The contemporary authoritarianism in the post-Soviet space (case study of Belarus and Georgia under Saakashvili rule)

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Abstract

The paper describes the very essential dilemma of democracy building in the post-Soviet area: the role of elites and popular support in the absence of institutional constraints on executive power; these tools can be used both in favor of democracy building and against it, and ultimately for the sake of regime to maintain its power. Many post-Soviet incumbents, among them Saakashvili and Lukashenko, managed to become authoritarian rulers because, and not on the contrary of mass support. Divide and rule strategy helped them to overcome the resistance of plural elites and to suppress them in the name of modernization, good governance and stability. In particular, it shows how the constraints on power can be used by the newly elected rulers against each other and how their removal leads to power consolidation and concentration in one hand. From this perspective comparing Saakashvili and Lukashenko makes sense and reveals the shallowness of democratization approaches and rhetoric, in which these two leaders are always considered to be at the different poles of democracy building. In the meantime, it focuses on the role of society and the phenomenon of a "good" autocrat who at the early stage can be useful for the country modernisation and then drive to the authoritarian rule, thus retaining power by all available means. The research also discusses the role of external powers in the observed processes and particularly Russia as sponsor and promoter of autocratic regimes in the neighbourhood.

Keywords: hybrid regimes, democracy backsliding, elites, society, good governance, authoritarian rule, authoritarian sponsorship

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Introduction

The characteristics of the post-soviet regimes and the problems of democratization in the region are well-described[1]. Literature pays particular attention to the domestic and external conditions to induce democratization or study (competitive) authoritarian regimes and the characteristics of the regimes[2], role of elites[3], civil society and external actors, contentious politics[4] and structural factors[5]. Policy experts and scholars discuss, which factors are more important and what is lacking for successful reforms. However, despite numerous attempts to induce democratic reforms from within and abroad the regimes continue to oscillate between competitive authoritarianism and autocracy[6] with a growing tendency towards authoritarianism in 2010s.

This article aims to contribute to studying failures of democratization and autocratic consolidation[7] and in particular why and under what conditions some newly elected leaders in competitive weakly institutionalized regimes successfully consolidate their power. To do that we particularly focus on the role of society and the relationship between society and newly elected leaders. This article specifically focuses on the phenomenon of the emergence of "efficient" patronal regimes in the post-soviet space to better understand how in a "pro-democratization" environment, the new regime is able to effectively undermine the existing constraints on its rule and effectively pursue a "power maximization" agenda. Finally, to this effect, capacity building of state institutions and good governance, which is at the core of the Western democratization policies, is a tool of power consolidation not merely as rent in hands of the government, but also as a way to secure societal support.

Georgia is a particular case in mind. Once a role model of democratization in the post-soviet region, praised for its market economy, security and anti-corruption reforms, Georgia was long considered to be one of the potential success stories. It had necessary pre-conditions for democratization as identified in the studies[8]. There were necessary constraints to prevent authoritarian backsliding: the dominant pro-Western ideology promoted by Saakashvili, necessary external support provided by the US and EU, sufficient leverage and linkage, the consensus among the elites upon the regime change, which rallied behind Saakashvili and the overwhelming societal support for the reforms and the new regime. Nevertheless, by the time Saakashvili's ruling United National Movement (UNM) quite unexpectedly lost parliamentary elections in 2012, Georgia at the very best was described by scholars as a hybrid regime with crony capitalism, undermined media freedom, harassed and intimidated opposition as well as the controlled judiciary and law enforcement agencies[9].

To better understand this puzzling trajectory, this work analyses the Saakashvili policies at the backdrop of Lukashenko's power-consolidating steps taken in Belarus in the 1990s. This work attempts to draw parallels between the two regimes in their pursuit of consolidating power. Such comparison might be considered provocative, given that Lukashenko until recent events was widely perceived as the "last dictator of Europe" unlike Saakashvili's Georgia, once famously described as the "great reformer" and "beacon of democracy". Moreover, today in political and media circles, Lukashenko and Saakashvili models are set against each other as role models for development.

To illustrate the puzzling failure of democratization of Georgia under Saakashvili rule, the central part of the work highlights the phenomenon of the rise of the "good autocrat", how in a weakly institutionalised state the newly elected incumbent uses encompassing policies to "buy" societal support against the elites in attempts to overcome the latter's opposition to the power consolidation.

As the starting point of the analysis, this work borrows a definition of the post-soviet rulers as "power-maximizers"[10] and combines it with a model for personal rule and a divide-and-rule strategy[11]. In a state of weak formal institutions, and in presence of informal rules that prompt to compete for more power, the rulers are expected to pursue the power maximizing policies. To effectively do that, the incumbent needs to overcome the existing constraints, which requires gradually co-opt and coerce different groups of elites and society and play against each other the elites and society.

In this regard, we focus on the role of society and the ability of the incumbent to win its support and utilise it at an early stage against the elites as vital preconditions for power mobilization. While many studies highlight the importance of interplay between incumbent and opposition or between elite groups, the focus on society is mostly restrained to its role in protests, elections and regime change. The role of society in overthrowing the incumbent regime is crucial. As the literature on regime change shows, the coalition of opposition and moderate elements of incumbent elites can overthrow the competitive authoritarian regime during the elections[12]. The examples of Colour Revolutions and the Arab Spring are a perfect illustration. However, citizens, who took to the streets to protest the electoral fraud for a better life, prosperity, against the corrupt and brutal regime and for the European future – which often represents these all – can be equally used to the opposite end – to consolidate power.

To impose his/her personalized regime and overcome the resistance of other interest groups, the new ruler must enlist the early support of the population and create a coalition against the opposing elites – the "divide-and-rule" strategy[13]. To accomplish that the autocrat needs to address the key societal aspirations, such as in the cases of Belarus and Georgia to offer the society elements of good governance and an efficient provision of most required growth-promoting public goods (anti-corruption, order and when possible socio-economic transfers) in combination with the continued distribution of patronage to regime's supporters. Moreover, originally the ruler establishes a direct connection to the people contrapositioning himself against the elites and at times even his own regime.

