategy and tactics of state capture by legal means without blowing up a democratic façade. His main instrument is parliamentary supermajority, which can pass and amend laws to the effect of undermining independent institutions and contributing to the concentration of all levers of power in the hands of a ruling party. Full domination of the parliament also allowed Fidesz to take measures such as the expansion of social benefits right before the elections without facing legal challenges. As Erica Benner noted, ‘instead of acting as checks on partisan extremism and autocracy, laws had become a means of fighting for one party dominance.’¹⁴

Among the most consequential for the destruction of Hungarian democracy was a series of amendments to the Elections Act. These included, *inter alia*, the provision of voting rights to Hungarians abroad,¹⁵ the gerrymandering of electoral districts,¹⁶ the introduction of the so-called ‘winner’s bonus’ and ‘voter tourism,’¹⁷ the imposition of new rules on party financing, and the restricting of the space for opposition campaigning. As a result, despite elections being held regularly and in a competitive environment, they have become, as Kim Lane Scheppele has noted, ‘structurally rigged,’ drastically reducing the chances of the democratic transfer of power.¹⁸ Yet maintaining the semblance of political competition is an integral part of the model. Orbán does not want to eliminate the opposition; he needs to appear to be a winner, someone who keeps defeating his rivals in the dramatic struggle for a better future of his country. The political opposition, therefore, has an important function; it gives the regime democratic legitimacy and serves as a negative ‘other’ against which the electorate can be effectively mobilized. As Krékó and Enyedi observed, Orbán’s regime can only be understood in the context of competitive electoral politics. ‘His means are often nondemocratic, but the logic of his behaviour is quintessentially competitive.’¹⁹

13. Zsuzsanna Szelényi (2022), *Tainted Democracy: Victor Orbán and the Subversion of Hungary*, London: Hurst, p.61-61.

14. Benner, *Adventures in Democracy*, p.167.

15. One of the first decisions Orbán made was to allow ethnic Hungarians living in the neighbouring states full voting rights. He justified this under the banner of national unification and Hungary’s sense of historical responsibility towards Hungarians that were unjustly left outside Hungary as a result of the Trianon Treaty. However, he was fully aware that Hungarians abroad were Fidesz supporters and by expanding the voting rights, he guaranteed his party significant additional votes.

16. The new Constitution reduced the size of the Hungarian parliament. Consequently, the electoral districts were redrawn, creating highly uneven-sized districts whereby larger districts were assigned to the left-opposition strongholds and smaller concentrated districts to Fidesz supporters. The bias increased to the extent that the ODIHR observers for the 2022 elections noted that the deviation was no longer compatible with the principle of equal suffrage. (ODIHR Statement on Preliminary Findings and Conclusions, 4 April 2022 at <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/hungary/515111>)

17. The National Assembly in November 2021 allowed voters to register anywhere irrespective of their residences. This came to be known as ‘voter tourism,’ creating the possibility for Fidesz supporting voters to be registered in tight race constituencies and tilting the balance. (See Kim Lane Scheppele (2022), ‘How Victor Orbán Wins? At How Viktor Orbán Wins | Journal of Democracy’). Orbán also eliminated the second tour run-off, introducing instead the winner compensation scheme, which according to Kim Lane Scheppele, ‘catapulted Fidesz from a simple majority to a constitutional majority in each election.’ (ibid).

18. Kim Lane Scheppele (2022), ‘How Victor Orbán Wins?’, *Journal of Democracy* (33:3) at *How Viktor Orbán Wins | Journal of Democracy*.

19. Péter Krékó and Szolt Enyedi (2018), ‘Explaining Eastern Europe: Orbán’s Laboratory of Illiberalism’, *Journal of Democracy* (29:3) at *Explaining Eastern Europe: Orbán’s Laboratory of Illiberalism | Journal of Democracy*

In addition to structurally entrenching electoral advantage, Fidesz systematically undermined the independence of the judiciary, including that of the Constitutional Court to limit its oversight powers. This too was done by legal means through increasing the number of judges serving in the Constitutional Court and filling the newly created vacancies with party loyalists. In general, Orbán is known to have placed his close allies in key decision-making positions, using personnel policy to subordinate institutions.²⁰ He has also created a whole host of well-funded civil society organizations that would support his line while discrediting all others as externally funded, foreign agents. Hungary was among the first to adopt the Russia-style NGO law as well as the so-called CEU law, which drove the Central European University out of Hungary. The European Court of Justice struck down both laws but while they were deliberating the damage was already done. In every challenge put forward by the EU to Hungary or every debate on governance, Fidesz has argued that the party had a democratic mandate obtained through the victory in competitive elections and every measure that has been taken was both legal and democratic.²¹

