Legislative Networks and Reforms in Post-Soviet States

How to Turn the Tide for Democracy

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CONCLUSIONS

6.1 Democratic Reforms and their Limits

This book explores the challenges that hybrid regimes face when developing democratic reforms, highlighting how domestic elites often restrict democratisation efforts while using political institutions to consolidate their power. We thus uncover why political reforms in hybrid regimes frequently fall short to produce effective and transparent democratic accountability mechanisms. The study opens the 'black box' of these processes to show how political actors involved in the drafting process set the boundaries of democratisation. This is often done by designing initial drafts of constitutional and legislative reforms in ways that enact partial democratic reforms that allow incumbents or other influential actors to retain or even enhance their power positions. The extensive interviews conducted with domestic civil society and political actors in Armenia, Georgia and Moldova revealed that the challenges they face in countering institutional manipulation by powerful elites are often rooted in their limited access to the reform processes during the crucial early stages.

Therefore, when uncovering the exact mechanisms behind partial political reforms, we delve into the various ways domestic elites curtail democratisation while using political institutions to perpetuate and reinforce their power positions. To this end, the research applies an analytical typology of five control strategies used by domestic actors to shape the initial drafts of reforms and ultimately influence their democratic outcomes. This typology of five control strategy is defined based on the degree of inclusivity or exclusivity with regards to the relative level of involvement of broad social and political stakeholders. We can thus speak of more inclusive or more exclusionary

reform strategies, which are also linked to the different political systems in three countries analysed here – Armenia, Gerogia and Moldova.

Four of these strategies (dominant, selective negotiation, informal control and formally inclusive) not only suppress genuine democratic involvement, but also perpetuate a cycle of superficial reforms that do not tackle deeper systemic problems, leading to a Potemkin village, façade democratisation. Ten of the 11 reform processes analysed here use one of these four control strategies, as they align with the interests and positions of the incumbent and other powerful elite, allowing them to further entrench their influence within the institutional system. In these cases, powerful domestic elites capitalise on key political positions they already control to further reinforce or perpetuate their power, steering the reform in a path-dependent trajectory that excludes opposition actors or those with alternative perspectives from the process.

However, Georgia's Rule of Law reforms between 2012 and 2015 stand out as an exception, representing the extreme end of the control strategy typology with an inclusive reform strategy, where broad social and political participation marked the drafting process. This reform followed significant political change, as new political parties came to power as a consequence of social protests, in demand of social legitimation by demonstrating a strong political will to implement democratising Rule of Law reforms. Therefore, the legitimacy of the then recently established political coalition GD-DG required the development of an inclusive reform process that introduced meaningful democratic accountability mechanisms.

The reform proposals were so substantial and genuine that they provoked active and concerted sabotage from other entrenched political actors with vested interests in the reforms' failure. Once the GD-DG had consolidated its government positions in 2016, which allowed it to autonomously adopt a Constitutional reform, the previous ambitious Judicial reforms were abandoned to give place to a new reform process pre-dominantly controlled by the Judiciary, with limited representation of the executive, civil society and the legislative allowing to perpetuate key mechanisms for hierarchical and political control within the Judiciary. Despite its ultimate failure, the 2012–2015 attempts for Rule of Law reforms in Georgia provide a rare glimpse of political contingency and the potential for genuine democratising reforms. Therefore, the emergence of new political parties, with limited expertise and institutional positions, following popular Rule of Law mobilisations offers a precious and rare opportunity for meaningful democratic progress in hybrid regimes.

Lessons learned from these untimely failures and from the study of controlled partial reform processes are crucial to chart a different course for future political reforms. By examining the nuances of these reform attempts from their very inception, we can better understand the pitfalls of previous efforts and make informed decisions to truly advance effective democratic

accountability mechanisms in the region and beyond. To better understand how powerful gatekeepers restrain political reforms, the study offers a comprehensive examination of the democratic reform process and strategies used typically by the most powerful domestic actors. Their strategic approaches during these early stages not only reveal their degree of willingness to commit to meaningful democratic reforms, but also significantly influence the trajectory of the subsequent reform process as a whole.

These findings give a new perspective to the processes studied by the literature on democratic backsliding (Bermeo 2016), autocratisation (Cassani & Tomini 2018), Europeanisation and norm diffusion (Börzel & Risse 2012; Delcour & Wolczuk 2015; Nizhnikau 2017). By tracing the influence of powerful gatekeepers in democratisation processes, shaping the system-wide state-society relations in hybrid regimes, this book highlights the domestic conditions and the perspective of domestic political actors (Schedler 2024). Specifically, this research shows how autocratisation follows the idea of a self-reinforcing spiral of "more or less subtle changes" (Landau 2013: 189; Schedler 2024), in which gradual contention between domestic political actors takes place on the level of electoral competition, in parallel to institutional manipulation. This incremental approach on the institutional and electoral level is particularly effective because it prevents large-scale resistance by making changes seem minor at each step.

The research on legislative networks illustrates this temporal logic in the elite manipulation of reform processes, unveiling the dynamics involved in the subtle political reforms controlled by political elites seeking to instrumentally use the institutional framework in their own benefit. The instrumental use and manipulation of political reforms begins from the very early stages of the reform processes when the legislative drafts are defined. The central features of the reform drafts created by legislative and constitutional commissions are often very difficult to reverse later in the process. Therefore, by controlling the work of these drafting legislative commissions, political elites effectively set the boundaries of the reform process and ensure that these reforms align with their interests. The analysis of these initial stages illustrates the autocratisation mechanisms in hybrid regimes.

Moreover, by focusing on how domestic political elites, opposition forces and civil society shape, contest and reinterpret EU norms, this research highlights the importance in shifting the analysis from a traditional top-down approach used in Europeanisation literature to one that underscores the critical role of local agency (Burlyuk *et al.* 2023). As the book shifts the attention from the external influence, it reveals the instrumental use of international support by domestic political actors, highlighting that democratic reform processes become arenas for political struggles for power. Domestic actors perceive these reforms as opportunities to reinforce or retain their power positions, leveraging both normative and rationalist arguments in this pursuit.

This dynamic allows us to understand how power dynamics intertwine with international support in shaping reform processes from the earliest stages. It underscores that actors are guided by cost-benefit calculations of the implications of these political reforms on their power positions, when they decide to either support or resist reforms, often aligning with international norms when beneficial.

Furthermore, this work demonstrates how domestic actors can instrumentally use norms and values projected by the EU and Russia to legitimise their actions both domestically and internationally. In this context, reverse legitimation refers to the strategic use of democratic norms by incumbents to frame arguments against transparency and civil society participation. Specifically, the need of an impartial justice system is invoked to prevent the influence of civil society on the design of democratic Rule of Law norms. Moreover, the close involvement of international actors in domestic policymaking is often followed by its increased politicisation. Such unintended consequences have been observed, when the support to reform-oriented elite has proven very effective to further develop their capacities and reinforce them as agents of change in democratisation processes.

The findings also extend the scope of Europeanisation studies (Delcour & Wolczuk 2015; Delcour, 2017) beyond sectoral regulatory convergence to encompass broader system-wide political reforms, offering a more holistic view of the EU's external influence impact. The focus on the strategies deployed by domestic actors contributes to explaining the process and outcome of democratisation in a region torn by geopolitical competition and normative contestation. The identification of the subtle control strategies developed since the early stages of reform processes, and their research reveals how political elites manipulate legislative and constitutional commissions from the outset. This early-stage control is crucial for understanding the mechanisms that lead to limited democratic outcomes. Therefore, it is possible to pinpoint the exact effects of the external influence of the EU and Russia during the different stages of the institutional reforms, while accounting for the domestic agency. These findings contribute to Europeanisation and can be further applied in other post-Communist states where the EU's engagement can affect deeply political reforms.