In this regard, we argue that what unites the evolution of Lukashenko and Saakashvili regimes is their effective use of patronal and encompassing policies at the initial stages of the regime consolidation – such as anti-corruption policies or police reforms, to rally popular support, which is used against a part of the elite, while maintaining the patronal nature of the regimes.

The support from the society is crucial to effectively apply a divide and rule strategy to weaken uncontrolled institutions and bring the opposing elite groups down. Upon the defeat of the rival groups and the removal of potential challengers, the power maximization intensifies by the strengthening of formally and informally controlled institutions and the creation of a loyal and dependent bureaucracy (sometimes in the name of bureaucratic revolution) and business community. At this stage, the societal constraint is weakened by the absence of potential allies among the elites and the continued provision of selected public goods. Finally, the Western support assisted Saakashvili's rule consolidation by helping the capacity-building and institution-strengthening of controlled law enforcement agencies and civil society. This role in the regime's trajectory can point at potential hazards of state-oriented assistance in the pro-Western hybrid regimes.

The research is built around the following questions: What are the causes of continuing authoritarian rule in the post-Soviet space? What unites the leaders of the post-Soviet countries particularly standing at different poles of democratic development? What is the role of external constraint in the democratic backsliding process?

The logic of power in the post-Soviet space

What can explain the regime trajectories in the post-soviet space and why some of the regimes effectively move in an autocratic direction? To explain that in the case of Georgia, we combine two ideas: first, that in a competitive environment the ruler's ambition to overcome constraints relies on his ability to efficiently apply the rule and divide strategy, second, that to win the overwhelming support of the society, he should initially succeed in providing some encompassing policies.

Obtaining, consolidating and preserving power is at the centre of politics, yet it is particularly evident in weakly institutionalized post-soviet space, where the institutional environment and overall weak constraints on the ruler is particularly conducive for the power-maximizing rulers. The patronal character of the societies[14], dominant informal norms and practices[15] accommodate power-maximizing behaviour of the rulers opening the path for the power consolidating policies by the new regime[16] and attempts to get control of the existing rents and to undermine the rival political and economic groups. Patronalism, which is described as "a social equilibrium in which individuals organize their political and economic pursuits primarily around the personalized exchange of concrete rewards and punishments, and not primarily around abstract, impersonal principles such as ideological belief or categorizations that include many people one has not actually met in person"[17], in the context of post-soviet regime undermines the formal institutions and primarily cultivates clientelism. Weak institutions presuppose a lack of political and economic rights by domestic actors and a possibility to overcome any formal constraints by informal practices[18], which are maintained by the patronal character of the regimes.

As a result, in most cases, a new ruler creates his own network or clan based on a strong connection between its members to effectively extract rents and distribute them among the members of the group and its primary clients. That mechanism allows the ruler to pursue dominant power politics[19]. In Belarus, this network originally included the people from the administrative units in the Mahilou region; in Moldova they represented the Vlad Plahotniuc clan; in Ukraine, the discussion about Yanukovych "family" was substituted by the discussion about Poroshenko's clan, etc.

Taking rents under control and distributing them among parts of the elite and society helps to maintain power and competitive edge over the opponents, but does not allow building a full monopoly on power. In a similar way, the societies are often deeply divided along ethnic, linguistic, religious and geopolitical lines in most of the post-soviet space, which creates significant hurdles for their mobilization and increasing the pluralism in the political system. As a result, in such situations we observe the oscillations of the competitive authoritarian regimes, where in the presence of formal democratic institutions as the principal means of obtaining and exercising political authority[20], incumbents usually skilfully use their competitive advantage over political opponents[21].

In presence of some pluralism/competition and availability of rents, few clans/financial-industrial groups can emerge, which naturally maintains the competitiveness among the elites within the system and constraining the formation of strong personal rule. In cases where some of these constraints are present, as it is observed in a variety of outcomes, the incumbent is not able to achieve this aim as we observed in cases of Kuchma, Yanukovych or Voronin. Similarly, the presence of all of these factors may facilitate the process of democratization.

In the absence or in the case of well-developed democratic institutions, the outcome of power maximization attempts depends on the ability of the ruler to undermine any of the existing structural and agency constraints; here we can mention a few – divided elites, society, international influence and ideology[22]. First, divided elites are one of the most emphasized constraints on power-maximization since strong elite opposition requires the ruler to make both political and economic concessions[23]. Second, existing opposition from the society, due to a class struggle or the development of mass values and norms conducive to democratic institutions is another factor.[24] International influence can play a positive role in democratization and prevent power monopolization through mechanisms of external leverage and linkage[25]. This outcome is shown in particular by the literature on the EU Enlargement. Finally, as Gel'man illustrates in the example of Russia, occasionally ideology can play a democratizing role by "sending wrong signals to an authoritarian ruler".

How can be explained the success of the power-maximization policies, if necessary constraints are in place? We primarily argue that the autocrats may succeed when they are able to use the constraints against each other[26]. To do that, first, they primarily need to overcome the opposition from other clans/elite groups. To achieve that, the ruler requires the support of the groups of the society, which are parts of the patronal networks of other clans or belong to different ideological, ethnic or identity groups. Hence, ruler shall seek their support by meeting their demands or aspirations by socio-economic improvements such as introducing elements of good governance.

The focus on overcoming the opposition from the competitive elite groups is a paramount task. The patronal system, which is reinforced by weak institutions, presupposes the presence of the rival groups and patron-client networks and their competition for controlling state institutions and division of rents between them. Such a situation usually leads to the eruption of conflict between the elite groups and eventually between the ruler and the elites and potential attempts to undermine and oust the incumbent – even through electoral revolutions. In case the ruler loses and regime change occurs, we return to the point the united broad elite coalition comes to power and forms the coalition government (Tymoshenko-Yuschenko, Poroshenko-Yatsenjuk, Filat-Plahotniuk, Saakashvili-Zhvania-Burdzhanadze, the Georgian Dream coalition (GD), etc.). In this regard, the survival of the regime or its power consolidation depends on the ability to undermine other elite groups. To that end, rallying societal support around a new ruler becomes crucial.