Another feature that defines the Hungarian regime is information dominance. Orbán consolidated his power along with monopolizing control of the media, which gave him an upper hand in strategic communication and enabled him to establish narrative dominance. Hungary boasted a thriving independent media landscape, which became gradually disempowered through changes of ownership and the acquisition of leading media outlets by men close to Orbán, through the replacement of critical journalists by those sympathetic to the regime and crude interference in editorial policies, and by the adoption of the new media law in 2010. A new Media Council was set up to supervise the media, which according to Zsuzsanna Szelényi, consisted exclusively of Fidesz appointees and had the power to levy crippling fines on the media outlets that did not favour the Fidesz line.²² Critical media outlets were starved of all advertising funding and as they failed financially, reportedly oligarchs close to Orbán bought them up cheaply, changed the editorial policy, and had their advertising funding restored. In the words of Kim Lane Scheppele, 'rather than jailing journalists, engaging in blatant censorship, or simply shuttering hostile media, Orbán let economic pressure do the work.'²³

As the ruling party gained institutional control over major media outlets, it also began to dictate its content. Crude, polarising language became mainstream, which enabled Fidesz to deepen polarization and use it as an instrument of maintaining power, particularly around the time of elections. It became easier to organize wide smear campaigns against opposition activists or those with dissenting views, turning information into a tool of (re)pressure. According to George Birnbaum, a well-known political consultant who is behind Orbán's negative campaigns, seizing the polarisation dominance is essential for electoral success. 'One should...try to polarise the election around that issue that cuts best in your direction, i.g. crime, drugs, race in NY state...'²⁴ In the case of Hungary, such issues were George Soros as a symbol of global elites,²⁵ LGBTQ rights as a symbol of morally degenerate liberalism, migrants as a threat to security and Christian culture and the war in Ukraine as a reminder of the value of peace and pragmatism. The near-total

20. Ibid.

21. Zsuzsanna Szelényi (2022), *Tainted Democracy: Victor Orbán and the Subversion of Democracy*, Hurst Publishers, p.150.

22. Ibid. p.238.

23. Kim Lane Scheppele at *How Viktor Orbán Wins* | *Journal of Democracy*.

24. *The man who helped Orbán and Netanyahu rise to power* - BBC News.

25. George Soros is a Hungarian-born US billionaire and philanthropist, who founded Open Society Institute, and the Central European University first established in Budapest and then moved to Vienna under pressure from the Hungarian authorities.

dominance of the media landscape allowed Orbán to portray himself as the best and the most determined fighter against the global elites who wished to subordinate Hungary and plunge it into an unwinnable war. According to Péter Krékó, Hungary can be described as an ‘information autocracy,’ whereby the regime survives not through brutal repression but by the manipulation of information. ‘Rather than terrorizing or indoctrinating the population, rulers survive by leading citizens to believe that they are competent and benevolent.’²⁶

Fidesz has successfully built and exploited the image of an enemy incarnated by George Soros. As Birnbaum explains, the Hungarian-born US billionaire and philanthropist was an easy target since many people disliked him and thought of him as a kind of Wizard of Oz making decisions behind the scenes. This image also helped proliferate various conspiracy theories known as the ‘Soros plan,’ with all-powerful yet ephemeral global elites trying to pull the strings with the help of local NGOs and wishing to inundate Europe with Muslim migrants to destroy its Christian roots. This framing was useful to justify occasional excesses and bending of the democratic rules in the ‘unequal fight’ of the ‘real nation’ vs ‘rootless, cosmopolitan global elites.’ ‘Don’t let Soros have the last laugh!’, proclaimed billboards scattered around Budapest, evoking parallels with antisemitic conspiracies. According to political philosopher Erica Benner, ‘since elites have the power of money and international networks, the True People have no choice but to fight a little dirty...The facts may have to be massaged or obscured if we want to win the unfair war against Soros and his ilk.’²⁷

