

TECHNOCRATIC LINKAGE, POLARIZATION AND AUTOCRATIZATION IN THE POST-SOVIET REGION

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Abstract

Background: Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, local autocrats have leveraged the challenging regional environment, marked by tensions between Russia and the West, to consolidate their power. By instrumentalizing the fragile security landscape and perceived foreign threats in the post-Soviet space, autocrats have managed the decline of democratic governance. Since the 2000s, the international environment for post-Soviet countries has also become more polarized, with the West increasing its engagement and Russia seeking to assert its dominance and strengthen its economic standing.

Objectives: This paper examines the role of 'technocratic linkages' in autocratization, focusing on how leaders in Armenia, Belarus, and Georgia have used regional polarization, with Russian support, to reinforce repression, silence democratic voices, and consolidate authoritarian rule.

Methodology: The study applies a qualitative research approach, analyzing political developments, governance strategies, and external influences through case studies of Armenia, Belarus, and Georgia.

Findings: Two key events have significantly intensified regional polarization: the color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine (2003–2004), which briefly fostered hopes for democratic progress, and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which severely undermined those aspirations. The research highlights how post-Soviet autocrats have exploited this polarization to strengthen state control, suppress opposition, and accelerate democratic backsliding.

Keywords: Technocratic Linkage, Polarization, Georgia, Armenia, Belarus

JEL classification: D72, H11, P16, D78

The color revolutions, polarization and Russia's invasion

The color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine demonstrated that authoritarianism is no longer the sole "legitimate" form of governance in the post-Soviet region and provided the people with a democratic alternative. Russia has pushed back against Western ideologies and influence, however. In the wake of the color revolutions, Russia and its allies utilized the new civic activism to disseminate strong anti-Western propaganda and to purge its own ranks. The leadership in Armenia and Belarus chose to emulate Russia, where leaders in Georgia initially opted to double down on becoming closer with the West.

The European Commission's Platform for Research and Innovation aptly summarized the measures taken by the region's authoritarian regimes to counter the potential for more color revolutions (CORDIS 2008).⁵ From 2004, Russia, Belarus, and Armenia employed repressive measures and strengthened their 'one-man rule' systems of governance. According to various international reports, all three countries recorded a significant decline in democracy during this period. Freedom House ranked Russia, for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 2004, as a completely "not free country" (Freedom House, 2005, p. 3). Belarus, which was already rated as "not free" and "partly free" Armenia both saw their ratings on political rights decrease (Freedom House, 2005, pp. 42-70). According to the same report, the October 2004 parliamentary elections and referendum in Belarus displayed signs of massive falsification.

The ruling party used a brutal campaign against independent media, political parties and civic groups. In April 2004, Armenia suppressed peaceful civic protests. By contrast, Georgia was in the midst of its "Rose Revolution", which brought in democratic changes that became a catalyst for awakening civic activism and popular mobilization against repressive political systems throughout the region, not only in Armenia and Belarus but also in Ukraine, Russia, and Kyrgyzstan. These changes were consolidated after holding its first free and fair presidential and parliamentary elections, and the international reports that followed confirmed it by coding Georgia as an "electoral democracy" (Freedom House, 2005, pp.5; 243).

The second major event that polarized the region was Russia's full-scale irredentist war against Ukraine in 2022 (Siroky & Hale, 2017). Local regimes again faced a clear choice between democracy (the West) and authoritarianism (Russia), and as before many leaders resorted to mobilizing the regime's coercive capacity. The leader of

⁵ These include the suppression of opposing youth organizations; banning of large gatherings of protesters, especially near government buildings; demonizing of organizations funded by the West; dividing the opposition and presenting them as an aggressive minority ruled by a "foreign power"; consolidation of coercive forces, strengthening of security apparatus and involvement in the repression of protesters; establishment of "clones" (government-run organizations) that mimic existing opposition movements and aim to confuse the public by spreading the pro-government agenda; mass arrest of protest leaders; use of national populism and religious narratives in government rhetoric, ensuring public figures are on their side; establishing alternative monitoring organizations. When rigged elections became catalysts for color revolutions, and OSCE findings evidence for the opposition, Russia staffed CIS observation missions with people that would ignore even the most blatantly violations.

Belarus reacted by deciding to fully integrate the country's military and security forces with Russia. The war also marked a turning point for Armenia, which coincided with military strikes from Azerbaijan. Armenia's undemocratic, pro-Russian opposition (with other forces) used the moment to destabilize the government but, instead of folding as before, the Armenian government did not take measures to strengthen authoritarianism.

The Georgian government responded, much like Belarus had previously at this stage of polarization, by initiating the so-called "Russian law" (twice), which it adopted despite massive public opposition in the summer of 2024. This 'lawfare' process was accompanied by a brutal campaign of mass intimidation, arrests of civic activists, physical assault, and the surveillance of opposition MPs by the ruling authorities. The same authorities then began using the increased polarization to create a false dilemma - either "Ukrainization", or "stabilization" (keeping the ruling authority, the Georgian Dream, in power). Since 'stabilization' has taken the front seat, Georgia's rankings in the democracy index have deteriorated significantly (Chkhikvadze, 2024).⁶

We first outline a conceptual framework that clarifies these shifts in behavior among the ruling authorities in the region during this period of regional polarization, and then we provide an empirical assessment of its explanatory power.

Linkage and Leverage in the Post-Soviet Region

To explain international influence in various regions of the world, including in the post-Soviet space, Levitsky and Way (2010) developed a concise theoretical framework called "leverage and linkage" in their book *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*. "Leverage" signifies the dependence of "governments" on external actors (in this case, European Union/Russia), and the degree of vulnerability to their influence. "Linkage", on the contrary, describes the strength and the density of the various ties to regional actors, and is central to understanding variation in the effectiveness of international pressure (Levitsky & Way, 2010, p.43).