With a lack of democratic traditions and political culture remaining underdeveloped, post-soviet society is particularly prone to possible manipulations. Regimes can influence society through ideology or manipulation of dominant attitudes. First, it is supported by the previous autocratic legacies and norms, which continue to affect new regime experience and the society in general[27]. Second, political socialization literature points to the crucial role of formative years for political attitudes, in particular the time of adolescence, when political attitudes and preferences are formed. Thus, if during Saakashvili rule older generation was driven by their socio-economic well-being, younger generations partially formed under Western influence, were driven by a simple version of Western promoted liberalism in form of market reforms and free elections.

As a result, to win societal support from different social groups, the new ruler has to satisfy current societal aspirations – for instance, by producing elements of efficient bureaucracy, good governance, social protection or fighting corruption, which are often also required by the external donors as a necessary step on the path to democracy. This support in turn is used against the opposing elites, which are easily prosecuted under slogans of fighting for justice or against corruption. The launched political and economic reforms help to weaken the state institutions that are controlled by or support the rival groups.

If the autocrat succeeds during this stage and overcomes the elite opposition, he may start to build personalized institutions and co-opts the bureaucracy turning it into an effective instrument of his policies. The ruler will continue to provide some public goods, order and pursue some liberal economic agenda to spur growth in the short term and gather more revenue later[28].

The rise of a "good" autocrat.

By 2004, the political environment was considered to be the conducive pre-conditions for change. On 25 January 2004, during his inaugural speech, President Saakashvili promised to build democracy stating that Georgia should serve as a shining example for democracy building and when all members of society are equal before the law and their rights are fully respected.

Yet, Saakashvili successfully used the state-building incentives and public good provision to effectively build up his personal authority. Only a last moment *force majeure* situation, caused by the release of prison footage on the eve of the 2012 Parliamentary election, efficiently mobilized the electorate against the regime, turned the predictable election into a stunning one preventing the UNM continued rule.

Before that Saakashvili's statecraft efforts, and specifically, the reform of the police, his campaign against organized crime, "thieves in law" and anti-corruption initiatives served three particular goals: first, it successfully fed society with rosy promises to build a new Singapore in the Caucasus and at the same time minimized the threat of a combined elite-society challenge that can remove him from power. Second, he created a tool to punish disloyalty and more importantly to form his own clientele in the law enforcement agencies that would not depend on their "roving" strategies but on the benefits provided by the patron. Finally, by strengthening state institutions and conducting a bureaucratic revolution as well as adopting elements of good governance and especially anti-corruption policies he sent positive signals to the Western institutions what generated more excitement and support from abroad.

As a result, to gain public support as well as from different social groups, the new ruler has to satisfy certain societal aspirations – for instance, he constantly instilled in the population that Georgia should free itself from the feeling of a defeated country, which in the near future will turn into an economically successful country with a developed democracy, and by producing elements of good governance or fighting widespread corruption, which are necessary preconditions for the external donors and as a necessary step on the path to democracy. This support in turn is used against the opposing elites, which are easily prosecuted under slogans of fighting against corruption. The launched political and economic reforms help to weaken the state institutions that are controlled by or support the rival groups.

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Divide elites: use the society to defeat the opposing elites

How the society, which in the case of Georgia only recently manifested its pro-change pro-democracy sentiments, can be used for power consolidation? Let us briefly observe Lukashenko's rise to power in the mid-1990s.

In 1994, Lukashenko came to power as a young charismatic politician embarked on an anti-corruption crusade against the corrupt elites. He won his presidency in a fair election under a competitive system, which extremely favoured the incumbent prime minister and the former Communist Party of Belarus boss Kebich, who controlled the media and actively used the administrative resources[30].

Early on Lukashenko met a strong opposition among the parts of the Belarusian elites, which were well represented in the Parliament, local government and other state agencies such as the State Electoral Committee and the National Bank. Belarus was a semi-presidential republic with significant powers vested in the Parliament and Cabinet of Ministers. Their strength is well represented by a strong impeachment threat for Lukashenko in the third year of his rule.

To overcome opposition from the elites, Lukashenko focused on winning the support of the society, which similarly presupposed his early focus on encompassing policies. At the early stage, Lukashenko provided what the society primarily requested – stability and elements of good governance such as anti-corruption policies, police reform, effective law enforcement and order. He fought organized crime and even publicly boasted that "thieves in law" and leaders of criminal groups were quickly eliminated[31]. It is particularly important given that there was not yet any socio-economic contract with the Belarusian society due to low economic growth and lack of resources to distribute as rents at this stage – the Russian support and energy windfall would be attained later.

During his confrontation with elites, Lukashenko weakened uncontrolled political institutions by re-writing the Constitution, gradually limiting the powers of the parliament and strengthening control over rents, which allowed him to take the bureaucracy under control and make it more instrumental in his state-building policies.

In Georgia Saakashvili followed a similar path. From the beginning, Saakashvili emerged to power on the wave of widespread dissatisfaction of the society and part of the Georgian elite against the Shevardnadze regime. Georgia at the turn of the millennium represented a failed and defragmented country with weak and inefficient institutions, rampant corruption, and an impoverished population. The Shevardnadze Government "resembled a medieval court where former [communist] *nomenklatura* vassals were fighting for resources and power"[32] with a few interest groups, which competed for rents and resources.

In this environment, some of the elite groups strongly supported by the West and society united to challenge the regime. The US democracy promotion NGOs that were already in place as well as the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the International Republican Institute (IRI), Freedom House, Open Society Georgia Foundation (OSGF) actively worked on the ground "helping draw attention to election fraud, developing coalitions between opposition forces, supporting a vibrant civil society" and directly financing anti-government protest activities[33].