Fidesz skilfully combined political technology with an anti-liberal conservative ideology to develop a distinct political identity. This identity is premised on openly unapologetic illiberalism, the so-called political ‘Christianism,’ and missionary, international ambitions. Already in 2014 Victor Orbán proudly proclaimed that he was building an ‘illiberal state within the European Union,’ because he believed in the primacy of order over freedom; in the collective will of the national community over the rights of an individual; and in traditional Christian morality and values over decadent liberal alternatives.²⁸ He began to interchangeably use the terms illiberal democracy and Christian democracy, justifying his model in the name of the Christian religion. He claimed that Christian democracy is illiberal; it is based on the Christian family model while liberal democracy is based on a ‘variable family model’ and gender fluidity. To prove his Christian credentials, Orbán began to court the churches, showering them with financial support and staging lavish celebrations of religious holidays. In 2020, the Hungarian Assembly added to the Fundamental Law the text that ‘the mother shall be a woman, and the father shall be a man.’ In the following year, the National Assembly passed the law protecting children from LGBTQ propaganda, making this the central issue for the 2022 election campaign.

In this context, Orbán launched a domestically popular crusade against Muslim migrants, playing on fears of demographic decline and insecurity, amplified by the loyal media. As Zsuzsanna Szelényi observed, ‘although the demographic panic fitted into the traditions of the Hungarian right wing, the systemic messaging of the danger affected a considerable pool of the population.’²⁹ Capitalizing on widespread immigration anxieties across the West enabled Orbán to position himself as a leader of the illiberal revolt. Many Western politicians considered Orbán a

26. Péter Krékó (2022), ‘The Birth of an Illiberal Informational Autocracy’ at <https://www.illiberalism.org/the-birth-of-an-illiberal-informational-autocracy-in-europe-a-case-study-on-hungary/>

27. Benner, *Adventures in Democracy*, p. 169.

28. See Attila Juhász (2014), ‘Building the Illiberal State’ at <https://www.boell.de/en/2014/08/21/announcing-illiberal-state>.

29. Szelényi, *Tainted Democracy*, p.81.

hero, both in Europe and the US. They were impressed with his defiance and courage to stand up against the ‘liberal mainstream’ and flocked to Budapest to pay tribute to the new Mecca of European illiberalism. Orbán in turn hoped that his supporters would slowly but surely start gaining power and his model would become widely emulated.

Another issue over which Orbán defies the common European line is Ukraine. After Russia’s full-scale aggression against Ukraine, one would expect that close ties with Putin would become a liability rather than an asset for any European leader. Not for Orbán, however, who managed to skillfully reposition himself as a potential broker of peace and turned the war into a significant electoral resource. He maintained that Hungary would not be dragged into this war; that the interests of Hungary were paramount so there was no shame in buying oil from Russia if Hungary needed it; and that it was the opposition that was wishing to open the second front in Hungary. Thus, Ukraine became part of Orbán’s successful electoral campaign. Billboards appeared asking citizens to choose between peace with Orbán’s face or war with the face of Soros and opposition politicians. The media control once more allowed Orbán to capture the narrative; his “peace” message was everywhere and the opposition was forced to respond and defend itself with very limited means. By all accounts, the war campaign boosted Fidesz’s electoral victory, revealing a skillful politician who according to Kim Lane Scheppelle, would be hard to beat even in a free and fair election.³⁰

In contradiction to the common EU line, Victor Orbán has maintained both political and economic ties with Russia. Soon after assuming the EU presidency in July 2024, he paid surprise visits to Moscow and Beijing, describing Western policies as ‘irrational’ and claiming that Ukraine would never join the EU and NATO.³¹ Amplifying the Russian narrative on the decline of the West, he has claimed that Russia and Asia are rising powers and underscored that one of the reasons for Russia’s success is its anti-LGBTQ stance.³² The deepening Russo-Hungarian alignment is based on strong ideological affinities, including the regime type as well as on converging views on foreign policy and global order more broadly. Orbán seems to have joined Moscow and Beijing in common contempt for the Western liberal world and has been acting as their ‘inside man’ in trying to dismantle it.