Although Levitsky and Way (2010) distinguish several dimensions of "leverage and linkage", due to the compact nature of this study, we only focus on first three dimensions of "linkage": "economic", "intergovernmental" and "technocratic". While economic and intergovernmental linkage are driven by structural pre-dispositions, the technocratic linkage allows us to account for the agency of domestic elites as well as for ideological diffusion channeled by leaders. Technocratic linkages can be therefore directly associated with the ruling elites' policy and their behavior. Such linkages can also help to shed light on the dynamic relationship between international actors and domestic politics. To account for alternative explanations of a more structural nature, we investigate the effect of trade linkages and alliance formation in foreign policy. We

⁶ The Democracy Index prepared by Freedom House **Georgia's Democracy Score declined from 3.07 in 2022 to 3.04** in 2023. The Democracy Index, prepared by the Economist Intelligence Unit Georgia's democracy index score, declined from 5.5 in 2018 to 5.2 in 2023.

show that more structural linkages cannot account for polarization, although they serve as excellent indicators of target state vulnerability to external pressure. Ultimately, it is the technocratic linkage that allows for elite cuing and forging divisions in societies that reflect the contested international environment.

We now describe all three linkages in detail and elaborate on their measurement. We begin in 2003, which we view as a starting date of polarization. According to Levitsky and Way the *economic linkage* is the flows of trade (2010, p.43). We therefore measure the share of exports and imports as a proportion of total trade with EU member countries and Russia since 2003. This enables us to assess whether more trade increases alignment with external actors. *Intergovernmental linkage* measures bilateral diplomatic and military ties as well as participation in Western-led alliances, treaties, and international organizations. This variable points to the country's official foreign alignments but is also related to elite foreign policy identities. We therefore also explore the official rhetoric on foreign affairs. Differences in institutional linkages and the rhetoric of elites highlight the need to account not only for structural determinants of diffusion but the ability of domestic elites to forge relationships with foreign actors.

The most important linkage we investigate is the *technocratic linkage*, which is the share of a country's elite that is educated in the West with has professional ties to Western universities or multilateral institutions. In this regard, we will look at the educational, professional and social ties between the governing elites of Armenia, Georgia and Belarus and the external actors (Levitsky & Way, 2010, p.44).⁷

"Economic linkage"

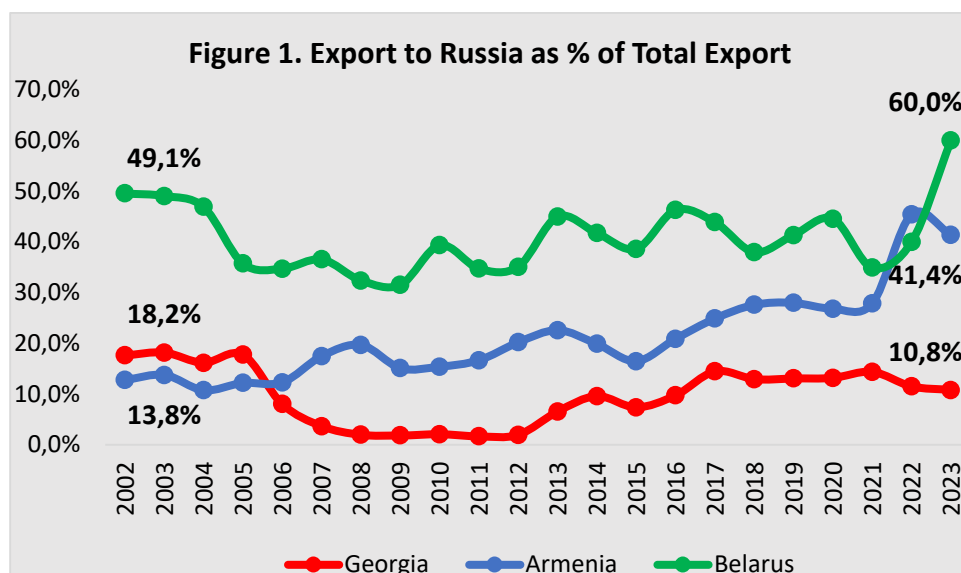
Over the past two decades, Russia's economic linkage with all three post-Soviet states has varied significantly. Belarus has had a long-term dependence on Russia; after 2022, however, its level of dependence skyrocketed. Economic linkages to EU were within 12%-20% until 2022. Then EU's linkage decreased because of the war, especially in exports, and because of the sanctions.

Armenia's dependence on Russia has been increasing since 2007 and, especially since 2022, it has increased significantly, especially in exports, because Armenia is one of the countries to bypass the sanctions by re-exporting to Russia. At the same time, its dependence on the European Union has been decreasing. In 2022-2023, exports to Russia compromised over 40% of total trade while trade with EU compromised about 11%. However, recently, Armenia halted military cooperation with Russia and initiated military training with the USA and political dialog with the EU. Georgia's dependence on Russia has decreased significantly over time. In 2003, Georgia's exports to Russia compromised 18,2% of total trade compared to 11,9% with EU. In 2006-2012, it fell