Soon, on November 23, 2003, the Rose Revolution brought into power a coalition of three opposition leaders – Mikheil Saakashvili (UNM), Zurab Zhvania (Democrats) and Nino Burjanadze who, after the resignation of President Shevardnadze, gained new positions of president, prime minister and speaker of the parliament respectively. Soon Saakashvili's party – the UNM won an overwhelming majority of seats in the newly elected parliament and in snap presidential elections Saakashvili received overwhelming societal approval of its domestic and foreign policy agendas.

In this context, Georgia had all pre-conditions for strengthening democratic institutions[34]. The elites united around Saakashvili shared the idea of building a pro-European democratic state. The West willingly provided necessary support. Pro-Western democratic ideals and market economy reforms were laid as the cornerstone of the unifying ideology. The Georgian society overwhelmingly backed this project during the Parliamentary and Presidential elections.

However, after the breakup of the "great trio" and disregard of the principles of collective rule, the Saakashvili regime began to gradually slide towards the authoritarian style of government. To subordinate the elites, Saakashvili allied with the society as a coalition partner to dismantle the opposing elite groups. He used his popular support to weaken his political rivals as well as political and economic institutions that were not under his control. Western aid and assistance helped to build institutions under his control. Public support was guaranteed by his anti-corruption policies, cracking down on criminal groups and crime networks, ensuring order and stability in the country. The rhetoric of westernization, European and Atlantic integration, liberal market economy and good gover-

nance won the support of pro-European societal groups, the newly created bureaucracy and the West. In turn, the market reforms helped to generate more revenues and more rents for loyal Saakashvili supporters and associates. Saakashvili was in a meantime overwhelmingly supported by the West: he was set and portrayed by Washington and Brussels as an example to follow for the newly independent states in the region.

As it was already mentioned, public support was crucial at the early stage of Saakashvili's rule and the provision of basic public goods and anti-corruption policies certainly played a key role in preserving it. It is noteworthy to mention that during Shevardnadze's era, the government failed to provide social and physical security and proper access to health and education; according to the official data close to one-third of the population lived below of poverty line[35]. Shevardnadze heavily relied on the corrupt officials and their patronage groups. Informal networks and powerful protégées became profit tools and sources of survival. The Georgian society was marginalized turning increasingly against the clan system and corruption at all levels.

As in case of Belarus, the early steps of Saakashvili much derived from this societal dissatisfaction with corruption and insecurity thus embedding security and the fight against corruption into the core of his state-building project[36] and regime's ideology. In the November 2003 elections, Saakashvili's campaign slogan was "Georgia without corruption" and "zero tolerance" policing to reduce crime. The government addressed corruption and organized crime in a wide range of sectors that directly affected the population, such as the traffic police, where 16000 were fired, the education sector and healthcare. The civil registry was revamped witnessing a sharp decrease in street-level corruption and even petty crime[37]. Provision of core public goods like a restored energy supply in Tbilisi and resumption of payments of salaries and pensions backed the election campaign rhetoric and showcased to the public rapid results.

Saakashvili first targeted corrupt officials and tycoons of the old regime, simultaneously he challenged the uncontrolled regional clique in Ajara, which was led by feudal-like leader Aslan Abashidze and Svaneti high-mountainous regional crime syndicate controlled by local warlords. As Aslan Abashidze was expelled (by direct involvement of Russian President Vladimir Putin and mediation of Igor Ivanov, the secretary of the Russian National Security Council) and group of mobs was cracked down in Svaneti, Saakashvili won extra popular support for strengthening territorial integrity and establishing stability in the country.

Second, Saakashvili backlashed against criminal-political groups, which were closely connected to the old ruling clans. They quickly were prosecuted, their property confiscated and later distributed among supporters; besides, huge sums were paid and collected in the plea bargaining by the corrupt bureaucrats. This step supported Saakashvili's image among the public: this won him fame among the people as a fighter for justice and the rights of ordinary and disadvantaged people.

However, the most important step, which followed, was the demise of potential political challengers among former/current allies[38] and reshaping the ruling elite. Among the three leaders prime-minister Zurab Zhvania was the most experienced and skilful politician who brought to power a new generation of Georgian political figures including Saakashvili himself. From the early days of post-revolutionary Georgia rivalry between Saakashvili and Zhvania became quite noticeable. The collective rule and subordination to formal rules were not part of Saakashvili's plans. The president soon appointed as ministers of defence, interior, justice as well as heads of security agencies his most trusted and loyal people against the preferences of the coalition partners. As Lukashenko, he first tried to undermine the power of the Cabinet of Ministers and the Parliament informally. Shortly, the "great trio" disintegrated: Zurab Zhvania mysteriously died in February 2005, and Nino Burjanadze, who lost a common ground with Saakashvili, was in trouble with the president and his zealous supporters from law enforcement agencies, kept a low profile until her resignation in 2008.

In a new system, the fight against corruption became a tool in hands of the personally loyal groups and institutions such as the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Prosecutor's Office.

The UNM government concentrated the anti-corruption measures in its hands and turned them to target political rivals and exerting pressure on businesses of disloyal people. The fight against rival elites was combined with the weakening of the institutions that were not controlled by the Saakashvili team[39]. The other formally more independent agencies were deliberately weakened and had no power in crucial areas such as anti-corruption policies. The local self-governance reform striped the influence of local elites. salaries of renewed public servants rise dramatically, with the support of donors (co-opting them to the system).

Anti-corruption policies combined with a lack of private rights led to the appropriation of disloyal private companies, which took mass character. Saakashvili used it to particularly remove any economic assets from political opponents. In 2016 the Department of Investigation of Crimes Committed in the Prosecution Processes, set up by the GD at the Prosecutor's Office of Georgia, revealed in 2004-2012 over 9500 facts illegally depriving private property rights (all assets were handed over to the State for free). Complaints claimed state prosecutors had played a central role in the illegal seizure of their property, forcing them to "donate" their real estate to the state[40].