The research provides critical insights into the mechanisms of autocratisation, underscoring the importance of early intervention and resistance against authoritarian encroachments. The identification of a typology of five strategies highlights the role of domestic contextual conditions (including institutional framework, party system and neopatrimonial networks) in shaping both the control strategies of incumbents and the challenges opposition parties and civil society actors face when they try to counteract democratic subversion. Therefore, the study illustrates that the different levels of power centralisation of the political system translate into varied strategies for control

and for opposition in each country. For instance, while Armenian opposition faces centralised power structures, Georgian opposition has proven greater effectiveness in challenging the formal legitimation strategy used by the incumbent. Such granular understanding of the control of political reforms contributes to understanding the challenges opposition parties and civil society meet in identifying and addressing such strategies, to a great extent due to the lack of transparency of these early stages of the reforms.

From a theoretical and methodological perspective, the findings illustrate the importance of the process-oriented research which recognises the agency of domestic actors in the field of democratisation and autocratisation. The complimentary use of process-tracing and social network analysis provides a granular understanding of how legislative drafts are manipulated from the outset to align with the interests of political elites, thereby setting the stage for democratic subversion and power consolidation. On the one hand, by mapping out the affiliations of commission members to various political and social institutions, social network analysis illustrates how actors leverage these relationships to control the reforms. On the other hand, through process-tracing, the study reconstructs the reform processes, allowing for the identification of the causal mechanisms linking the strategic actions of these domestic actors and the reform outcomes. Overall, this combined methodological approach not only deepens our understanding of democratisation and democratic subversion processes, but also offers a versatile toolset for future research in hybrid regimes. This approach bridges the gap between agency and structure, as it links legislative networks with the broader political context, while reflecting the political outcomes of control strategies adopted by domestic elites.

The integration of *tertium comparationis*, based on the control exerted by political elites, enables a nuanced cross-case analysis of Armenia, Georgia and Moldova. This comparative approach identifies the control strategies deployed in diverse political regimes, providing insights that are applicable to other post-Soviet contexts and beyond. By situating the analysis within different political systems, party structures and the influence of informal networks, the research approach allows to reflect the interplay between contextual factors and agency in shaping democratic reforms. Expanding the research to other hybrid regimes in the region and beyond will allow to further refine the scope of factors that shape the choice of strategies by powerful gatekeepers in different institutional and political contexts.

By tracing the instrumental use of political reforms and the constraints imposed by domestic gatekeepers, this research brings the perspective of domestic actors to the front. In this concluding chapter, I focus on the implications of the findings of this book. Specifically, I discuss the various aspects involved in and the consequences of the constraints imposed by powerful domestic elites on democratic reforms, as well as the significance of the rare

opportunities for democratic reforms, and the different actors involved in these processes. Additionally, this chapter discusses the findings on the international influence of the EU and Russia, and it touches on the implications for policymakers.

6.2 Control Strategies of Democratic Reforms

The imposition of effective control over reform processes by powerful political actors in hybrid regimes severely restricts their institutional development and potential for democratisation. Therefore, tracing the control strategies of powerful actors helps to unpack the mechanisms that result in limited, ineffective and partial democratic reforms not just in post-communist countries, but in hybrid regimes more broadly. This research scrutinises decisions made in the early stages of these reforms, with the appointment of legislative commissions. The identification of decisions made at this early stage reveals the control strategies employed by domestic actors aimed at diluting or limiting democratic reforms.

By focusing on these initial decisions, the analysis shifts the focus from the static analysis of reform outcomes to explaining how these strategies drive the evolution of reforms from inception through to implementation and internalisation. Moreover, the analysis of legislative commissions as legislative arenas shows how they are frequently employed by ruling elites as tools for maintaining control under the guise of promoting democratic participation. While theoretically designed to foster comprehensive stakeholder engagement and consensus-building, in practice, these bodies often serve to amplify the ruling party's influence by overrepresenting pro-government figures and side-lining opposition voices. Such instrumental manipulations of democratic reforms undermine the legitimacy and effectiveness of the reforms and the institutional framework they enact.

By examining the affiliation background of the individuals who dominate the legislative commissions and tracing the decisions they adopt when drafting the reform, the book highlights the mechanisms behind the partial and protracted reforms that fail to implement meaningful accountability tools. The identification of the five strategies of control over legislative networks provides significant insights into the political will of domestic actors, as their efforts to control the reform processes are evident from the outset. This early analysis of the reform processes highlights how early decisions critically shape the trajectory and outcomes of political reforms.

6.2.1 Identifying Control Strategies

The typology of control strategies outlined here is anchored in two crucial factors: the level of power centralisation within the political system and the inclusiveness of the legislative commission. Understanding the interaction of

these factors sheds light on the choice of control strategies involved in reform processes in hybrid regimes, highlighting the interplay between overt power control and subtler influences over legislative outcomes. The centralisation of power within the political system is defined by three factors: institutional power centralisation, the party system and the influence of neopatrimonial networks. The specific development of these factors in Armenia, Georgia and Moldova reveals the control mechanisms that domestic gatekeepers use to constrain democratic reforms.

Depending on the political configuration in each country and the positions of domestic gatekeepers, different strategies are deployed. Identifying the main features of these control strategies and the factors that define them is essential for understanding the actual limitations of democratic reforms from their inception. Analysing these aspects is crucial, as in ten out of 11 political reforms examined in this book, powerful political elites have employed strategies that capitalise on key institutional or political positions they already control to maintain their power and influence, thereby constraining democratic reforms by channeling them into a path-dependent trajectory under their control. The choice of control strategy is therefore based on their leverage over key positions such as the executive, the majority in the parliament or exerting informal influence through neopatrimonial networks on formally independent institutions or political parties. By understanding these dynamics, we gain critical insights into the structural impediments that hinder democratisation efforts in hybrid regimes.

Firstly, institutional power centralisation reflects the relative balance of power between the executive and the legislature. Specifically, the embeddedness of the reform processes within a presidential or parliamentary system significantly influences the choice of control strategies. In centralised presidential systems where the executive holds substantial unilateral power, a dominant control strategy is often employed, allowing the executive to directly influence legislative outcomes with minimal input from other branches or opposition. In contrast, less centralised parliamentary systems, where power is more dispersed, require additional negotiation and coordination among different political actors, leading to a more complex or less overt control of the reform process.

The configuration of the party system also deeply impacts reform control strategies, as political parties will choose more or less direct strategy for control of the reform process depending on the extent to which it can influence the institutional system, through the parliament or through social legitimation. Dominant party systems, where one party secures significant influence over a long period of time, typically use dominant control strategies, enabling the autonomous adoption of reforms without extensive negotiations. Meanwhile, pluralistic systems with multiple influential parties often rely on strategies involving more or less formal negotiation and coordination efforts,

as reforms usually depend on coalition-building and broad-based agreements. Besides, as neopatrimonial networks are often deeply ingrained within the structure of hybrid regimes, informal control strategies are used to shape political reforms. Such neopatrimonial organisations can influence formal institutions and political parties to manipulate reforms' outcomes in favour of specific private interests. As a result, formal legislative processes are overshadowed by informal strategies where neopatrimonial interests determine the reform outcomes, often undermining transparency and accountability.

The dynamic interaction of these three factors defines the channels for influence domestic actors use to shape the reform processes. Therefore, the choice of strategies reflects the underlying power structures and the interplay between formal institutional frameworks, party politics and deep-rooted informal networks. The inclusiveness of the legislative commissions is shaped by the channels of influence that domestic actors can leverage, and it is determined by the necessity to secure support at various stages of the reform process – namely, adoption, implementation and internalisation. These aspects influence the choice of control strategy over the reform process, which is manifested at the first place in the composition of the legislative commission, as power gatekeepers seek to ensure it meets their strategic needs and allows them to achieve the desired reform outcomes.