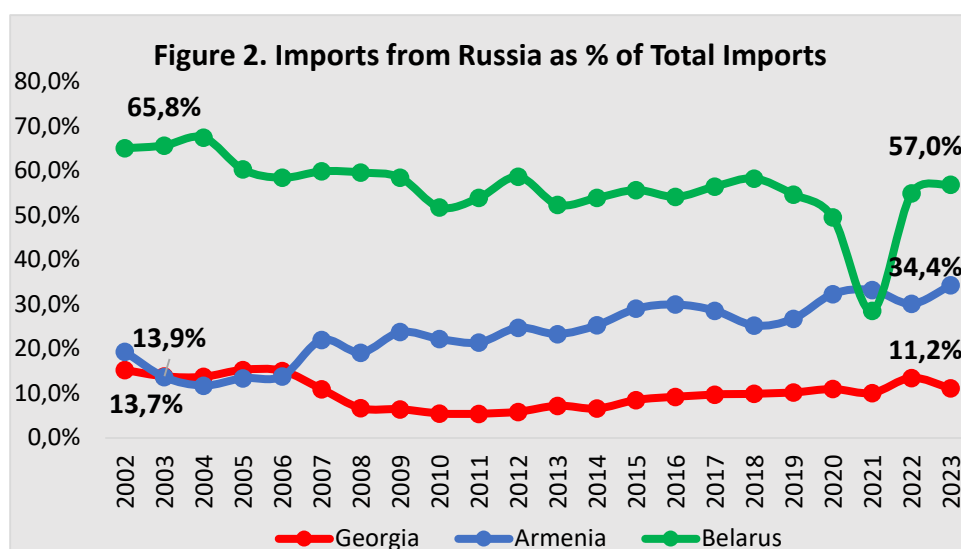
⁷ We disregard the other dimensions („social”, „information” and „civil society network”) of **linkage** identified by the authors since those are not directly related to government policy.

below 2% and then increased again, especially with imports. Georgia's trade dependence on the EU increased until 2015, but then decreased.⁸

Figures 1 to 4 show these data trends in more detail. Overall, the data suggest that economic linkages are important, but not deterministic. Countries still can break their trade linkages and re-direct the flow of exports and imports elsewhere.

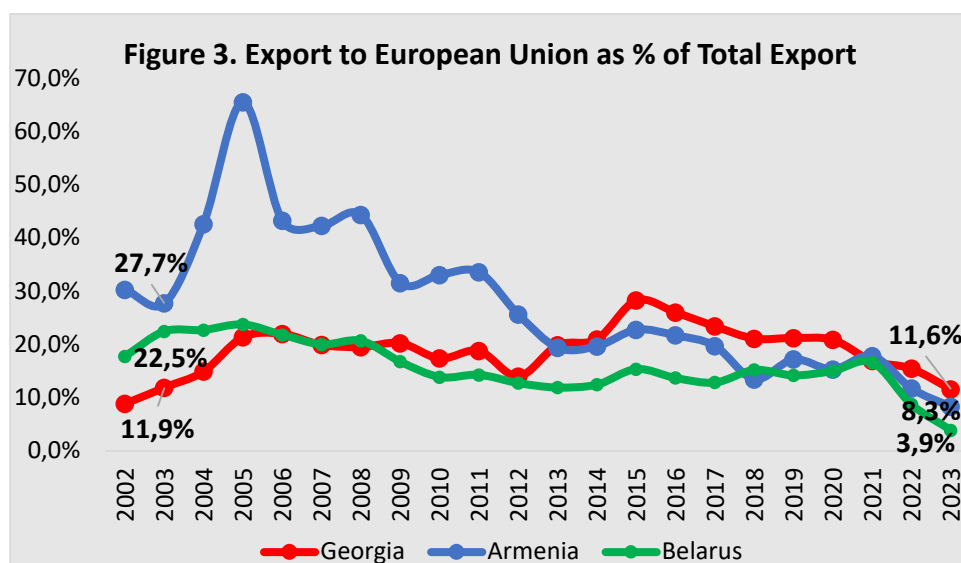


Source: National statistics offices, Eurostat, World Bank (WITS)

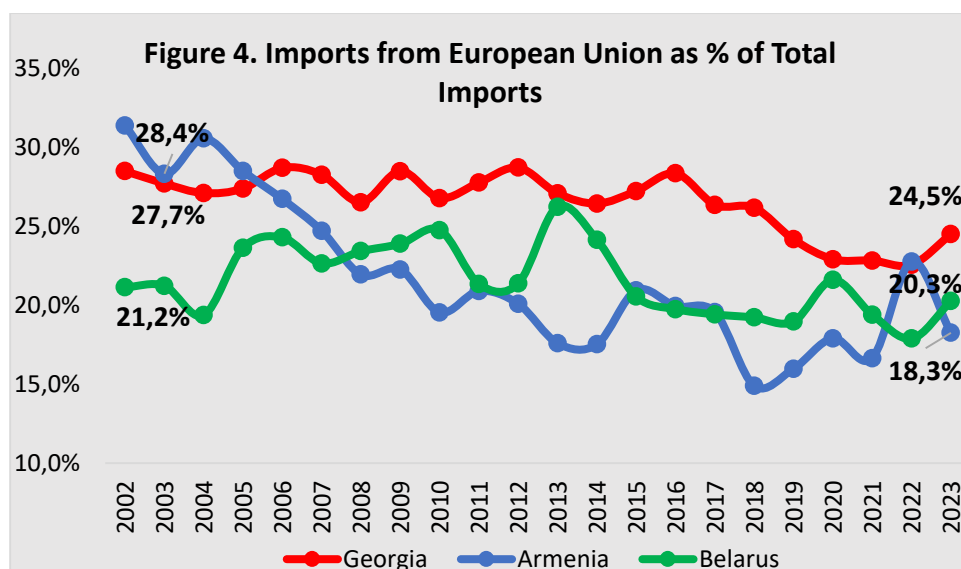


Source: National statistics offices, Eurostat, World Bank (WITS)

⁸ In 2023, imports from Europe increased significantly, but we do not know whether the increase will be maintained or not.



Source: National statistics offices, Eurostat, World Bank (WITS)



Source: National statistics offices, Eurostat, World Bank (WITS)

"Intergovernmental linkage"

"Intergovernmental linkages" are comprised of diplomatic and military ties as well as participation in Western-led alliances. While these ties are crucial, we demonstrate that official foreign policy need not be an obstacle to radically changing trajectories.