Besides watering down the powers of agencies independent from Saakashvili, the ruling UNM redrew the constitution which gave the president almost limitless power[41]; law enforcement agencies were strengthened and were granted a *carte blanche* for implementation of "zero tolerance" policies. In 2006-2012, despite the numerous complaints from the West (US, EU, NATO) and requests to pay thorough attention to the development of state institutions in Georgia, they were either very weak or subordinated to the ruling class and had not been held accountable through the legal or constitutional arrangements[42].

Divide society and consolidate power

After minimizing the threat from the elites, the ruler starts fortifying his power basis. In a short turn after the defeat of the elite opposition, the Saakashvili regime and the ruling party accelerated the consolidation of power in its hands demising the societal constraints including by encroaching civil society organizations such as media outlets and sports federation, business community and media. That alongside educational reform created a new pool of pro-governmental social elite.

The government successfully reformed and tightened its control over law enforcement structures, reshuffled entirely police and border guard. Strong instrumental bureaucracy and a new security system emerged. Moreover, total surveillance, phone tapping, intimidation, harassment and arrests of disloyal people [43] (even supposedly killings – Gvrigvliani, Robakidze, and Vazagashvili cases to name a few) became political tools of the authorities.

Georgian politics became dominated by Saakashvili and "his people". Parliament fell under the control of UNM; opposition was intimidated and marginalized, the judiciary system served the interests of the political elite and main TV media channels moved into the hands of either ruling elite or affiliated business circles and had been orchestrated by the Saakashvili propaganda machine. Civil society was in the hand of UNM associated organizations. Every government appointment actually was a Saakashvili's great supporter[44].

In the economic sphere, situation was not better. The economic policies led to the improvement of fiscal discipline, customs administration and centralization of revenue collection[45]. In this regard, Saakashvili set himself two tasks: to reshape the control over economic and financial assets, which overwhelmingly benefitted the regime's allies. Not surprising that soon reports started to surface the accounts showing that "elite-level corruption has continued to pose a serious obstacle to Georgia's socio-economic development"[46].

Likewise, Lukashenko after taking control over elites, turned to the finalization of the consolidation of his power and pursued policies, which would undermine public constraint on his agenda – media, civil society, elections – further fortifying the personification of the rule upon his election in 2001.

The core of his policies was to complete taking major state institutions under his personal control creating the vertical of power and loyal law enforcement and security services[47]. Institutions were substituted by "corporative unions that are given a monopoly to represent the interests of various segments of the population"[48], which were legitimized by their control by the president. The other institutions were also considerably weakened. For example, the parliament during its last session 2011-2015 adopted only 3 laws initiated by the deputies themselves. On the economic front, Lukashenko's policies focused on taking under direct control the major revenue-generating economic assets.

A power system emerged, which shortly enormously benefitted from Russia's financial and economic support. Upon subduing opposing elites, the potential rise of discontent in the society was prevented by a social contract. Yet, as in the case of Saakashvili's Georgia, until the following election cycle and the emerged substantial financial support from Russia, there was still space for active opposition, independent media and civil society in Belarus, though a very narrow field of activity was left.

In both cases, the early power consolidating steps met resistance from society. In November 2007, the Georgian government entered the period of the worst political turbulences since the Rose Revolution. A public anger sparked a storm of protest around the country. However, in absence of allies within the elite (except for cases of Okruashvili and Patarkatsishvili), protests were quickly brought down. The government used excessive police force against peaceful protesters, the disloyal "Imedi" TV station was detained and shut down, opposition leaders arrested. All mentioned led to abuses and disregard of fundamental freedoms in Georgia. Rampant abuse of power showed the lengths by which the Saakashvili administration attempted to consolidate "its stranglehold of the political apparatus"[49].

By 2008, Saakashvili changed the agenda and ran under the slogan "Georgia without poverty", which was combined with a promise to restore the territorial integrity and fight the Kremlin. Saakashvili monopolized the pro-European integration political niche and turned every political opponent into agents of the Kremlin[50].

By the end of the second term, despite the dissatisfaction of his Western partners, Saakashvili elaborated an "exit strategy" *a la Putin* style, as a third term for him would have been unconstitutional. The UNM introduced constitutional changes; nearly all executive power had to be transferred to prime minister since the next presidential elections in October 2012, thus cleaning the way for his future unlimited premiership.

Yet, the elections of 2012 unexpectedly turned against the regime and undermined its far-reaching plans. While the creation of a new opposition bloc on the eve of the elections by Georgian prominent philanthropist Bidzina Ivanishvili, who made his fortune in Russia in turbulent 90s, did not directly threaten the Saakashvili grip on power, the disclosed massive abuse of prisoners caused a major outbreak of public outrage against the regime. Systemic use of sexual abuse, torture and ill-treatment of prisoners became routine and exposed underlying problems within the penitentiary system of the most incarcerated nation in Europe. After the mentioned events Saakashvili's halo finally slipped. Despite administrative resources, harassment and intimidation of rival parties, the UNM bitterly lost in the parliamentary elections.

What about the Western constraint? Dual role of capacity building

Despite the effective use of domestic constraints on power against each other, the external constraint remained intact and should have played a decisive role to prevent the regime evolution towards power consolidation. Western leverage and linkage could have provided a better check on the Saakashvili's policies. Nevertheless, the West not only offered institutional development best practices and vital financial and capacity building assistance but also praised and extolled his achievements.

The ideology Saakashvili pursued was centred around the idea of turning Georgia into a symbol and champion of pro-westernism in the post-Soviet space. Public opinion surveys showed that this vision was shared by a major bulk of elites and society[51]. However, instead of preventing the authoritarian backslide both the US and EU continued to look at post-revolutionary Georgia as a democratizing example to be followed. The West, as usual, continued to provide assistance to the Saakashvili regime, until the "prison scandal" erupted in September 2012. In this regard, the Western approach aimed at capacity building of state institutions, good governance and the belief in preparing domestic elites into modern European rulers, which was used by Saakashvili against the main purpose of the democracy promotion agenda.