For example, if parliamentary approval is essential, the legislative commission will likely include representatives from relevant political parties. Conversely, if implementation hinges on collaboration with key Judicial institutions, their participation will be sought to ensure smooth institutionalisation of the reforms. Additionally, when overall legitimacy is a priority, the inclusion of experts and representatives from specialised organisations, including civil society actors, becomes crucial in order to guarantee the successful adoption of the reform outcomes that best fit the interests of the powerful elite. The decision to open the reforms to a broader range of stakeholders will ultimately hinge on domestic actors' position within the political system and the level of support they can garner. However, while there is often a need to increase the inclusiveness of the reform process to enhance legitimacy and support, this need will be often balanced against the ability of powerful actors to maintain effective control over both the reform process and its outcomes. This delicate balance highlights the complex interplay between inclusiveness and control in shaping the reform trajectories and political outcomes. Understanding this balance between inclusiveness and control is essential for analysing the reform processes and outcomes within hybrid regimes.

The analysis of 11 reform processes in Armenia, Georgia and Moldova reveals how distinct contextual conditions shape the control strategies deployed over democratic reforms. The persistence of certain strategies despite significant changes in the institutional framework and a near-complete turnover of the political elite suggests that path-dependent trajectories are repeatedly used by

different political elites to increase their power or to consolidate their positions, while weakening the democratic accountability mechanisms adopted by the reform process. Therefore, the same strategies have been repeatedly adopted in each country by different political parties and elites. These trends indicate that the control of political institutions by the governing elite allows it to constrain the reform process, as a way to reproduce its power, leading to the repetition of a path-dependent trajectory.

The control strategies employed by pro-democratic elites in Armenia and Georgia mirror the dynamics they struggled against as they were still opposition actors. Therefore, the transition to a pro-democratic governing party in power and the adoption of a parliamentary system do not automatically lead to more democratic policymaking. This development underscores the enduring challenges in hybrid regimes as Georgia and Armenia, where even new political factions, emerging from pro-democratic opposition parties and movements, often revert to familiar strategies of dominant control and exclusion once in power. The continuity of these strategies, despite the transformative potential indicated by the backgrounds of the new elites, points to deep-seated impediments to democratic reforms and highlights the impact of highly polarised contexts characterised by dominant, zero-sum relationships. These dynamics also confirm that political elites follow a path-dependent trajectory in which they capitalise on the positions and procedures they control to increase their power positions.

Therefore, each country presents a unique blend of factors that critically influence how reforms are conceived, discussed and implemented, highlighting the interplay between structural conditions and the specific needs of the governing elite. For instance, the dominant strategy is characteristic of centralised systems, such as presidential regimes with dominant parties. This approach restricts participation to allies, effectively marginalising opposition and civil society. As a result, reforms are shaped to align with incumbent interests, often at the cost of transparency and broader democratic engagement. The centralised power structure in Armenia facilitated the recurrent use of a dominant control strategy, whereby reforms were typically orchestrated by the executive, bypassing extensive legislative negotiation or resistance. This overwhelming presidential influence marginalised the political opposition, stifling the potential for effective checks and balances. Such scenarios led to reform processes that were predominantly executive-driven, limiting democratic engagement and the development of a balanced political system.

In Armenia, the persistence of a dominant control strategy across RPA and My Step government highlights the significant role of such path-dependent learning among diverse political elites. Despite undergoing political reforms, including the 2017 shift to a rationalised parliamentary model and a substantial renewal of the political elite following the Velvet Revolution, these dynamics were largely unchanged. As My Step had an important majority in

the Parliament it also opted for a dominant control strategy. This continuity is due to the limited consolidation of political parties and the prevalence of dominant competition trends. Armenia's highly centralised party system allowed a single political party to control the reform processes, minimising the need for substantial engagement with other political actors. The adoption of a dominant control strategy by the new My Step government underscores that practices of exclusive and dominant policymaking remain entrenched across political elites, particularly in highly polarised political contexts.

Despite both Georgia and Armenia transitioning from centralised presidential or semi-presidential models to parliamentary systems, their political elites pursued slightly different approaches to reforms, shaped by the different level of consolidation of opposition forces within their respective party systems. In Armenia, the political establishment leveraged its centralised power to maintain control and suppress opposition efforts, while in Georgia, the incumbents faced challenges in integrating a highly polarised opposition to legitimise their reforms. Thus, the capabilities and influence of opposition actors play a pivotal role in determining the precise adaptation of control strategies when reforming hybrid regimes.

In Georgia, the path-dependent trajectory is defined by the formal legitimation strategy, which, while ostensibly inclusive by engaging a wide range of actors, maintains stringent control over the reform process by ensuring the over-representation of incumbent's representatives and supporters. Despite the legislative commission's size and diversity, the actual influence wielded by non-governing members remains minimal, ensuring outcomes that predominantly favour the incumbent. This strategy was deployed in Georgia on two occasions, when the incumbent had sufficient parliamentary majorities to pass the constitutional reforms. The formal legitimation strategy was used by both the United National Movement (UNM) during the 2010 Constitutional reform and Georgian Dream-Democratic Georgia (GD-DG) during the 2017 Constitutional reform. On both occasions, the effective opposition efforts orchestrated by political parties and civil society significantly challenged this strategy.

After 2012, Georgia transitioned to a parliamentary system, reducing the degree of power centralisation in the executive and introducing the need for more inclusive and negotiated approaches to governance. Therefore, the formal legitimation strategy was crafted to project an image of broad participation and inclusion, thereby enhancing the perceived legitimacy of the 2017 Constitutional reform adopted by the GD-DG. However, in both instances – with the UNM in 2010 and with the GD-DG in 2017 – the adoption of a formally inclusive strategy did not hinder the incumbents from tightly controlling the reform process and tailoring its outcomes to serve their short- and mid-term interests, despite the inclusion of a high number of politically diverse actors. This pattern underscores the perceived need to keep the balance of the

formal appearance of inclusivity, which often masks the underlying control exerted by those in power.

Lastly, in Moldova, the strategies for controlling political reforms between 2010 and 2020 were deeply influenced by its fragmented party system and weak institutional frameworks, compounded by widespread influence of neopatrimonial networks. Therefore, the prevalent strategy in the case of Moldova is the informal control strategy, which is characterised by the instrumental manipulation of the reform process by political institutions and parties co-opted by neopatrimonial organisations. This strategy deploys a smaller, more opaque legislative commission, and involves influencing members of political parties with fluid political allegiances within the Parliament, where shifts in loyalty and unstable party ties are commonplace.

Particularly in 2016, this informal control strategy was crucial in reintroducing direct presidential elections, and ahead of the 2017 parliamentary elections, it was instrumental in adopting a mixed electoral system. Such pivotal changes underscore the use of informal control strategies to adjust the electoral frameworks, favouring specific political interests, linked to neopatrimonial networks. Additionally, the use of institutions like the Constitutional Court to advance party interests – rather than uphold impartial justice – highlighted broader issues of accountability and transparency in Moldova's political framework. In essence, the instrumental use and informal control of Moldova's institutional and party system between 2010 and 2020 resulted in a façade democracy, where neopatrimonial competition overshadowed genuine inclusivity and equality. Although the party system in Moldova appeared pluralistic, marked by multipartyism, the actual control of legislation frequently reflects the particularistic interests of neopatrimonial networks. This was particularly evident when PLDM MPs, amidst a deep legitimacy crisis against the PDM, filed a complaint to the Constitutional Court in 2016 advocating for direct presidential elections. The subsequent adoption of a mixed electoral system in 2017 with the support of PSRM and PDM deputies, who both have historical ties to Moldova's Communist Party, suggests a concealed layer of coordination based on past loyalties and ongoing collaboration on key political reforms.