Armenia started out with strong intergovernmental linkages to Russia, and joined Russia-led political, economic and military alliances. Armenia (along with Belarus) was a founding member of the Russia-led military alliance, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Moreover, Russian 102nd military base is stationed in the Armenian city of Gyumri. Armenia is also a member of Russian political organization Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and economic organization Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).

Armenia's experience illustrates how intergovernmental linkage can be subjected to change.

During the first regional polarization in 2003, Armenia's political elites considered Russia (not the European Union and the West) to be the guarantor of Armenia's overall security and specifically the status quo in Nagorno-Karabakh. With the support of Russia, Armenian ruling class consolidated its grip on power. However, since 2018, Armenia's political elite no longer considered Russia as the guarantor of its security. Its feeling of being abandoned in clashes over Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 and in 2023 further reinforced its movement away from Russia.

Despite structural intergovernmental ties, political elites may decide to shift allegiances. The political elite's technocratic (pro-western) linkages contributed to reshaping Armenia's pro-Russian orientation. Although Armenia still maintains membership in Russian-led alliances, it refused to host military drills by the CSTO in 2023 and instead hosted US military training (Reuters 2023). In the early 2024, Armenia also refused to fund CSTO and later suspended its participation "at all levels" (Hodunova, 2024). At the same time, it started to hint that it may consider joining the EU. Armenia's parliament speaker stated that will hold a referendum "in the near future" (Barseghyan, 2024). Elites are not tethered to intergovernmental and economic linkages, but can subvert them and reorient the country's foreign alignments.

Georgia has had linkages with both Russia and the European Union. Since 2012, its policy has varied from balancing between Russia and the West to bandwagoning with the West only to adopt an explicitly pro-Russian stance in recent years (Gvalia et al., 2019). Elite decisions diverted Georgia from what official intergovernmental linkages would otherwise imply. Starting in 2003, during the first period of polarization following the colored revolutions, political elites in Georgia's ruling elite aligned with the West, even though country was officially a part of CIS.⁹ The same political elite concluded 90% negotiations on the Association Agreement and DCFTA, and initiated visa liberalization dialogue, with the EU (Chkhikvadze, 2024). Since 2008, Georgia ceased all diplomatic relations with Russia and later officially suspended its membership in CIS. In 2022, in the wake of the early stages of the war in Ukraine and large pro-EU demonstrations, Georgia's political elite governing was compelled to submit an application for EU membership, even though the elite did not appear convinced that it was the right path. Although Georgia was granted EU candidate status, this process was promptly sabotaged by the ruling elite with the implementation of anti-democratic ('foreign agent') laws and hostile rhetoric against Western partners. As a result, the EU suspended Georgia's membership application process indefinitely in June, and the USA postponed its annual military drills with Georgia, which have been held annually in Georgia since 2015 as part of a 'comprehensive review of the United States–Georgia bilateral relationship' (OC Media, 2024). The country's ruling party then suspended talks on European Union accession and refused budgetary grants until 2028. The PM accused the EU of "a cascade of insults," "blackmail[ing]" the country, and "organiz[ing] a revolution in the country (CNN, 2024). Georgia's trajectory shows that political elite

⁹ Georgia officially left the CIS in 2009.

decision-making and agency are central to understanding the effectiveness of international linkage and leverage.

Belarus has been a key ally of Russia since independence and is a core part of Russian-led alliances (e.g., CIS, CSTO, EEU and the Union State). The aim of the 'Union State' is to form a supranational union of Russia and Belarus with a common government and currency. In 2023, Belarus also joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Russia currently has two military bases and is preparing to station tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus. During both period of heightened regional polarization, the political elite in Belarus have hued closely to Russia, both in its official rhetoric and its intergovernmental linkages.

"Technocratic linkage"

The third form of linkage is technocratic. Technocracy is form of linkage devoid of ideological content and anchored in expertise (de la Torre 2013, Bustikova & Guasti 2019, Aprasidze & Siroky 2020, Bickerton & Accetti 2021). Technocratic linkage as a form of diffusion is built on the premise that elites obtain education and acquire high skills abroad that, eventually, bring competency back home. This particular linkage also presumes that, on top of administrative, managerial and technocratic expertise, elites trained in the West or East internalize those norms, which extend beyond the art of realm of governance to encompass social norms, cultural attitudes and (il)liberal value. Personal beliefs, formed during formative years while studying abroad, shape and guide the actions of the new post-communist elite regardless of the structural linkages between their respective states and the places they have studied, worked and lived.

According to the logic of "technocratic linkage", the foreign and domestic political actions of the ruling elite educated abroad are also shaped by their social beliefs and values, developed through educational and professional "connections". "Technocratic linkage" establishes the professional and educational connections of the domestic elites toward the external actor. These attitudes extend beyond acquired skills, but include the effects of exposure to the West, which fundamentally governs their views of democracy and the rule of law. According to this dimension, the behavior of internal actors is determined by the strength of and types of ties they possess with the particular external actor. This ultimately affects the quality of democracy in the country when domestic elites have acquired liberal values and govern accordingly (Lebanidze, 2020, p.37).

According to, "technocratic linkage" is defined as the share of a country's elite that is educated in the West and/or which has professional ties to Western universities or Western-led multilateral institutions. This determines the value system and standard of behavior among the domestic rulers and elites. In short, [technocratic linkage] "facilitate[s] the diffusion of ideas and norms, and...has a powerful impact on actors' interests, incentives, and capabilities" (Levitsky & Way, p.45). Examining 35 empirical cases, Levitsky and Way conclude that the lack of educational or other professional

ties among the ruling elite (President, Speaker of the Parliament and members of the Cabinet of Ministers) with the West can become an obstacle to a country's democracy ((Levitsky & Way, p.42).