Originally, the West saw events taking place in Georgia through the prism of new possibilities for democracy promotion in the post-Soviet space, which had to be supported and promoted. The December 2003 Maastricht OSCE ministerial became a "one-man show"; the message to the West was quite clear: the young Georgian revolutionaries wanted to build a democracy in the post-Soviet space, actively implement policies of Europeanization, uproot everything which was connected with the Soviet past and escape the growing neo-imperialistic influence of Putin's Russia. The new Georgia became a showcase for revolutionary changes in semi-democratic and authoritarian regimes in Eurasia.

The EU increased financial and technical assistance programmes, nearly immediately included the South Caucasus in the EU Neighbourhood Policy and started drafting the ENP Action Plan for Georgia, which originally was not envisaged for the region. The EU provided Tbilisi with full-scale assistance for deepening integration into the EU. In 2009 Georgia became a part of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and was soon offered key reform instruments – Association Agreement and Visa Liberalization arrangement, which would provide Georgia with a visa-free regime and access to the EU single market in exchange for reforms.

The Western strategy aimed at building capacities of the pro-Western leadership to implement the Western best knowledge and reform according to the EU standards[52]. In many cases this patronage was primarily used by Saakshvili for power maximization. The Western support comprised mostly from direct state-building assistance was particularly used to expand the capacities of pro-Saakashvili state agencies and to further strengthen the support of the western-oriented society. For instance, the National Indicative Programme, which amounted to 300 million euro in 2007-2013, prioritized SPSP Criminal Justice Reform and finance management. Most of the US assistance contributed to military sector and security[53]. The US in 2007 alone provided the $63 million, roughly a third of it was channeled for training its military personnel, police officers and border guards[54]. The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) helped to rebuild critical infrastructure spending in 2006-2011 $395 million[55]. By 2012, the annual aid package was raised to 158 million, with 85 million aimed at building up the security and military capabilities of the state. Overall, following Georgia's 2008 conflict with Russia, the United States provided over a $1.0 billion assistance package targeted at the state and its institutions[56].

The pro-Western pro-liberal ideology was useful to remain popular in the West, among the newly recruited bureaucracy and part of the West-leaning society. Moreover, he used external support to a similar goal to support the building of the state institutions, which he used against his opponents to advance his ambitions to become an indispensable leader and main supporter of the Western principles in the former Soviet republics[57]. In the end, the Saakashvili regime was well supported and nurtured by his US and European allies and media. The West originally saw in him a great reformer and democrat, however, later turned a blind eye on his authoritarian behavior and manifestations. The Western assistance rendered to Georgia, in particular after the August 2008 war, what mainly was directed to fill the state budget gaps, has often been touted as a personal achievement of the Saakashvili administration. This also contributed to the emergence of a persistent perception among the population about the good governance and efficient bureaucracy of the executive power.

Such outcome of the Western reform attempts may turn even more problematic in today's geopolitical situation after the eruption of the Ukrainian conflict, aggressive Russian policies and the greater focus on stability, security and preservation of "pro-Western" post-soviet regimes, which use Western assistance and support to stay in power. The US and EU policies were used to maintain an uneven playing field[58]. In this respect, in the light of evolving thinking in the EU[59], the case of Saakashvili's effective power-maximization can illustrate the potential trajectory of the Eurocentric regimes within the Eastern Partnership community and the emergence of more pro-Western leaders with potentially autocratic instincts and behaviour.

The kinship of autocrats

The "birds of a feather"

If we look more carefully we might be able to see that Saakashvili and Lukashenko have far more in common than that which divides them. Despite the age, cultural and educational differences and proclaimed political goals, they have plenty of similarity, particularly in the ruling style, thirst for power and acquired authoritarian instincts. Originally, just after the Rose Revolution, Saakashvili distanced himself from Lukashenko and at every opportunity contrasted himself from the leader of Belarus – he was a "a great reformer and pro-European democratic leader" and Lukashenko was a "pro-Russian relict of the Soviet era".

The Rose Revolution and his modernization efforts became Saakashvili's "brand pieces" and the young president felt it necessary to start exporting his "know-how" in the near neighbourhood. After the great success in Ukraine in 2004 and helping Yuschenko to manage the Orange Revolution and then consulting Kyrgyz opposition forces in 2005 during the Tulip Revolution, he put the eye on Belarus (certainly, with the light-handed endorsement of Washington and Brussels). Saakashvili's close ally and personal envoy on revolutionary matters, Defence and Security Committee Chairman of the Georgian Parliament Givi Targamadze, who was well trained before and during colour revolutions, was tasked to arrange yet another revolution, this time in Belarus. In March 2006 just before the parliamentary elections, he was commissioned to Lithuania to build a command and training centre in Vilnius for the organization of mass protest actions in Minsk and providing technical and financial support to the Belorussian pro-democratic opposition political forces. After failure in Belarus to topple Lukashenko's regime[60] and building Saakashvili-Lukashenko friendship after 2008 Russia-Georgia war, Targamadze's activities were focused mainly on Russia, who in December 2012 was accused by Russian authorities for "instructing" Russian oppositionists to arrange mass disorders and destabilize the country; later a Moscow court convicted him *in absentia* for conspiracy to organise mass riots and violence in Russia[61].

Since the inauguration of president Medvedev and Russia's invasion of Georgia in August 2008 both Tbilisi and Minsk become closer to each other. Lukashenko, despite the significant pressure from the Kremlin and promises given to Moscow to embrace the Georgian occupied territories, did not recognize independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia; despite the Russia's ban on Georgian export to Russia Minsk promoted import of Georgian wine, mineral water and agricultural products. No debt remained unpaid for Saakashvili: he was asking the EU for full-fledged inclusion of Belarus into the Eastern Partnership Initiative, to invite Lukasheko to the EaP summits, elaborate special assistance programs for Belarus, and was sending instructions to the Georgian embassies accredited to the EU member states by all means gain support for Belarus in EaP deliberations. Saakashvili and Lukashenko became close friends and this is quite symbolic: the two leaders became products of the authoritarian/semi-authoritarian system, which brings leaders together. Indeed, the "birds of a feather flock together".