GEORGIA’S IMITATION GAME

Observers of Georgian politics would notice remarkable similarities with Hungary at the level of both foreign and domestic policies, power mechanics as well as ideological framing. The discourse on the war, in which ‘Russia will inevitably win,’ over the ‘decadent West with its corrosive influences of individualism and liberalism,’ the ‘self-harming Western sanctions’ and the ‘war-wishing opposition’ seems to be copy-pasted from Hungary. Moreover, Georgia has made a clear shift away from its traditional West-centric foreign policy towards the so-called multi-alignment, manifested through the rapprochement with Russia and strategic partnership with China. If the GD remains in power, this trend of aligning Georgia closer with anti-Western positions in foreign affairs is likely to continue, especially if the threat of Western sanctions increases. Domestically, one could expect consolidation of the Hungarian-style regime and its potential radicaliza-

30. Kim Lane Scheppelle, ‘How Victor Orbán Wins?’.

31. <https://www.voanews.com/a/hungary-s-Orbán-russia-stands-to-gain-as-irrational-west-loses-power/7715190.html>

32. Ibid.

tion, whereby it begins to resemble Russia more closely than Hungary.

The GD leadership, following the Hungarian playbook, has successfully leveraged their absolute majority in parliament to rush through controversial laws and adopt policies without the due process of consultations and with both the intent and the effect of consolidating power. The latest example is the adoption of the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, similar to the Russian and Hungarian laws on foreign agents, specifically targeting civil society and independent media.³³ In the case of Hungary, the law was struck down by the decision of the European Court of Justice³⁴ but in Georgia, it was pushed through despite a month-long wave of large-scale protests.³⁵ Earlier decisions included the abolition of the State Inspector's office under the guise of reform, the speedy adoption of the law on common courts, curtailing independence of institutions such as the Office of the Ombudsperson, Anti-Corruption Bureau, Central Bank, the Central Election Committee, and the National Broadcaster through the appointment of party loyalists. Most of these decisions have been adopted in open disregard of recommendations from the EU and international monitoring bodies as well as of presidential vetoes.³⁶

The GD majority has also adopted legislative changes that have effectively entrenched the electoral advantage of the incumbent party, adapting the existing legal framework to their needs. Unlike in Hungary, where the elections are held under the mixed system, in Georgia, following the 2019 Constitutional reform, the parliamentary elections are to be held under the fully proportional system. In order to offset the loss of the majoritarian advantage, the ruling party introduced the system of 'delegates.' Claiming the need to strengthen the link between voters and their representatives, the GD majority adopted amendments to the electoral code in May 2024, allowing parties to designate their MPs as 'delegates' for electoral districts that largely coincide with the previous majoritarian districts. Many critics saw it as a reintroduction of the majoritarian elements in the electoral code through the backdoor.³⁷ The additional amendment, replicating the Hungarian model, eliminated the 40 percent threshold for majoritarian deputies in the local elections.³⁸ The candidate receiving the highest number of absolute votes gets elected to regional or city council without the need to face a runoff in the second round, reducing the chances of success for united opposition candidates.

The GD also changed the procedure of choosing members of the Central Election Commission (CEC), making the election of the CEC head by simple majority and abolishing the position of the deputy, which used to be reserved for a representative of the opposition. The 5 per cent threshold for entering the parliament has been established, despite recommendations from the EU and OSCE to lower it. The Georgian parliament also fast-tracked the abolition of gender quotas in party lists in April 2024, overriding the presidential veto. At first sight, the decision may have nothing to do with the elections but its adoption less than a year before the parliamentary elections raised concerns regarding stability and integrity of the electoral law.³⁹ It also trig-

33. The Venice Commission assessments of the Hungarian and Georgian laws were strikingly similar. See in the case of Hungary: CDL-AD(2017)015 and in the case of Georgia: CDL-PI(2023)

34. EU's top court rules against Hungary on NGO funding

35. <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-parliament-signs-foreign-agent-law/32976772.html>

36. The 2017 Constitutional reform granted the power to override presidential vetoes to the parliamentary majority, limiting the influence and the role of the President as an independent institution.

37. <https://civil.ge/archives/607391>

38. The Hungarian bonus system, however, has not been introduced in Georgia. There were attempts to do so as part of the constitutional reform but then was abandoned under the pressure of the international community. It should be added here that before 2021, the GD was much more responsive to international criticism.