The relevance of "technocratic linkage" can be seen clearly in the role elites played during the colored revolutions, notably in Georgia. Following the Rose revolution, more than half of Georgia's political elite, and later almost 80% of it, were Western-educated young politicians or technocrats who had close contacts with Western academic and political circles. By contrast, at this time, the ruling elite in Armenia and Belarus (the latter unchanged until now) was still largely composed of old Soviet-style politicians with more academic or professional contacts in Russia than in the West (Lebanidze, 2020, p.99). The 'value system' of Georgian elites formed by "technocratic ties" (Western training and education) profoundly shaped their attitudes towards democracy and the West. The elite in Armenia and Belarus largely sided with Russia because their technocratic linkages were primarily with Russia.

The second period polarization, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, has shown even more how the lack of Western training and ties influence value orientations and undermines technocratic linkages with the European Union. Following the change of government in Georgia in 2012, Bidzina Ivanishvili, a key figure in the ruling elite, maintained close professional and business ties to Russia. Through offshore entities, Ivanishvili and his associates still own dozens of Russian companies (Transparency International - Georgia', 2022). Ivanishvili also had direct educational ties with Russia, having defended his dissertation at the Labor Scientific Research Institute in Moscow (RFE/RL, 2020). This significantly shaped his pro-Russian and anti-Western value system as well as his perspective on democracy as something superfluous.

Although a significant share of state officials in Bidzina Ivanishvili's initial team (President, Prime Minister, Speaker of the Parliament, his deputy and other ministers and MPs) were educated in the West, he has gradually replaced them with loyalists. From 2012-2016, Ivanishvili replaced ministers and their deputies from the pro-European Republican and Free Democrats parties in his coalition. From 2016-2020, he replaced the Harvard educated vice-speaker, Tamar Chugoshvili, and five other MPs. Finally, in 2023, he replaced the Chairman of the Parliament, educated at the University of Nottingham, Kakha Kuchava, and five further deputies. Meanwhile, the pro-EU president, educated in France and the USA, Salome Zurbishvili, has been completely demonized (Kapanadze, 2024). After eliminating elites with Western technocratic linkages, Georgia exhibited a markedly different trajectory and reoriented itself toward Russia.

Armenia also demonstrated a radically different approach in the second period of polarization. Pashinyan's government significantly increased the appointment of individuals with professional ties to the West, or those who boasted experience working in Western non-governmental organizations. Armenia's elite deliberately sought to strength technocratic linkages with the West and to realign itself internationally away from Russia. This shift was also due to Russia's "abandonment" of Armenia in the war with Azerbaijan.

In sum, technocratic linkages shed new light on change and continuity in the pro-Russia and pro-West orientations of Armenia, Georgia and Belarus. In the next section, we provide with some prominent examples of authoritarian practices and democratic backsliding in the selected countries, which were facilitated by the lack of technocratic linkages and were supported directly by Russia.

Armenia

Armenia's ruling elite, backed by Russia, consolidated its authority during the first period of polarization. In order to marginalize and suppress the popular protests that started after the presidential and parliamentary elections in Armenia in 2003, which were deemed fraudulent, the government used its security apparatus and propaganda to maintain the narrative that "foreign (Western) forces", along with local NGOs and opposition parties, attempted a coup. The Armenian government directly accused the West of trying to overthrow the national government. During this time, the opposition organized months of peaceful street protests, with thousands of citizens demanding a referendum to determine public confidence in President Kocharyan (NYT, 2004). The opposition of Armenia hoped that the ruling authority would resign in a civilized way. Despite mass protests that started in April and continued until June, Armenia's opposition failed to organize an Armenian "color revolution". According to Kocharyan, "any attempt to repeat the Georgian revolution in Armenia was doomed to failure, as he [controlled] a stronger security apparatus and [had] a better economic situation than his ousted Georgian counterpart, Eduard Shevardnadze" (RFE/RL, 2004 as cited in Lebanidze, 2020). The Kocharyan government instrumentalized Armenia's fragile security environment to shift the population's focus from the rigged elections.

The process of protecting Nagorno-Karabakh was associated with Russia and Kocharyan, who was a former 'president' of Nagorno-Karabakh. If opposition mobilization posed a threat to Kocharyan's government stability, it would disrupt Armenia's favorable status quo in Nagorno-Karabakh. Under these circumstances, the "stability" established by Kocharyan was framed as exceptionally beneficial, and the public protests as being in the interest of "foreign agents". This strategy proved effective, as the public refrained from exerting strong pressure on the Armenian authorities, fearing it might weaken their government's position in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict amid continued pressure from Azerbaijan (Lebanidze, 2020, p.144).¹⁰

Armenian government propaganda, again with political support from Russia, repeated a similar narrative during the 2008 post-election street protests, which were brutally suppressed, and resulted in the loss of life for 10 people. Mass public protests were again sparked by the formal transfer of power from Kocharyan to the Russian-backed candidate, former Defense Minister Serzh Sargsyan, following the presidential elections. Propaganda framed Armenia's popular protests as a decisive battle between "patriots" (Russian-backed government forces) and "foreign agents" (Western-led

¹⁰ In parallel, post-election mass protests were mounting in Ukraine. Kocharyan was one of the first to follow in Russia's footsteps by recognizing the victory of Yanukovich, the Kremlin-backed presidential candidate, in the second round of the presidential elections in Ukraine in 2004. Nonetheless, the results of which were later annulled by the successful color revolution.

protests). According to Hrant Markarian, a senior official of the pro-government ARF party, the opposition mobilization was part of a "foreign conspiracy" that sought to stage a "pro-Western revolution" in Armenia. He claimed that "unspecified external forces are trying to weaken the country", offering "fertile ground for external intervention"(Lebanidze, 2020, pp. 260-261). Propaganda portrayed the West as the enemy, attempting to undermine Armenian stability, especially considering the potential for an Azerbaijan offensive. This mass protest was also successfully marginalized and suppressed using the same methods.