Moreover, the PDM managed to form a government in spite of having only 20% of the MPs by leveraging organisational support from various parties, capitalising on their shifting loyalties. This strategy repeatedly enabled the PDM to control reforms adopted by the legislature and influence ostensibly impartial institutions like the Constitutional Court, thereby obstructing the advancement of democratic reforms and entrenching informal elitist competition trends. This subordination of institutions to the whims of oligarchic party leaders has rendered accountability mechanisms largely ineffective, highlighting the profound impact of the informal control strategy on Moldova's political and legal landscape. The weakening of democracy in this

context is rooted in the instrumental use of political institutions by informal networks, which prioritise personalist or economic interests over democratic integrity. Such dynamics diminish the representativity of the political system and restrict citizens' ability to access and influence decision-making processes.

In essence, the path-dependent continuity in control strategies in the three countries indicates elite learning of undemocratic practices that reproduce, based on the prioritisation of the rational cost-benefit calculations by domestic elites seeking to maximise their political power. While Armenia's strategies often rely overtly on maintaining power within a tightly knit political elite with clear control over political and judicial institutions, Georgia's approach to governance is characterised by more complex negotiations, due to the need to balance the appearance of inclusivity with the actual practices of control. In Moldova, the manipulation of political reforms and parties in the interest of neopatrimonial networks became commonplace between 2010 and 2020 defining the path-dependent trajectory of restraint reforms. The persistence of control strategies across different political elites suggests that despite the emergence of ostensibly more democratic elites, normative considerations regarding democratic principles and Rule of Law still have not become central factors shaping the political behaviour of domestic elite. The persistent use of dominant, informal control or even formal legitimacy strategies indicates that the primary motivation for these elites remain pragmatic rational cost-benefit calculations seeking to maintain or even increase their power positions, while overshadowing ideals of inclusivity, democratic freedom and equality.

Additionally, the use of these control strategies to restrain democratisation underscore the challenges that democratic champions meet in hybrid regimes. They highlight how control mechanisms, initiated at the early stages of reform processes, significantly shape the trajectory and outcomes of political reforms. This insight into the deployment of these strategies reveals the interplay between entrenched power dynamics and the formal democratic aspirations, which in ten out of 11 reform cases analysed here remain overshadowed. This analytical approach towards hybrid regimes also equips policymakers and scholars with the tools to navigate and possibly mitigate the challenges in fostering genuine democracy in such complex political contexts.

6.2.2 Increased Polarisation as an Indirect Challenge

The political trajectories of Armenia, Georgia and Moldova underscore a profound erosion of democratic norms, where ruling parties manipulate political institutions for power retention, fostering cycles of exclusion, polarisation and deep societal divisions. The long-term repetition of exclusionary decision-making control strategies as a mechanism to restrain democratic reforms and their manipulation by powerful elite aiming to consolidate their power positions significantly increases the political polarisation. This monopolisation

of power, coupled with a lack of genuine inclusivity and transparency, and the persistent control of the political reforms renders political competition and participation ineffective, while street protests and other forms of unconventional participation increase. These deepening divides fuel increased social mobilisation, pushing politically contentious processes beyond the confines of the formal political institutions and institutionalised channels of policymaking.

In Armenia, the extensive control exerted by a single political faction over representative and Rule of Law institutions starkly demonstrated how political systems can be manipulated for partisan advantage. This dominant control not only distorts the democratic process but also intensifies zero-sum dynamics between the government, led by the RPA until 2018, and its opposition. This situation was particularly evident in the politicisation of trials involving leaders of the Republican Party of Armenia, who were implicated in the 2008 post-electoral protests. The entrenched political inequality and open manipulation of democratic processes have significantly eroded public trust in national institutions, driving citizens towards unconventional forms of participation as they seek justice and accountability beyond traditional electoral mechanisms. These conditions were among the catalysts that precipitated the 2018 Velvet Revolution in Armenia.

Georgia's political context presents a different, yet equally troubling dynamic. Despite the appearance of inclusivity, the ruling party maintains stringent control over reform processes, leaving little room for genuine democratisation. While opposition and civil society actors are nominally included, genuine decision-making authority remains entrenched within the governing elite. This pervasive influence undermines the autonomy of public institutions and erodes their legitimacy. The resulting diminished trust in these institutions has fuelled social frustration, leading to widespread protests demanding electoral reforms and enhanced transparency. Additionally, the successful adoption of a foreign agents' law and the subsequent social mobilisations underscore the ongoing struggles in Georgia's political system.

In Moldova, the pervasive use of informal control strategies through opaque negotiations starkly limits citizens' equality and their capacity to exercise political rights effectively. The manipulation of the Constitutional Court is a prime example, demonstrating how accountability mechanisms, designed to serve the public interest, were repurposed to reinforce partisan and neopatrimonial power. This subversion has deepened a sense of injustice among Moldovans, due to their limited access to institutional accountability mechanisms. This perceived inequality fostered significant political tension and polarisation between 2015 and 2020, exacerbating divisions within the country. However, it also led to the emergence of a reform-oriented group of actors around the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS), which succeeded in establishing a government in 2021 after an important electoral victory.

6.2.3 Rising Resistance to the Path-dependent Control of Reforms

In the past decade, Armenia, Georgia and Moldova have seen a surge in demand for substantial democratic reforms, driven by a need to restore integrity and trust of their political institutions. When examining political reforms in Rule of Law, interinstitutional relations and electoral accountability, a significant rise in pro-democratic social activism was highlighted, alongside the growth and even consolidation in some cases of pro-democratic parties. The focus of this book on domestic actors that are actively engaged in political reforms also emphasises the obstacles they face while resisting democratic subversion. Understanding the different control strategies used by powerful domestic gatekeepers sheds light on the challenges faced by democratic champions who aim to counter democratic subversion. Indeed, the literature often overlooks the perspectives of actors who resist such subversions (Schedler, 2024).

The analysis of the control strategies in political reforms in my research was inspired by multiple references in interviews with civil society and opposition actors. They consistently claimed that they had no access to the reform process and that the drafting and negotiation of reforms was conducted in a closed manner. This was considered a significant setback by civil society activists, who sought to raise social awareness of the decision-making on key institutional reforms. These repeated reports drove the exploration of how these actors encounter and address the difficulties imposed by each strategy when trying to influence democratic reforms controlled by powerful political actors (Schedler, 2024). Therefore, the research explores the resistance and initiatives that competing domestic actors may mount to further develop democratisation efforts or to resist autocratic subversion, providing insights into the limitations they need to address. By identifying these dynamics, the research sheds light on the conditions that contribute to the incumbents' success in institutional manipulation and highlights the need of adaptation and the variety of oppositional tactical choices in different political environments. This comprehensive analysis of both control strategies and resistance offers critical insights into the broader processes of autocratisation, expanding the understanding of how opposition forces can more effectively engage in resistance efforts.

Notably, understanding the control strategies sheds light on the limitations imposed by powerful gatekeepers on civil society and opposition when developing their resistance actions. For instance, the use of a dominant strategy allows the incumbent and other powerful actors to fully control the reform while completely limiting the access of competing political forces. The main challenge in this situation is the lack of transparent information on the decision-making process until the reform is formally adopted by the legislative commission. Moreover, the subversion of already adopted measures is

particularly challenging in highly centralised contexts where the incumbent controls both the executive branch and possesses the majority required for legislative approval of the law. This concentration of power makes it exceedingly difficult for opposition and civil society actors to influence or reverse reforms once they have been enacted, thereby stiffening any potential for democratic accountability and further entrenching power centralisation in the incumbent. The selective negotiation strategy in a very similar way limits the access to information on the reform drafting process.