39. See the Venice Commission opinion at <https://civil.ge/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/default.pdf>

gered speculations that the real motive behind the amendments was the desire to free up places for rich and influential men, particularly from the regions that would represent greater electoral resources than every third woman. The OSCE/ODIHR assessed the amendments as inconsistent with Georgia's commitments, expressing concern that 'no evidence' was presented by the parliament justifying the abolition of quotas.⁴⁰

The hasty adoption of laws, the disregard for public consultations and labeling of the civil society as politically biased have fuelled an already polarised political environment.⁴¹ When assessing the situation in Georgia, the EU has repeatedly expressed concern with the extreme levels of polarisation in the society and started calling on authorities to reduce its levels from 2021 onwards.⁴² In 2023, the EU included de-polarisation as one of the top priorities to be addressed as part of Georgia's EU accession process.⁴³ Georgia has always had a highly adversarial political culture and the language used has been angry and divisive since the restoration of independence. In that sense, polarization is not new to Georgia. What is new, however, is the transformation of polarization from a condition where heated arguments take place as part of democratic contestation into a deliberate political choice and an instrument of power, undermining the democratic process.⁴⁴ Instead of engaging in attempts to reduce polarization as recommended by the EU, the GD systematically radicalized its political discourse. The references to the opposition evolved from 'radical' to 'destructive, treacherous and war-mongering.' Uncorroborated accusations of treason, sabotage of state interests, even drug addiction have become commonplace.⁴⁵ The GD adopted Orbán-style dirty campaigning, whereby billboards of blood-drenched political figures and civil society activists appear on the streets, claiming that they are ruled by a conspicuous 'global war party' (reminiscent of the anti-Soros campaign in Budapest) and wish war and destruction on their country.⁴⁶ Those who happened to hold opinions different from those of the GD were described as rootless cosmopolitans, betraying their cultural values, traditions and religion. To defend these, the government launched an anti-LGBTQ campaign, adopting the Hungarian-style law on the prohibition of the LGBTQ propaganda months before the parliamentary elections.

To keep polarisation as strong as possible, the government expanded its domination of the information space, including not only media but also public space where government messages happened to be on display everywhere. The Georgian Dream began to consolidate its influence over the media after the opposition TV station Rustavi 2 lost an ownership dispute and changed hands in 2019. While the legality of the case was not disputed, its intent and effect have been the transformation of the most-watched TV channel in the country into the government mouthpiece. The public broadcaster stopped airing any dissenting opinions and instead began ampli-

40. https://legislationline.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/2024-06-20%20FINAL%20Urgent%20Opinion_Organic%20Laws%20Abolishing%20Gender%20Quotas_ENGLISH.pdf

41. GD hierarchy and Victor Orbán have characterized NGOs in strikingly similar terms when justifying punitive and restrictive measures. In a speech in Balványos, Orbán claimed: 'Here we are not facing NGOs, but political activists financed by foreign interests' (ZN,p.77).

42. See <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2021/12/divided-georgia-a-hostage-to-polarization?lang=en¢er=europe>

43. See the EU Communication from November 2023 at https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/COM_2023_690%20Communication%20on%20EU%20Enlargement%20Policy_and_Annex.pdf?fbclid=IwAR01ZKjWxltP6a9KDGKeQWqu3sD64HdOgcviIAWYuuTBZEEI95vneLD0MwU

44. There is a growing academic literature exploring links between extreme polarisation and democratic backsliding. See, for example, Nancy Bermeo (2016), 'On Democratic Backsliding', *Journal of Democracy* (27:1) at <https://journalofdemocracy.org/articles/on-democratic-backsliding/>

45. See N. Sabanadze at <https://cepa.org/article/drugs-lies-and-secret-tapes-georgias-faltering-democracy/>

46. For the read out of Ivanishvili's address on April 29, see <https://civil.ge/archives/602348>.

fyng the government's narratives.⁴⁷ The imprisonment of the former head of Rustavi 2, Nika Gvaramia on bogus charges represented another attempt to put pressure on journalists who made life of the authorities uncomfortable.⁴⁸ As a result, Freedom House in its annual Nations in Transit report, dropped Georgia's media freedom ranking by several points, citing Gvaramia's arrest as well as an 'increasingly polarized and politicized media environment that has undermined editorial independence.'⁴⁹ Furthermore, the content of the government-affiliated broadcasters, including Imedi TV and ultra-right Post TV became increasingly aggressive, divisive and radical. The Post-TV anchors closely resemble, both in style and in content, the Russian TV propagandists such as Simonyan and Solovyev, indicating that Georgia is moving beyond the Hungarian model and closer to the Russian one.