After two terms of presidency, Putin's ally, Serzh Sargsyan returned for a third term in the position of Prime Minister. This was followed by a successful "Velvet Revolution" in 2018, during which Russia stepped aside. Russian analysts explained the "non-interference" of the West in this process thus: "This is not a color revolution," said Fedor Lukyanov, editor of the magazine *Russia in Global Affairs*. "Everyone understands that the roots of this crisis in Armenia are domestic - unlike several previous cases in the post-Soviet space, where the international presence was quite clear." (Demytrie, 2018).

Russia recognized that the Republican Party of Kocharyan and Sargsyan, which had ruled Armenia from 1997-2018, had completely lost its legitimacy. Even if Pashinyan's pro-democracy movement were to win, the country's economic and military dependence on Moscow would not change. In 2020, Russia deepened Armenia's dependence by mediating a ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan and deploying a military unit to Nagorno-Karabakh. This conflict once again demonstrated the limited influence of the West. However, the full-scale war in Ukraine ultimately disrupted Armenia's fragile ceasefire, leading to Armenia's full capitulation to Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023.

The loss of Nagorno-Karabakh undermined Russia's credibility as a patron. Due to this humiliating loss, even today, the Armenian government is still fighting for its political survival. However, it no longer relies on Russia. Destabilization caused by the Nagorno-Karabakh war led to frequent anti-government protests across the country in 2022 and 2023 and to a strong re-orientation to the West (Freedom House 2023). The protests were organized by pro-Russian forces, who demanded the resignation of Prime Minister Pashinyan in order to disrupt the peace deal with Azerbaijan. Police used force against protesters on several occasions (Freedom House 2024). Russian government-controlled media and officials did not hide that they were supporting anti-Pashinyan and anti-government voices (TACC, 2024).

Pashinyan's anti-Russian rhetoric, which had been present before he came to power, intensified with Russia's perceived "abandonment" during the conflict with Azerbaijan. He was thus emboldened to make ever stronger claims against Russia and to seek more enduring partnerships with the West, including in the security sector. According to a recent survey, 40% of Armenians named Russia as the third most dangerous country threatening Armenia, after Azerbaijan (86%) and Turkey (82%) (factor, 2024). From the early years of Pashinyan's rule, the Kremlin was not hesitant to deliver "unpleasant remarks" to Pashinyan's young administration on their desire to cooperate closely with the West. Not only did Russia criticize Armenia for warming up to the US,

it actively interfered in Armenia's internal affairs (Batashvili, 2019). Armenia was able to deepen its cooperation with the West because it possessed credible partners due to the "technocratic linkage" of the current ruling elite with Western institutions and organizations. This is in stark contrast with pro-Russian technocratic linkages cultivated during the previous government.

Belarus

President Aleksandr Lukashenko utilized the regional polarization caused by both the color revolutions and Russia's attack on Ukraine to further consolidate his authoritarian rule. The first major wave of mass repression by the regime followed the October 2004 legislative elections and the national referendum, which abolished the two-term limit of the presidency given by the Constitution. The elections were widely regarded as having been rigged.¹¹ No opposition candidates secured parliamentary mandates, and prominent members of the opposition (e.g., Mikhail Merinich, Valery Levanevsky, and Alexander Vasiliev) were sentenced to several years in prison.

There were widespread arrests of demonstrators, including the imprisonment of pregnant activist Aksana Novikova, who was sentenced to two and a half years for "slandering the President of Belarus" through anti-government leaflets that she distributed. The media were also subjected to strict state control. In 2004, journalist Veronika Cherkasova, of the opposition newspaper "Solidarnast", was killed. The courts also found reasons to temporarily shut down several civil organizations and independent media outlets. Similarly, universities also came under the total control of the state (Freedom House, 2005, pp.70-71). In 2004, the higher education course, Foundations of Ideology, based on Lukashenko's "ideas," became mandatory for students at all colleges and universities in Belarus.

From 2004 onward, the EU imposed sanctions on Belarussian officials, which contributed further to the consolidation of the ruling regime Hughes (Hubbard & Reed, 2020). Since 2006, sanctions have also been imposed on the President of Belarus, following his controversial third-term election. The subsequent peaceful demonstrations were violently suppressed. As of 2024, a total of 233 individuals and 37 organizations in Belarus are under sanction by the EU (European council 2024).

Russia's support was crucial at all stages of internal repression and foreign sanctions. Russian gas and oil subsidies, loans, and the Russian market, all helped the Belarusian authoritarian regime to survive and to maintain economic stability. Russia's backing for Lukashenko was evident not only in economic and political terms, but also through the direct involvement of Russian security special services in arresting an

¹¹ According to the exit poll conducted by Gallup Organization/Baltic Surveys, only 48.4% of voters in the country supported changing the presidential term. According to the results of the government, it was more than 77%. Thus, according to the data of an independent poll, the population refused to include such an amendment in the Constitution of Belarus at the referendum. Freedomhouse.org. 2005. Freedom in the World—2005 Survey. p.72. Available at: https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/Freedom_in_the_World_2005_complete_book.pdf

unprecedented number of peaceful demonstrators that were protesting his election for a sixth term (RFE/RL 2024). According to Pavel Slunkin, a Belarusian diplomat and political analyst, "It was an open threat [from Russia]: if the situation gets out of control, if the protests succeed, we will invade Belarus" (RFE/RL 2024). Between August and November 2020, 35,000 protesters were arrested in Belarus.