Through the formal legitimation strategy, the incumbent seeks to co-opt opposition and civil society to legitimise its reforms. By incorporating opposition members into the drafting process, ruling elites can dilute oppositional capabilities by incorporating a veneer of inclusiveness and legitimacy, while effectively steering reforms to serve autocratic objectives. This tactic not only weakens unified resistance but also legitimises the incumbent's actions in the eyes of both domestic and international audiences, making it harder for democratic actors to mount effective opposition. The main risk, therefore, is that some organisations might be co-opted by the incumbent, having a legitimising effect on the reform process, while weakening any resistance or opposition actions. However, the main opportunity for any opposition and civil society actors in this case is their access to more or less transparent information on the evolution and the main measures being developed in the reform draft. This awareness allows them to prepare in a timely manner and develop strategies to counteract measures that may undermine democratic institutions. The effectiveness of such timely resistance efforts is notably greater in comparison to the countermeasures against a reform draft already adopted by the legislative commission, by the executive or by Parliament in a dominant system.

The informal control strategy is the most subtle approach, wherein political parties and institutions are instrumentally used by neopatrimonial networks to steer key political reforms. This strategy enables the definition of limited political reforms, rendering democratic accountability mechanisms ineffective. In such contexts, the effective control of Rule of Law institutions can offer neopatrimonial networks protection from accountability mechanisms. The main difficulty in this case is the identification of institutional changes, designed to protect the interests of informal neopatrimonial organisations. The lack of formality poses significant challenges in identifying the mechanisms for democratic subversion and the outcomes, which hinders any opposition or resistance. This profound lack of transparency and formal procedure makes it extremely difficult for opposition forces to develop coherent strategies to counteract these measures or to mobilise public support effectively.

The deployment of strategic countermeasures by opposition and civil society actors – marked notably by political protests and the leveraging of international support – exerts pressure on governing bodies, but rarely achieves

the revocation of reforms that had been manipulated by incumbent forces. Rising social resistance and increased political participation has defined the reforms in the last decade in Armenia and Georgia, wherein unconventional tactics are increasingly validated as strategic levers for influencing institutional decision-makers. The 2018 Velvet Revolution in Armenia serves as a clear example of this trend. Triggered by the diminishing legitimacy of the RPA government, due to its instrumentalisation of political reforms, the revolution reflects heightened social activism and the development of diverse, innovative social movements that have strengthened public engagement throughout the 2010s. Armenia's social resistance is largely shaped by internal dynamics, with the nation's aspirations towards European integration exerting only a limited impact.

These domestic efforts are reinforced by close cooperation with international democracy support actors like the EU. This combination of social activism, opposition parties and international support has over the last five years forged more dynamic and qualitatively novel relationships compared to earlier decades. This collaboration has been marked by their enhanced specialisation, accumulated experience and more sophisticated strategic approaches. For instance, Georgia's opposition and civil society resistance strategies traditionally align with its EU aspirations, enhancing international leverage over domestic dynamics bolstered by societal support for EU integration. Georgia's civil society approach to countering political reforms controlled by the government were partially successful due to the robust platforms which developed significant advocacy. International organisations have supported reform initiatives demanded by domestic opposition and civil society, underscoring the critical need to reinforce democratisation efforts. Georgia's developments have repeatedly demonstrated how the synergistic efforts of an active civil society, opposition forces and international pressure can effectively counteract control over political institutions and reforms. This social and international pressure exerted on Georgia's government has led to the partial mitigation of adverse impacts by reducing the majoritarian components of its electoral system. However, the repeated introduction of the foreign agents' law indicates an intensification of the struggle between the government, civil society and opposition forces in the democratic subversion of political institutions.

The continuous trajectory of this positive dynamic depends often to a great extent on the level of consolidation of opposition parties ready to integrate future governments. This key role of political parties was seen in Moldova, where PAS emerged in the context of the 2015 anticorruption scandals and has managed to reverse some of the reforms adopted in the past. Specifically, Moldova revisited the electoral reform with the reinstatement of the proportional electoral system, initially adopted at the beginning of its independence. Building upon these new foundations, it is important that the new governments seeking to establish democratic institutions often face sabotage

techniques of key institutional actors that have been nominated by the previous governing elite, as was the case with the Constitutional Court in Moldova and Armenia, and the Supreme Court in Georgia. Consequently, the aspirations to renew the composition of formally impartial institutions often emerge after the change in power, reproducing past dynamics of the political nominations by pro-democratic governments.

These dynamics of democratic subversion and resistance reveal trends that are likely to emerge in other hybrid regimes, particularly in post-communist countries where similar democratic subversion and resistance strategies may be deployed. Depending on the specific political systems, party dynamics and the influence of neopatrimonial networks, such strategies of democratic subversion are expected to mirror the patterns identified in this research. Thus, the findings presented can serve as a broader framework for examining democratic subversion across different hybrid regimes in the region and beyond. Such analysis can enrich our knowledge of autocratisation processes and offers critical insights into the mechanisms at play in hybrid regimes.

6.3 Identifying Democratisation Contingencies

Ten of the 11 reform processes remain under the strict control of incumbent elites, which employ control strategies that best align with their interests and positions within the broader political system, as they allow them to entrench their influence within the institutional system. However, an inclusive strategy was used in only one case – Georgia's Rule of Law reforms developed between 2012 and 2015. Here, the reform process followed the arrival of new political parties in power through a wave of social protests. The GD-DG sought social legitimation by showcasing a strong political will to carry out democratising Rule of Law reforms. To this end, it adopted a broadly inclusive strategy for the composition of the legislative commission in charge of drafting the Rule of Law reform.

An inclusive strategy involves broad participation from diverse actors in the legislative commission, commonly occurring in fragmented political systems. In such systems, collaboration between governing and opposition parties is essential to garner parliamentary and societal support for reforms. This strategy ensures that different perspectives are considered, reflecting a strong commitment to democratic outcomes. For instance, the Georgian Dream's use of this strategy in defining the initial Rule of Law reform between 2012 and 2015 was driven by the need to gain political and social support and, more broadly, legitimacy. As a relatively new political party, it was crucial for Georgian Dream to display its commitment to implement genuine democratic reforms, especially in re-establishing the Rule of Law as a counterbalance to the executive. This was particularly pertinent given the power excesses committed by the previous UNM government, highlighting the demand for

significant political change in the country. Thus, the two key conditions that led to the development of a draft reform process with effective democratic accountability mechanisms in Georgia were the weaker governing party's position, which required an inclusive reform process in order to strengthen its position, and to respond to the social protests demanding effective reforms.

This momentum of social and political support for Rule of Law reforms, combined with the relatively weak position of the new GD-DG government in its first mandate, imposed the need for an inclusive reform strategy, granting broad access to key political and social figures to gain legitimacy and support for the reforms. This window of opportunity allowed the definition of a genuinely democratic reform draft which sought to reduce the political influence and hierarchical control within the Judiciary. The Georgian example serves as a revealing case of episodic weaknesses prompting inclusivity and the development of significant democratic accountability mechanisms. In essence, initial inclusivity driven by a new government seeking legitimacy resulted in effective democratic reform drafts.

However, the possibility of the adoption of such meaningful accountability mechanisms provoked clear opposition from the judicial leadership, which, combined with GD-DG's electoral victory in 2016, induced a shift towards a formal legitimation strategy, allowing the control of the reform by the Judicial leadership. This electoral success and the consolidation of the GD-DG party's political position made the autonomous adoption of the reform possible without the need to seek the support of other parties. This new perspective emboldened the incumbents to shift to a formal legitimation strategy, thereby undermining the achieved inclusivity and compromising the democratic reforms for political control over the Judiciary. Consequently, the new approach, prioritising judicial actors in 2017, led to the adoption of legislative measures that continued the hierarchical control within the judiciary, allowing for pressure to be exerted on judges. The lack of commitment of the GD-DG to democratic values manifested in the autonomous adoption of the second draft reform prepared by a legislative commission dominantly controlled by the Judiciary.