Finally, the area where the Georgian Dream borrowed heavily both from Hungary and Russia is its aggressively anti-liberal, nationalist conservatism with strong religious overtones. The political party that started out as a pro-European and centre-left ended up on the Euro-sceptical far right. At the 2023 CPAC conference in Budapest, former PM Irakli Gharibashvili espoused what Stephen Jones described as a form of Christian nationalism. Closely echoing Victor Orbán (and Vladimir Putin),) declaring: 'our main weapon and foundation is traditional, Christian conservative family and values.'⁵⁰ The year later at the same conference, the current PM Kobakhidze repeated almost verbatim Orbán's and Putin's talking points, speaking about unaccountable global elites; liberal 'bolshevism'; the importance of family and traditional values, and even the dangers of migration. The following year, as part of the pre-election campaign Georgia adopted the legislative package on the 'protection of family values and minors,' which in addition to censoring content including the LGBTQ community, also defined marriage as a voluntary union exclusively between different sexes. These legislative changes, together with the law on Transparency of Foreign Influence led to the de-facto suspension of Georgia's EU accession process.⁵¹

In a striking resemblance to Orbán's pre-election tactics, the Georgian Dream built its 2024 campaign on two sensitive and divisive themes: preservation of peace and protection of family values, traditions and Christian identity. In one of his campaign speeches, the honorary chairman of the GD and de facto ruler of the country, Bidzina Ivanishvili declared that his party needs to get a parliamentary majority to prevent the repeat of the Ukraine scenario in Georgia, to preserve peace, restore territorial integrity, protect the sanctity of the family and strengthen the role of the church.⁵² Echoing the words of his leader, the speaker of the Georgian parliament in a gathering in his native region of Kakheti described the opposition as those who 'are stripping the country of its nationhood, the nation of its faith, and the individual of his or her identity. We should no longer know what it means to be Georgian, to be Orthodox, or what it means to be a man or a woman.'⁵³

47. The European Centre for Press and Media Freedom published a report, detailing the deteriorating situation with media freedom in Georgia. See <https://www.ecpmf.eu/georgia-a-crisis-point-for-press-freedom/>

48. Gvaramia was eventually pardoned by the president and shortly after his release, he launched his political career, founding a new political party Akhali.

49. <https://civil.ge/archives/543909>

50. <https://daviscenter.fas.harvard.edu/insights/perspectives-georgia-brink>

51. The EU described this package of laws as discriminatory, aimed at stigmatising one part of the population and called on authorities to repeal it, together with the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence. See https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/georgia-statement-spokesperson-legislative-package-family-values-and-protection-minors_en

52. <https://info.imedi.ge/en/elections/2801/bidzina-ivanishvili-says-mission-of-orthodoxy-as-pillar-of-identity-of-georgian-state-will-be-clearly-reflected-in-constitution>

53. See Shalva Papuashvili on X at <https://twitter.com/shpapuashvili/status/1840408413391532542>

COMPARE AND CONTRAST: FROM ORBÁNIZATION TO PUTINIZATION

The Georgian Dream imitates Fidesz in terms of methods, narratives, and tactics. Nevertheless, there are some important differences between the two. Firstly, in contrast to Hungary, Georgia is not a member of the EU and NATO. This means that Orbán, despite all his bravado, is still limited by his membership in the EU, which holds financial and reputational sticks. Moreover, Hungary is obliged to abide by the decisions of the European Court of Justice as it did when repealing its foreign agents' legislation and the so-called anti-Soros law. There are both formal and informal constraints that stem from the membership in the European Union. In the case of Georgia, there are no such institutionalised constraints. There is the accession carrot, which should work as an incentive for compliance and reform, but it only works if the government of a candidate country actually wants the said carrot. The GD does not seem too concerned about delivering on its promise to take Georgia to the EU despite public pronouncements to the contrary. The GD leadership understands that the regime they have built as an instrument of power is incompatible with the EU norms and values. The choice they have to make, therefore, is between staying in power and Georgia in the EU. The latest actions, statements, and policy choices indicate that the government is turning its back on the EU without openly admitting it.