Russian sponsorship and patronage of autocratic regimes

Research on the "authoritarian resurgence" has emphasized the role of external non-democratic sponsors. Currently, there are significant concerns about threats to democracy posed by external support for authoritarianism coming from Russia. The autocracy promotion by Russia in the near abroad and consolidation of autocratic regimes against democracy building in the Eurocentric countries in many cases shape regime outcomes in the post-Soviet space. Russian actions have periodically promoted the most notorious regimes in the post-Soviet space: Lukashenko in Belarus, Yanukovych in Ukraine, Aliyev in Azerbaijan, Karimov in Uzbekistan, Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan, Akayev and Bakiyev in Kyrgyzstan, etc. In fact, Russia and Belarus willingly provide asylum to fugitive autocrats from near abroad (e.g., Akayev, Yanukovych, Azarov were hardboard by Russia and Bakyiev – by Belarus). At the same time the Kremlin tries to build up and consolidate relations with autocratic regimes in different parts of the world, thus recovering old alliances and opening new spheres of influence (Syria of Assad, Venezuela of Maduro, Nicaragua of Ortega, Cuba of Castro, Turkey of Erdogan, etc.). Particularly, after the August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, Venezuela, Nicaragua and Syria were a few countries around the world that supported Russia in its posture of recognizing the Georgia's separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (actually at the expense of Russia's political, financial and military support of the mentioned countries).

President Putin is highly selective in his foreign political preferences – supporting directly outstanding autocratic leaders, or opposing new democracies in countries where pro-western and anti-Russian governments are in power. Nonetheless, Russia's resistance and impact on democracy building in the region has been restricted by the fact that three Eastern Partner countries (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) have strong European aspirations and fiercely leaning towards Brussels. Despite increasingly aggressive foreign policies by autocratic regional powers, autocracy promotion and building a new "brotherhood of autocrats" so much sponsored by the Kremlin does not bring any tangible fruit to the Kremlin so far.

At the same time, the former Soviet republics remain perhaps the most vulnerable to Russian influence and aggression and are most receptive to Kremlin propaganda. In some cases, the post-Soviet republics have their own Russian-speaking communities, thus the Kremlin does everything possible for building the popular front for rapprochement with Russia. They are also the most vulnerable to interference due to still weak governing institutions, handicapped justice systems that undermine the seeds of democracy and allow for higher levels of corruption, underdeveloped media and civil society.

The Russian tactics of interference follow two main trends in this region. First, Russia aggressively targets countries that have taken tangible steps to integrate with western institutions (the EU and NATO) in order to impede integration processes. Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova are the most vivid cases in a long history of Russian aggression along its periphery – the more they have drawn closer to NATO and the EU, the more they have been the focus of arguably the most brazen Kremlin efforts to keep them from sliding from the Russian orbit. Perhaps more than any other countries, Georgia and Ukraine have suffered from Russian hybrid aggression in all of its forms – starting from conventional military assaults, energy manipulation, disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, and ending with financing pro-Russian opposition forces and media and NGO outlets.

Second, Russian interference in places like Belarus and Armenia is less visibly aggressive and focuses more on cultivating the "Russian civilizational values" and sympathetic elements of society to deter government efforts to integrate with the West. In addition to disinformation and the co-opting of political forces, Russia employs energy resources as a weapon to gain leverage in these countries. Besides, due to the preservation and keeping the pro-Russian political regime afloat, Russia issues loans and at this expense redeems the most lucrative assets and thus subordinating the country's economy to its dictate.

The Downfall

In the end the use of an oppressive system by authoritarian rulers becoms necessary in order to keep afloat the regimes. The security establishments brutal tactics to repress the masses or the "stick" ensures that the population blindly submits to the authority giving up individual freedoms. This is the last hope and instrument in the hands of non-democratic regimes, which leads to the degradation of the system and to the loss of power.

After November 2007 events and the disastrous war with Russia in August 2008, the relationship between the US and Georgia became noticeably cooler. The political establishment in Washington already spoke of *"Misha fatigue"*, the phenomenon of simply being physically exhausted by his authoritarian manifestations, extensive lobbying efforts, endless demands and eccentric behaviour[62]. Upon his arrival in the White House, Barack Obama's first foreign policy priority was an ill-fated "reset" of relations with Russia. In the new US scheme Georgia was disregarded and left in the cold. Saakashvili, with his aggressive Russophobia, was actually viewed by Washington as the fifth wheel. President Obama did not support the troublemaking Georgian leader, as his predecessor had done, and told Saakashvili to be prepared for "peaceful transfer of power"[63]. Doors were closed to Saakashvili in many European capitals as well. Particularly, Chancellor Angela Merkel took a very critical view of Georgian political leader and his democratic reforms, and of the ability of Saakashvili to take weighty and balanced decisions on many outstanding issues.

In March 2012, shortly after returning home from a trip to the US and meeting with President Obama, disapointed Saakashvili addressed a huge crowd in the town of Tsnori: "No state leader, no president can tell me when to leave my post. Only the Georgian people are real source of power, you can decide who should lead the country. Today we face many challenges and together we will lead the country to the victorious end"[64]. However, it was obvious that he had already played his part, lost the support of both his people and the West, but he did not give up. With the aim of staying in power for as long as possible, the ruling regime developed a "soft exit strategy" for Saakashvili. The plan involved the transfer of the bulk of executive power from the president to the prime minister (as it is mentioned above). Thus, on completion of his second presidential term, Saakashvili would comfortably move to prime minister's chair, effectively allowing him to rule the country indefinitely. Unfortunately for Saakashvili, however, his party failed to secure a victory in the October 2012 elections.