The outcome of the shift from an inclusive to a formal legitimation strategy, which prioritised the Judiciary's leadership in 2017 within the composition of legislative networks, resulted in only limited guarantees for judicial independence. Specifically, political influence in the selection of key judicial bodies and the role and selection of Chairpersons allowed the judicial leadership to maintain its hierarchical influence. Therefore, the control over key institutional positions remained an essential asset for political competitors aiming to influence judicial institutions. Such judicial systems can easily be manipulated by politicians into a "political weapon against their adversaries" (Maravall, 2002: 298), while individual judges remain subject to the control of their hierarchical superiors. Despite its ultimate failure, this reform attempt

provides a glimpse at otherwise elusive political contingency, containing the potential for genuine democratising reforms. The arrival of new political parties following social mobilisations demanding meaningful Rule of Law reforms are thus identified as especially precious opportunities for change.

These findings, together with the understanding of the control strategies developed by powerful gatekeepers, shed light on the path-dependent nature of political reforms in hybrid regimes. The EU demonstrably failed to capitalise on these rare opportunities for genuine reform, as the EU political conditionality focused on a formalistic legal analysis. EU institutions have tended to issue critical statements about limited democratisation efforts only after social mobilisations or media exposure of judiciary irregularities and Rule of Law violations. However, the political opportunity for the adoption of meaningful democratic mechanisms, created by the conjunction of social demands and a weak governing party in Georgia between 2012 and 2015, was significantly missed. This failure underscores the critical nature of seizing such rare political contingencies to achieve genuine democratic progress. The episodic weaknesses in the incumbent might prompt the inclusion of more diverse social and political actors if their support becomes necessary for the reforms' approval and implementation.

These contrasting developments of missed opportunities for democratisation that are followed by a dynamic interaction between domestic and international pressures to prevent democratic subversion confirm the importance of gaining an early understanding of domestic processes. Although this interplay may not yet be sufficient to significantly deepen democracy, it underscores the emergence of social and political actors that can resist autocratisation. Lessons must therefore be extracted from these untimely failures if future political reforms are not to go the way of all those cases analysed here. It is only by examining the nuances of these reform attempts from their inception that we can avoid repeating past mistakes and rationally advance on democratic reforms in the region and beyond.

6.4 Outcomes and Implications of Controlled Reforms

The analysis of the strategies used by domestic actors to restrain the progress of democratic reforms offers insights into the specific institutional areas that are targeted, unveiling the mechanisms that drive their autocratisation efforts. Therefore, it is important to also identify the outcomes of these partial or *façade* democratic reforms. Identifying the elements of political reforms that are obstructed or deliberately diluted offers a deeper understanding of the strategic objectives guiding the behaviour of political actors and mechanisms, thereby maintaining the entrenchment of these countries in the grey zone of hybrid regimes and undermining the very foundations of democracy they claim to support.

Political elites who manipulate political reforms primarily aim to secure and dominate crucial institutional positions, ensuring their grip on power remains unchallenged. Specifically, the control of key appointments in the Judicial hierarchy is a central element in the strategy used by domestic actors to exert direct influence on the Rule of Law. For instance, in Armenia, the executive exerted considerable influence over key judicial positions, significantly affecting the impartiality and independence of the judiciary. This influence also impacts career progressions, disciplinary proceedings and the regular workload management within the judiciary, allowing the executive to shape the judicial performance according to its preferences. In Georgia, similar trends can be observed in the political influence over appointments within the High Council of Justice, especially following change in government.

The struggle for political control over the nomination of the Constitutional Court, the High Council of Justice, Supreme Court makes this dynamic evident in all three countries. These appointments frequently align with the political interests of the ruling elite, ensuring that the judiciary functions not as an independent branch of government, but rather as an extension of executive power. This alignment often compromises the judiciary's ability to act impartially, reinforcing the control of the executive over judicial functions. Additionally, in the three countries, the hierarchical structure and concentration of power within judicial positions, such as the Chairs and Vice-Chairs of the Courts, can significantly affect the individual independence of judges through their career development or disciplinary actions. Both Georgia and Moldova retained the probation period before permanent nomination of a judge, which poses additional risks to judicial independence and equality. Furthermore, the vague phrasing and unclear regulations governing disciplinary proceedings across the three countries create opportunities for direct influence on the decisions of individual judges.

The most significant impact of these measures is the substantial erosion of judicial independence, which transforms judicial institutions into genuine political tools for targeting political opponents, while providing protection for incumbents and their close associates. Consequently, the effectiveness of Rule of Law reforms is heavily compromised, leading to a cycle where the judiciary is perceived not as an impartial arbiter but as a tool for political ends. By maintaining tight political control over the judiciary, domestic actors thwart any substantive legal reforms from developing an impartial institutional framework. These dynamics undermine efforts to establish a fair, impartial and politically untainted institutional framework – core tenets of the Rule of Law – as they severely compromise the effectiveness of these reforms. Additionally, this instrumental control also erodes public trust in the state institutions – perpetuating the hybrid regimes' status quo.

The second goal of the incumbent when controlling political reforms in the field of interinstitutional accountability was to control the use of pivotal

procedures that could otherwise rebalance political forces, such the no-confidence vote. In Armenia and Georgia, there is a clear shift towards a parliamentary model and a proportional electoral system, which reflects a broader regional evolution towards gradual power decentralisation. In both countries, the redistribution of power towards the Prime Minister, coupled with enhanced roles for Parliament, marks an institutional reconfiguration to improve democratic pluralism over centralised presidential systems dominant in the 1990s. Nonetheless, despite these advancements, the governing elite continues to hold sway over crucial procedures that could otherwise rebalance political forces. This retention of control sustains a degree of power centralisation in the Prime Minister and within the parliamentary majority, perpetuating a pattern of power concentration despite the introduction of a parliamentary model.

In Georgia, the regulation of mechanisms like the no-confidence vote, budget management authority and the power to form investigative or temporary commissions are indicative of the same trend. Specifically, the effectiveness of these procedures as accountability mechanisms is compromised by their limited implementation, largely controlled by the parliamentary majority. From 2004 to 2013, for example, despite 25 requests for the formation of investigative commissions, only four were approved – highlighting a significant gap in translating legal frameworks into practical, effective governance tools.

Similarly, Armenia has moved towards a mixed or rationalised parliamentary model, where significant parliamentary majorities dominate decision-making, thereby moulding the policy making to favour the incumbent. This centralisation of the party system deeply entrenches the incumbent's power positions. Interestingly, the use of different control strategies in Georgia's and Armenia's constitutional reforms has resulted in notably similar institutional frameworks. This development underscores that the reform process was effectively under control of powerful elite despite the use of formal legitimation strategy in Georgia, which formally intended to project an image of inclusivity. The openly dominant control strategy used by the RPA in the 2015 Constitutional reform led to the adoption of a similar institutional outcome. In both cases, the high level of control by the incumbent and the reluctance to align the constitutional drafts with international recommendations reveals a calculated move to reinforce a rationalised parliamentary model, closely aligned with incumbent interests. This approach highlights the strategic control over constitutional reforms to sustain a centralised political structure. Additionally, the politicisation of the Constitutional Court illustrates how political forces manipulate the institutional framework for partisan gains rather than for effective democratisation.

Reforms in the field of electoral accountability, more than any other, prove that institutional reforms are manipulated by political actors in order to retain

their power grip. This includes the continuation of mixed electoral systems and the frequent changes of the electoral threshold. The reluctance to adopt a fully proportional system like in Georgia underscores the protracted and polarised nature of this reform process, reflecting deep-seated resistance among political elites to relinquish control, which hinders the adoption of more democratic reforms. Moreover, political polarisation increases in the three countries, due to this reluctance of governing elites to introduce more pluralistic electoral systems.

Overall, in Armenia, Georgia and Moldova, the stated objectives at the beginning of interinstitutional and electoral reform processes often disguise the real goals that the legal norms and their implementation follow. This leads to the establishment of mechanisms that, even if theoretically promoting accountability, in practice remain ineffective and prone to political manipulation. The discrepancy between the supposed intent of these reforms and their actual impact highlights a gap in fostering democratic accountability, emphasising the enduring challenge of aligning the formal intentions with genuine political will and effective implementation. Therefore, an analysis of the long-term consequences of adopting parliamentary systems and proportional electoral systems should assess whether they achieved greater political pluralism. This study of the actual outcomes in the long-term will be crucial to understanding if the structural changes in the institutional framework genuinely foster more diverse political processes or merely adjust the mechanisms of control.