At the same time, the Georgian Dream is compelled to pay lip-service to European aspirations of the Georgian people. Polls have been consistently showing high levels of support for Georgia joining the EU even among the GD voters. In that sense, the most effective constraint on usurpation of power by any ruling party in Georgia has been civil resistance, indicating high democratic resilience at the societal level. Unlike Hungary, Georgia has a strong tradition of large-scale popular protest. In decisive moments, it has been the popular rejection of authoritarianism that has saved Georgia's democracy. The protests against the foreign agents' legislation dubbed as the 'Russian Law' were more widespread than anywhere else among the former Soviet bloc states, including Hungary.⁵⁴ It is for this reason that the GD leadership often speaks of a danger of 'colour revolution' and depicts popular protest as an externally instigated anti-state revolt, echoing the Russian narrative. Georgia demonstrates that popular protest is an antidote to political apathy, but more importantly, a response to the dysfunction of democratic institutions. When institutional channels for voicing dissent or achieving change are closed, mass protest becomes the only available form of civil engagement.

Another difference between Georgia and Hungary is the cost of the authoritarian turn. While Hungary is firmly embedded in the European and Euro-Atlantic structures, Georgia is facing growing isolation from the West, which increases its vulnerability and leaves it alone to face regional security challenges. Georgia lost friends and traditional supporters among EU member states, particularly the Baltic States. Relations with the US have been deteriorating at breakneck speed with both sides threatening to review relations that have been built over the last 30 years.⁵⁵ The US has already imposed sanctions on several GD officials as well as judges and former officials close to the ruling party. The US Presidential Administration used the occasion of the UNGA and disinvited PM Kobakhidze to an official reception, signalling that business as usual is no longer an option. The GD meanwhile is try-

54. Similar legislation was also adopted in Kyrgyzstan in 2024, while Kazakhstan has decided to publish the registry of all NGOs receiving foreign funding and establish a formal mechanism of exchanging information with Russia on combatting foreign influence. See, for example, <https://eurasianet.org/russian-and-kazakh-legislators-set-up-information-exchange-to-study-foreign-influence>

55. <https://www.rferl.org/a/tbilisi-foreign-agent-blinken--visa-protest-/32961744.html>

ing to diversify its contacts, reaching out more to non-Western states, including China.

As the pressure from the EU and NATO increases, the GD will increasingly pursue the policy of multi-alignment and even adopt positions hostile to Western interests. Here too, the GD seems to be taking inspiration from Victor Orbán who seems to pursue interest-based, transactional foreign policy, maintaining ties with Russia and China while still enjoying membership in the institutional West. The main difference, however, is that Orbán is a much more skillful foreign policy actor. Through his actions, he is trying to put Hungary on the map rather than erase it from it, showcasing how a leader of a small European nation can see both Donald Trump and Xi Jinping within two days.⁵⁶ He maintains close ties with the MAGA conservative wing of the US Republican party and is revered as a hero among conservative circles around Europe. Georgian Dream officials pale in comparison, burning old bridges while struggling to build new ones.

Another important difference is ideological consistency. Fidesz has always been on the right of the political spectrum. It may have become more radical over time and more daring in its challenge to the 'liberal establishment', taking advantage of a more permissive international context, but it has always been a conservative party with a clearly defined political identity. In contrast, the Georgian Dream positioned itself on the centre-left and started out as both a relatively liberal and pro-European political force. GD's political migration from the left to the far-right and from Euro-enthusiasm to euro-scepticism is striking, particularly since it happened over the course of only a few years. This indicates a great degree of political opportunism rather than true ideological conviction. The GD is making a calculated choice, hoping that it would work as a tactic for staying in power and battling on the spread of illiberal forces around the world.