Speaking about the importance of a peaceful transfer of power, Senator Shaheen cited the example of Georgia in 2012, recalling that on the second day of the election, after meeting with Saakashvili, the President decided that there should be a peaceful transfer of power in Georgia. As the Senator recalled, she travelled to Georgia with her colleague, Senator Risch to observe officially on behalf of the US Senate the election in October 2012. Senators visited multiple polling stations on election day and agreed with the international assessment that the election was free and fair and that the Georgian Dream coalition was the winner. However, there was a real concern in the country, that Saakashvili would refuse to give up the power and that would end up with violence. Shaheen remembered: *"The day after the election, Senator Risch and I visited President Saakashvili at home. We sat down with him and we pointed out that the hallmark of democracy, for what he had worked so hard over 8 years of his tenure as President of Georgia would be to give the power peacefully to those, who were elected by the voters. The future generation must recognize that democracy means the peaceful transfer of power. Our attempt was successful, he resigned and called on his supporters to accept the election results"[65]*. Everything is obvious here and the conclusion suggests itself: without pressure from the US Saakashvili would not had surrendered his power, and for the first time in the history of modern Georgia there was a peaceful transfer of power, which set an example to other regimes in the region.

Howevr, events in Belarus are developing according to a more dramatic scenario. Belarus has been sparked by massive protest actions since Lukashenko was declared the winner of an August 9, 2020, election amid claims the vote was rigged against Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who was considered by Minsk as the biggest challenge to Lukashenko's regime, and under the threat of imminent arrest, she was forced into exile. More than 30,000 protesters have been detained and thousands beaten or even tortured in the government's brutal responses against popular protest movement. The EU, US, UK, Canada, and other Western countries have refused to recognize Lukashenko as the legitimate leader of Belarus and have imposed sanctions on him and several senior Belarusian officials in response to the "falsification" of the vote and the brutal postelection crackdown of peaceful demonstrations.

Moreover, the collective West imposed a new wave of sanctions on key sectors of the Belarusian economy and major revenue sources for Lukashenko's regime following the forced diversion of a Ryanair passenger flight to Minsk in May 2021 that allowed for the arrest of dissident journalist and blogger Roman Protasevich. In response, Belarus recalled its representative to the EU for consultations, announced a travel ban on unspecified EU officials, and declared that it was suspending its participation in the EU sponsored EaP programme. The only leader who provided support (political, moral, military and financial) was certainly Vladimir Putin. Lukashenko went with a bow to Putin several times for help since August 2020 post-election events.

Undoubtedly, the Kremlin's sponsorship is not free: Lukashenko has now begun to trade with Russia the sovereignty of his country, which of course threatens the independence of Belarus and that his people will certainly not forgive it. The Belorussian leader actually entered the last phase of his political career: his authoritarian rule began to reincarnate into a totalitarian system with his complete rejection by Belarusians and the West. It became obvious, in such a situation he has very little left to rule. When the patience of his people overflows he can only hope that the Kremlin will provide him with the last refuge. The era of Lukashenko, which is almost three decades old, has come to its inglorious end.

Conclusion

Georgia and Belarus became the two reference points for reforms in the post-soviet space. Georgia was regarded as a role model in pro-reform circles in Ukraine, Russia and Belarus, associated with pro-democratic reforms, while Lukashenko is equally referred to as an exemplary model of necessary changes to bring order, stability and socio-economic development among certain elite groups in Moldova, Georgia and Russia.

At some point, President Lukashenko became an acceptable leader who could be followed, at least the leaders of certain countries from the post-Soviet area thought so. In particular, ex-President of Moldova Igor Dodon during his tenure in office (2016-2020) openly referred to Lukashenko as his role model. Yet, as we show, the regime trajectories of Saakashvili's Georgia and Belarus during the first decades of Lukashenko, are closer than it is usually portrayed and is well represented by the power maximization strategies that both rulers followed. Here we can reiterate that almost all successful cases of democratization result from constraints imposed on would-be dominant actors. Yet, incumbents can use these constraints against each other. Moreover, the external constraint, which shall play a crucial role to prevent that, can facilitate that by building the capacities of the aspiring autocrat.

This article aimed to analyse the Saakashvili regime's authoritarian path, although the conditions in certain cases favoured democratization. It does so by examining the phenomenon of the emergence of efficient patronal regimes in the post-Soviet space. It argues that regimes can play constraints against each other and particularly highlights how good governance can help the ruler maintain popular support during his attempts to subordinate the elites and minimise the impact of the opposing elite groups. In this regard, the ruler follows the rule-and-divide strategy uniting with the society against the "corrupt and detrimental" elites. If the ruler succeeds in undermining the elites' constraint, he proceeds with the power consolidation by strengthening personal control and maximizing his formal and informal power.

Thus, we argue that in Georgia, the external agenda served the interests of the power maximizer. The external financial and ideological assistance was instrumental in maintaining social support, creating a new bureaucracy, and building institutions that were effectively used to maximize power. Importantly, the final important constraint – the external influence – has originally played in the hand of the Western-oriented ruler by providing him with the necessary assistance and support even when the EU and/or the US possesses necessary leverage and linkage to stop the process.

Although in many instances the hybrid regimes do not turn openly autocratic and maintain formally competitive democratic system, the path towards power consolidation is shorter than it is assumed. The example of Saakashvili's regime illustrates how to dismantle the emerging constraints and consolidate the power informally and then formally. The bad news for the West, which sees itself as a guardian of democracy and tries to promote democratic reforms, is that its support of elites and focus on good governance can actually facilitate power consolidation.

Using the examples of Georgia and Belarus, we examined two cases of external influence on autocratic/semi-autocratic regimes: how both the West and Russia influence regimes being under their patronage. If the West, and specifically the US and EU, tries to contain democracy backsliding in its partner-country and, if necessary, directly points out to the bankrupt ruling class about the need to transfer power to the popular elites, in case of Russia, in contrary, the Kremlin intentionally provides external support to its client authoritarian regime, which is driven by purely instrumental and strategic motivations – receiving political, ideological and material benefits whenever possible.

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