The heightened polarization after Russia's attack on Ukraine allowed Lukashenko to consolidate his power even more. He promoted the belief that only he could guarantee peace in Belarus, and that there would be no war if he remained in power. Lukashenko began to initiate institutional changes. The outcome of the referendum held on February 27, 2022, allowing Lukashenko to stay in power until 2035. With the same constitutional amendments, a new governing body, the "Belarusian People's Assembly" was created. It was given extensive executive and legislative powers, and is seen as a means of consolidating Lukashenko's control and influence beyond 2035 (Freedom House 2024). This was followed by anti-government demonstrations, which were also brutally suppressed, resulting in about 800 people being arrested.

The next wave of repression against the opposition and independent journalists is also related to the post-war period in Ukraine. The already displaced members of the coordination council, a civil society group formed in 2020, were tried *in absentia*. At the time, the purpose of the council was to organize a peaceful protest of the 2020 election results and offer a peaceful response to the state's post-election violence. In March 2023, opposition presidential candidate, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, was sentenced to 15 years in prison *in absentia*. In September of the same year, her travel documents were revoked by presidential decree. Many other Belarusians residing abroad are no longer able to visit consular offices to renew or extend their passports.

Throughout 2023, 33 media outlets were declared "extremist" and 12 were declared "terrorist". In addition to the editors and journalists of these outlets, they were also listed as extremists, effectively preventing public outcry in support of their release. Even citizens who had donated to organizations "prohibited" by the state could not evade the long arm of the government. In August 2023, Lukashenko signed a decree that granted state security agencies complete access to monitor these unauthorized payments. Between December 2022 and January 2023, trade unions that organized labor strikes in protest of the 2020 rigged elections faced severe repression. Alongside the arrest of union leaders, hundreds of workers were detained; and some were sent to mental institutions, while others received long prison sentences. Even lawyers who defended these political prisoners were arrested or prohibited from practicing law. As of December 2023, reports indicate that 960 civil organizations have been forced to close. The government justified these repressions and the subsequent consolidation of power by citing the threat from hostile Western countries which were "plotting against sovereign Belarus." In response to these "threats", authorities began work on a draft law on the prohibition of "LGBTQ+ propaganda", and on criminalizing LGBTQ+ people, echoing similar legislation in Russia.

Despite the government propaganda asserting that Lukashenko is a guarantor of peace, Belarus is actively engaged in the war against Ukraine. Russia has launched

ballistic missiles and transported Russian military personnel and military equipment from the territory of Belarus. Further, Belarus provides the Russian military machine with refueling points and storage of weapons and military equipment (European Council 2024). In addition, according to a December 2023 report by the Yale Humanities Research Laboratory, between February 2022 and the end of October 2023, more than 2,400 Ukrainian children between the ages of 6 and 17 were housed in 13 state-controlled institutions in Belarus (Freedom House, 2024).

Since gaining independence, Belarus has not had any major state officials with educational or ideological ties to Western nations. The strong "technocratic linkage" between Belarus's ruling elite and Russia has significantly contributed to the absence of democracy in the country and the breakdown of political dialogue with the West (Lebanidze, 2020, p.100).

Georgia

The Rose Revolution triggered polarization. During the first wave of polarization, Georgia found itself on the Western side (Imedashvili & Siroky, 2023). This was related to the closeness of "technocratic ties" of its ruling elite with the West. The Georgian 2003 Rose Revolution, and numerous attempts at replication of it (the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2005, the Jeans Revolution in Belarus in 2006, and post-election mass protests in Armenia in 2004) were what led to the first major polarization in the region. Under Saakashvili, even though authoritarian tendencies prevailed, the EU and the US were able to persuade the incumbent regime to open up the political system and allow for a transition of power through elections (Lebanidze, 2020, p.100).

Following the peaceful transfer of power in 2012, Georgia's "technocratic linkage" with the West was replaced with pro-Russia leaders. Ivanishvili, the patron of Georgia's new ruling elite, had professional and societal ties to Russia. Investigative journalists have alleged he owns unreported business and real estate in Russia (OCCRP, 2024). Although an important share of state officials have had educational ties with the West (the current Prime Minister, Irakli Kobakhidze and Speaker of Parliament Shalva Papuashvili), they have either become executors of their patron's will or have "resigned" (as seen in the cases of Speaker of Parliament Kakha Kuchava in 2021, First Vice-Speaker of Parliament Tamar Chugoshvili in 2019, and several MPs and ministers and deputy ministers [2016-2023]). The only high level pro-EU official figure left is President Salome Zourabichvili, whom the ruling party tried to impeach for her unauthorized working visits to Europe to lobby for Georgia's EU candidacy in 2023 (Parulava, 2023).

Georgia has reached a critical juncture. The re-orientation of technocratic linkages facilitated and consolidated the process of turning away from the West towards Putin's Russia. Although the authoritarian character of Georgia's government was noticeable even before Ivanishvili, the new government dramatically increased its control over state institutions and coordinated campaigns to marginalize critical

media, opposition and civil society. The Georgian government painted the West as the "icon of the enemy", and accused it of trying to destabilize the country by interfering in its internal affairs. The government's rhetoric became fully antagonistic with regular attacks against Western politicians and ambassadors.

The government of Georgia also instrumentalized the fragile security of the country by weaponizing the fear of (renewed) war. It accused a large part of the opposition of trying to drag the country into the war and presented itself as the only guarantor of peace (Kandelaki, 2024). Georgian authorities also increased the scale of arrests, court fines, persecutions and intimidation of peaceful demonstrators.¹² In addition, the government began using terminology favored by Putin to discredit opponents. Phrases like "grant eaters", "puppets of the West" (used during the color revolutions), "liberal-fascism," and "Global War Party" (introduced after the invasion of Ukraine) have all been adopted by Georgia's ruling party to shape public perception and undermine dissent. (Imedashvili, 2022). The Georgian government has also claimed that the US government intends to overthrow its administration using the US Agency for International Development (USAID) (Civil.Ge, 2023).