Both Hungarian and Georgian variants of authoritarianism have been characterized by gradual radicalization. However, there are signs that the Georgian copy may be outpacing the original. The signs of difference were evident already before the 2024 election campaign. There have been cases of violence against journalists, assaults on opposition figures by GD-affiliated groups and heavy-handed treatment of protesters by the police. In Hungary, there may be informational pressure on opponents, but violence is largely absent. In Georgia, especially as the GD is feeling that its popularity and the grip of power is slipping, illicit forms of intimidation and pressure have become more widespread.⁵⁷ In the latest campaign speeches, Ivanishvili started talking about condemning and outlawing the opposition parties he describes as the 'collective UNM' and promising to make them pay for all the crimes committed. He threatened the UNM with "Nuremberg Trials"; accusing the opposition of treason and crimes against the nation. The GD leadership therefore is openly announcing plans to restore a one-party rule and is de facto running on the promise of fully-fledged authoritarianism.⁵⁸ Given the party's dominance over the Constitutional Court, no institutional mechanisms of resistance are available. This suggests that the GD may be moving beyond Orbánization and towards Putinization of its governance style. As Stephen Jones observed, 'the transformation of the Georgian Dream into a party dedicated to the eradication of multiplicity and tolerance is complete'.⁵⁹

56. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/11/Orbán-hungary-pm-trump-meeting>

57. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/05/georgia-authorities-must-address-violent-attacks-against-critics-and-bring-perpetrators-to-justice/>

58. <https://www.eurasiareview.com/03092024-incumbents-touting-desire-to-turn-georgia-into-a-one-party-state/>

59. <https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-it-is-time-for-georgias-citizens-to-decide>

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

The 2024 parliamentary elections in Georgia may result in the defeat of the Georgian Dream, paving way to the first-ever coalition government in the country. It is hoped that such an outcome would reverse the course and return Georgia to the path of democratisation and European integration. If the Georgian Dream retains power, however, it is likely to strengthen authoritarian rule and continue its drift away from the West. In the current geopolitical context, this would mean falling back into the Russian influence and losing whatever is remaining of democracy and civil liberties. Russian officials and propagandists do not hide their satisfaction with Georgia's shift towards authoritarian rule at home and the so-called multi-alignment abroad, cheering on the Georgian Dream to continue its 'independent foreign policy' and courageously stand up to the pressures of Western liberalism.⁶⁰ They are even promising help, if the GD were to find itself in trouble, although the nature of the help has not been specified.⁶¹ This, however, has created expectations that Russia may not sit idly and accept the return of pro-Western forces to power in Tbilisi.⁶² In the renewed confrontation between Russia and the West, Georgia may become Russia's gain and the West's loss.

The question is what are the implications of this trend? Why does it matter if Georgia is to turn into yet another autocracy, challenging the values of liberal democracy and rules-based international order? And to whom might it matter, if it matters at all? First of all, it matters to citizens of Georgia who may find themselves trapped in an authoritarian system that they did not choose. It would also be a betrayal of their aspirations to join the European Union since to the majority of Georgians, protection of sovereignty and independence is defined through association with the EU, not in opposition to it. Secondly, it matters because Georgia is not an exception but part of a growing trend. Understanding how modernized autocracies work, the drivers and enabling factors of their rise, is essential if we are to find an effective response to them. Georgia's authoritarian tendencies may have structural domestic causes but its anti-liberal and anti-Western shift has been enabled by international conditions. Georgian Dream would not have happened without Orbán and Fidesz would not have happened without a perceived erosion of the post-Cold War liberal consensus and the rise of global authoritarian powers such as Russia and China.

Finally, it matters to the very notion of democracy and normative coherence in the international system. One of the defining characteristics of these regimes is that they are engaged in state capture and suppression of dissent and fundamental freedoms and do so in the name of democracy and through democratically elected bodies. Maintaining a democratic façade therefore is essential while eroding democratic institutions, checks and balances, and ensuring concentration of power. At the same time, they challenge the liberal understanding of democracy with its safeguards for minorities and legitimize their actions as an expression of the will of the majority. This duality of form and substance makes these regimes difficult to characterize, which explains the proliferation of definitions such as hybrid democracies, illiberal democracies, information autocracies or competitive authoritarianism. However, the fact is that these regimes lack fundamental characteristics of democracy and are thus detrimental to stability of democracies everywhere.

60. <https://oc-media.org/lavrov-praises-georgian-government-for-resisting-western-lgbt-agenda/>

61. <https://civil.ge/archives/617050>

62. See ISW Report (21 October 2024), 'Russia or the West: the Stakes in Georgia's Elections' at <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russia-or-west-stakes-georgia%E2%80%99s-election>