6.5 International Influence

International actors such as the EU and Russia play nuanced roles in shaping the democratic reforms and regime transformation in Armenia, Georgia and Moldova. Through a combination of financial support, conditionality and strategic regional alliances, these international actors influence domestic democratisation processes. Despite notable differences between the influence of the EU and Russia, both regional actors have evolved over time, as they developed a more targeted approach towards domestic actors, while addressing growingly similar topics.

Specifically, in the early 2010s the EU's external influence approach was more formalistic and technical focusing on normative values, without clearly effective positive and negative conditionality linked to the contractual and economic incentives it provided. Over time it has developed a more targeted approach for engagement and conditionality towards domestic elite involving growing politicisation of its support. Additionally, the regional geopolitical developments in Ukraine since 2014 and notably since 2022, including the invasion of Ukraine, have brought a new perspective to the EU's engagement in the region, which has been defined as a 'geopolitical

awakening'. On the other hand, Russia has continued its traditionally geo-political and realist approach towards the countries in the region, while at the same time developing a normative contestation of liberal values and norms promoted by the EU in the region. This evolution of the regional approaches of the EU and Russia confirms that both actors are currently involved in intense normative contestation and geopolitical competition over the future of the region.

6.5.1 From Strategic Economic Cooperation to Geopolitical Alignment and Confrontation

Both the EU and Russia use economic incentives and the development of strategic frameworks for cooperation with the countries in the region. For instance, some of the incentives provided to Armenia, Georgia and Moldova included financial assistance, access to advantageous trade conditions and even access to the EU or the CIS market, visa exemptions and participation in multilateral platforms and organisations. These incentives were provided or retained based on the political performance and geopolitical alignment of the countries in the region.

However, the initial provision of these incentives by the EU at the beginning of the 2010s displayed clear weaknesses. For instance, the conditions for provision of key incentives such as the signature of AA/DCFTA and the Visa Liberalisation Plans were very limited and formalistic in terms of democratisation processes, that is the adoption of the comprehensive and inclusive reform strategies without any clear stipulation of the requirements for comprehensiveness and inclusivity. When these early rewards were provided, the reform efforts were discontinued or stalled consistently, as was the case of Moldova (after 2015) and Georgia (after 2017). Consequently, the EU was in a difficult position when important corruption scandals emerged in Moldova or the rise of social protests in opposition to the adoption of instrumental reforms for the GD-DG control over the political system. On those instances, the contractual AA/DCFTA frameworks had been already adopted and substantial funding had been provided, leaving the EU without the possibility to promote democratic change through the provision of positive incentives. Consequently, the EU introduced targeted and stringent negative conditionality, leading to retained funding due to violations of democratic principles and norms. Despite the application of such measures and the pressure of social protests, however, the PDM elites in Moldova resisted the EU's pressure, while the protracted negotiations between the incumbent, the opposition and the EU's senior official led only to limited concessions. Therefore, a key consideration of the EU is the need to develop effective mechanisms against democratic backsliding at an early stage of the reform processes and in those cases when crucial incentives have been provided and it is difficult to

induce domestic elites' compliance. Such considerations become even more important in the context of the EU's Enlargement and the candidacy of Moldova and Georgia. Since 2019, the EU has supported civil society opposition in Georgia against critical measures which represent backsliding in terms of democratisation, such as the foreign agent's law and the electoral reform. However, its limited success, as manifested in the political developments in the country in 2024, highlights the challenges such mechanisms face in the context of intense geopolitical and normative competition.

Similarly, Russia traditionally used its influence through positive incentives by leveraging its migration and trade policies and the collaboration within regional organisations as the Commonwealth of Independent States and Eurasian Economic Union. In these interactions, Russia capitalised on the deep-seated regional interdependencies inherited from the Soviet era, leveraging these to exert considerable economic pressure on Armenia, Georgia and Moldova for continued economic alignment with Russia. In addition, the Russian approach included the use of positive conditionality when domestic political leaders aligned with Russia's foreign policy, as with the provision of more beneficial conditions for Moldovan migrants before the election campaign. When Moldova or Georgia signalled their interest in closer collaboration with the EU, Russia interpreted this in zero-sum terms and imposed sanctions on Moldova's products or limitations on its workers. In response, the EU deployed a mitigation strategy, offering positive incentives to offset Russian sanctions and trade disruptions.

Notably, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 transformed the geopolitical dimension of regional relations. Even if Russia showed that it perceived the economic cooperation between the EU and the associated countries, specifically Ukraine, in geopolitical terms with zero-sum implications for Russia, the EU denied and sought to mitigate such perceptions. However, this approach has undergone significant evolution following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, where the EU has shifted from mitigating Russian geopolitical perceptions to the development of crucial geopolitical strategies and the implementation of targeted sanctions. With this new reality, the EU moved to actively supporting its associated countries like Moldova through the affirmation of their sovereignty by direct political support and their integration into European markets. Moreover, the approval of the candidacy status to Georgia and Moldova has marked a significant step towards affirming the boundaries of the EU, as a response to the geopolitical competition. Notably, the EU's geopolitical awakening is marked by its insistence on rules based international order, in contrast to the realist approach defining Russia's perspective (Raik *et al.*, 2024). As a result of this geopolitical competition, the dependence on Soviet-era economic ties has been reduced, as in Moldova, where the reduction of energy and trade dependency on Russia has become an important goal for the PAS government.

6.5.2 *Normative Competition and Differential Empowerment of Domestic Elite*

The provision of economic, military and energy incentives by the EU and Russia has been accompanied by intensifying normative contestation over the last 15 years. The intertwining of domestic strategies, regional normative contestation and geopolitical competition contribute significantly to shaping reform processes and political institutions in the region. The influence they wield might be also polarising on occasions, as it deepens existing political divides. As reform processes become increasingly politicised, the influence of the EU and Russia in these spaces shapes not only governmental actions but also social responses. Notably, when applying negative and positive conditionality, the EU and Russia effectively used differential empowerment of domestic elite. Geopolitical cleavages have a critical role in the region and it is increasingly difficult for the EU to avoid getting involved in the increasingly politicised and geopolitical competition.

Russia seeks to amplify internal tensions within Moldova and Georgia by engaging with Russian-speaking or secessionist minorities, thereby intensifying domestic pressures. Conversely, the EU supports reform-minded, pro-European elites and civil society organisations in these nations. For instance, the EU has backed reform-driven parties like ACUM and PAS, while Russia has unequivocally supported the PSRM's initiatives in Moldova and the RPA in Armenia. Specifically, the EU has developed a more targeted approach of differential empowerment where it supports and legitimises the actions of reform-oriented elite, which is coupled with explicit and stricter conditionality in response to breaches of the Rule of Law. When the EU was successful in negotiating the reversal of democratic backsliding in Georgia, its efforts were accompanied by strong social mobilisations. What was at stake both for the government and the EU between 2010 and 2020 was the symbolic image of Georgia as a democratic success story.

However, the active participation of civil society and opposition parties frequently intensifies and polarises their confrontations with the government. Intriguingly, such polarisation and politicisation, particularly noted in Georgia, has further strained interactions not only between the government and the opposition but also within the broader civil society. For instance, domestic opposition groups and civil society actors seek the assistance of the EU as an international leverage when advocating for democratic principles, indirectly influencing government actions. Even if this strategy has proven its effectiveness on specific instances, it also leads to the politicisation of civil society, with accusations from the government that CSO are merely extensions of the opposition, seeking to undermine the government (Mkhatvari *et al.*, 2018).