In October 2023, the State Security Service of Georgia (known as SUSI in Georgian) interviewed NGO employees who had participated in USAID training. The investigation suggested a connection between the training and an alleged coup plot orchestrated by the US government. The Russian analogy is interesting in this context. Following the color revolutions, USAID-Russia faced a number of baseless accusations. In 2006, the Russian Duma accused the US of interfering in Russia's domestic affairs by supporting NGOs, and it called on the Foreign Ministry to take "urgent measures" to protect the country's sovereignty (Ambrosio, 2009). Over two decades, USAID's mission in Russia provided nearly \$3 billion in aid to organizations aimed at "social and economic development". The organization ultimately had to leave Russia in 2012 (Rojansky, 2012).

The government of Georgia also famously adopted the so-called "Russian law" and the homophobic anti- LGBTQ+ legislative package. During discussion of the anti- LGBTQ+ legislative package, the representatives of the ruling party of Georgia accused the West of being involved in Georgia's gay propaganda, and suggested the law was necessary to protect Georgian traditions (Kapanadze, 2024). The actions of the Georgian government have Russia's full political backing. Russian propaganda has claimed that the US was planning a coup to bring its proxies to Georgia. To circumvent this, Sergei Karnaukhov, a former employee of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs, and currently a co-anchor of the propaganda channel Soloviev Live, directly appealed to the Georgian authorities to officially apply for military-technical assistance to the President of the Russian Federation, telling them that such help would be found (Netgazeti, 2024). Russia also prizes the acts of the Georgian government in "strengthening [its] sovereignty", which, according to Kremlin ideologue Aleksandr Dugin, "means liberation from the West, not from us".

¹² During the second initiation of the Russian law, protestors were fined up to 150,000 GEL. Voice of America. 2024. 'Are Georgia's law enforcement agencies investigating violence against activists?' Available at: <https://fb.watch/tjQ-X1UGDv/>

Georgia's society is largely pro-European, with a long history of free civil society, academia and part of the media. Their significant contributions to building a pro-European Georgia offers hope that this democratic backsliding is temporary. Georgia's 2024 parliamentary elections on October 26th were seen as a pivotal referendum on the choice between a Western pro-EU course for the country, and a pro-Russia position. The ruling party, Georgian Dream, manipulated the process in the style of other authoritarian regimes in the region. At the time of writing, the local monitoring organizations, the President of Georgia, and the opposition parties are refusing to recognize the results. The President publicly declared that the country had fallen victim to a Russian 'special operation'. In response, U.S. Helsinki Commission Chairman Rep. Joe Wilson called on the U.S. State Department to investigate potential Russian interference in the electoral process (CSCE, 2024). The European parliament denounced the outcome of the recent parliamentary elections in Georgia and called for a new election within a year. It is yet to be seen whether mass protests will change the current course of Georgia and if pro-Western technocratic linkages will facilitate a return to Georgia's previous destination as a future member of the EU.

Conclusion

Technocratic linkages have a significant influence on why countries in the post-Soviet region have oscilated between the European Union and Russia since 2003. The colored revolutions and the full scale invasion of Ukraine led to heightened polarization and created fertile ground for autocrats to consolidate their power. These leaders demonized the West, suppressed technocratic linkages built up the European Union, dislodged elites educated in the West and utilized security instruments to strengthen autocratic systems of governance, aided by direct political-diplomatic support from Russia. Structural factors such as economic and intergovernmental linkages may have little or no influence on radically reorienting country's trajectory. Georgia and Armenia exemplify this point well.

In Belarus, Lukashenko is totally reliant on Russia to hold on to his power. However, even though economic linkages to EU were more that 20% until 2022 (reaching maximum 23,8% in 2005), such structural factors were not an obstacle for the ruling elite to consolidate power.

In Armenia, the first stage of regional polarization ended with the consolidation of authoritarianism, despite the fact economic linkage to EU was high. In 2003, economic linkages were 27,7% (compared 13,8% with Russia), increasing to 42,6% in 2004 (vs. 10,8% with Russia), and skyrocketed to 65,5% in 2005 (vs. 12,2% with Russia). The second period of polarization saw a political turn toward the West, despite the fact that economic linkage of Armenia to EU was low but was high with Russia compared to previous years. Exports to EU were 11,7% (vs. 45,4% with Russia) in 2022 and 8,3% (vs. 41,4% with Russia) in 2023. Intergovernmental linkage remained much the same when the ruling elite began to engage in anti-Russian rhetoric and hinted at closer ties with the West.

Georgia initially served as a catalyst for democratic processes during its peaceful revolution, despite close economic and intergovernmental ties with Russia. Georgia's exports to Russia amounted to 18,2% and to EU 11,9% in 2003; Georgia was a member of Russian-led CIS when its elite started to pursue a more pro-EU foreign policy. Nonetheless, its government has since sought to secure its power using authoritarian methods. Despite the fact that Georgia has EU candidate status and a strategic partnership with USA, and in 2022 Georgia's exports to Russia amounted to 11,5% (vs 15,5% with EU), the elite has paid closer attention to Moscow's interests than it did previously.

To understand this change and continuity, we applied Levistky and Way's conceptual framework "leverages and linkages", focusing specifically on the role of "technocratic linkages". As a result, we conjectured that elite connections through professional, educational and social networks with external actors (the West or Russia) have significantly influenced their preferred ideological and international alignments.

When ties to Russia are weak (as in the case of Georgia in 2003-2012, and Armenia in 2018-2024), the country tends to align more closely with the West, and their internal environment becomes more openly democratic. Conversely, when ties with Russia are closer (as in Georgia in 2012-2024, and Belarus in 2004-2024), countries choose authoritarianism and isolation from the West under the guise of "stability". However, the flexibility and agency associated with technocratic linkages suggest that the cycle can be broken if and when leaders decide to re-orient and empower elites educated and trained in the West.

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