In parallel, domestic actors have used this international support to bolster their strategies, as they strategically frame their behaviour based on the

prevailing international discourses. Notably, the RPA elite in Armenia presented a rival such as Pashinyan as a populist anti-democratic leader to the EU, while portraying the Velvet Revolution to Russia as a colour revolution aimed at diminishing Russian influence. In addition, domestic conservative actors tend to align with pro-Russian narratives, as they collaborate on key social and political events. Additionally, neoconservative narratives reflect the increased collaboration of organisations as the Russian Orthodox Church, Duma representatives and conservative groups in the three countries analysed. In parallel, the EU supports liberal progressive groups that support minority rights, including LGBTQ rights groups. Such dynamics further deepen social polarisation, based on the opposition between liberal pro-EU factions and conservative pro-Russian groups, each championing differing sets of values and visions for the future. Such polarisation can hinder democratic reforms, rendering inclusive decision-making impossible.

These geopolitical cleavages have been further strengthened after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Interestingly, the increase in social support for the EU integration of countries such as Moldova have unfolded alongside the intensification of geopolitical tensions. Similar is the dynamic in Armenia, where the provision of security guarantees in the framework of the Common Security Treaty Organisation was a pivotal incentive for alignment with Russia. However, this trend was reversed after Azerbaijan effectively captured all the Nagorno Karabakh territories and the Prime Minister Pashinyan indicated readiness to build closer relations with the EU.

6.5.3 Technical Expert Support

The EU has traditionally emphasised adherence to procedural democratic rules, primarily through technical and financial support, which has manifested several weaknesses in the reforms analysed in the region. Domestic political actors seeking to control the reform process often prioritise the external legitimacy provided by the approval of international actors over engaging in relevant domestic consensus-building processes. This is more important as there are substantial differences between domestic and external actors concerning their right to initiative and the consensus-building dynamics of the process. Specifically, external players are constrained by a more reactive role. Consequently, when domestic political reforms are dominantly controlled by powerful domestic gatekeepers, international experts should consider the extent to which they contribute to the legitimation of reforms that can be instrumentally used, as happened during Armenia's constitutional reform. In addition, the EU has faced difficulties in measuring and controlling key political indicators in the field of Judicial independence and other highly political fields. In addition, the purely institutionalist analysis without consideration of the broader social and political context might prove to be highly ineffective.

This technical and formal approach was mimicked by Russia in specific domains, as for example electoral observation. In parallel to the electoral observation mission reports issued by the OSCE/ODIHR, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) issued parallel electoral observation reports presenting an alternative version of the referendums and elections taking place, seeking to oppose and delegitimise the assessments provided by electoral missions organised by the OSCE/ODIHR and European Parliament. These missions are intended to provide alternative assessments of electoral processes, challenging the legitimacy conferred by Western observers and attempting to influence perceptions about the elections.

6.6 Implications for Practitioners and Policymakers

The findings of this research for decision-makers and civil society actors at the domestic and international levels have important implications on the processes of democratisation, democratic subversion and its oppositions. Effective reforms require an in-depth understanding of how domestic actors manipulate legislative processes. The emphasis on the importance of early-stage transparency and meaningful inclusivity is essential to prevent the instrumental use of reforms for particularistic gains and ensure mechanisms are in place for accountability at every stage of the reform process. Notably, transparency and accountability must be meaningful to ensure that different perspectives are genuinely reflected in political reforms, thus preventing strategies like formal legitimation that serve to consolidate power rather than democratise the institutional framework.

In addition, civil society organisations have a vital role in shaping and overseeing the democratic reform process. The findings of this research contribute to developing a targeted approach that will allow civil society organisations to strengthen their advocacy since the early stages of legislative reforms. Enhancing transparency, advocating for inclusive decision-making processes and providing channels for citizen engagement can help counterbalance the influence of powerful political actors. Building networks of collaboration both domestically and with CSOs in Europe is a strategic asset that amplifies their impact.

However, in very polarised contexts as in Georgia and Armenia, reforms are often viewed through a zero-sum lens, where political actors are primarily concerned with securing power rather than fostering democratic principles. This polarisation can lead to the adoption of exclusionary and dominant strategies by governing elites who aim to suppress opposition voices and limit civil society participation. Understanding the level of political polarisation and the politicisation of the relations between civil society and government, and its effects on democratisation efforts is essential for addressing such common challenges. Therefore, effective strategies to mitigate such politicisation

will contribute to developing healthy democratic links between civil society and governmental forces. For example, mechanisms to facilitate bipartisan cooperation and initiatives to increase cross-party deliberations can mitigate the adverse effects of polarisation. International actors and CSOs can support these efforts by facilitating meaningful platforms for dialogue and providing resources for conflict resolution to promote a more collaborative political environment.

International actors, particularly the EU and Russia, exert significant influence over the political reform processes in Armenia, Georgia and Moldova. The EU's shift towards a more targeted support, developing a clear negative conditionality and differential empowerment of reform-oriented elite has deep implications for how democratisation is pursued and perceived in these countries. The development of a structured approach to conditionality, where the implementation of political reforms is rewarded with enhanced EU relations, has been a crucial element refining the EU's democracy support strategy. This approach is an important improvement of the EU's engagement in the region and in its efforts to incentivise genuine democratic changes.

In this context, the definition of clear benchmarks and milestones that truly reflect the democratisation trends of the institutional and political system in broader terms is essential. Two additional elements can be incorporated in the EU's democracy support mechanisms. Firstly, the nuanced understanding of the domestic political environment is critical for international actors to effectively support genuine democratic reforms. For this purpose, it is essential for international actors to avoid a formalistic approach and to consider the actual political dynamics within each country. This includes incorporating the evolution of party systems, broader state-society relations and the overall influence of informal actors, such as neopatrimonial networks, over the institutional system. Such a comprehensive approach is vital because focusing solely on formal institutional frameworks often provides an understanding merely of the *façade,* where the institutional system is actually analysed as an empty shell without taking into account the trends of political domination. These formalistic institutional analyses threaten to ignore key dynamics that influence democratisation efforts and the dynamics of democratic subversion, effectively leading to the reproduction of the very same domination dynamics that keep those countries trapped in the grey zone of hybrid regimes. In essence, the formalistic institutional analysis gives only a superficial picture, which does not reflect the whole reality. If international support is based on this partial picture, it risks supporting the building of partial, incomplete and controlled political institutions.

Secondly, the unintended consequences of the external actors' support for democracy also affect the democratisation process. For instance, the domestic politicisation of external actors' support and the polarisation of liberal pro-EU and conservative pro-Russian political parties and social groups negatively

influences the inclusivity of the decision-making processes. This polarisation can undermine efforts to create a cohesive and inclusive democratic framework. Moreover, dominant domestic actors in both Armenia and Georgia that seek to steer the political reforms in order to reinforce their own power positions have shown the willingness to use the involvement of international actors as a substitute of actual domestic political engagement in the drafting process to legitimise the adoption of superficial reforms. This dynamic creates an environment where public institutions and reforms are perceived as externally driven and lack genuine domestic legitimacy and support. Consequently, this dynamic can exacerbate social frustration with both domestic policymaking and international actors. Therefore, international actors should avoid such instrumentalisation of their expert support, which can indirectly influence the democratisation efforts in hybrid regimes.

In conclusion, the findings of this research contextualise and illustrate the practical challenges involved in the democratic support efforts in hybrid regimes. Applying a similar approach to other post-communist hybrid regimes would enhance the impact of democratisation efforts, ensuring that political reforms lead to substantial and sustainable democratic outcomes. Understanding the precise moments and methods of intervention can foster meaningful progress, making the democratisation process more inclusive, transparent and accountable. Mechanisms for transparency and accountability, when meaningful, can ensure that different perspectives are genuinely reflected in political reforms, thereby preventing the use of strategies serving to consolidate power.

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