D7.1 Background paper

Hybridity and Hybrid Regimes in the Eastern Neighbourhood at a Time of War and Geopolitical Tensions

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101132314

Project acronym:	RE-ENGAGE
Project full title:	Re-Engaging with Neighbours in a State of War and Geopolitical Tensions
Grant agreement no.:	101132314
Type of action:	HORIZON-RIA
Project start date:	fixed date: 1 January 2024
Project duration:	36 months
Call topic:	HORIZON-CL2-2023-DEMOCRACY-01
Project website:	https://re-engaging.eu/
Document:	Background paper | Working paper
Deliverable number:	D7.1
Deliverable title:	Hybridity and Hybrid Regimes in the Eastern Neighbourhood at a Time of War and Geopolitical Tensions
Due date of deliverable:	30.09.2024
Actual submission date:	30.09.2024
Editors:	Sophie Gueudet, Maia Machavariani, Francesco Strazzari
Authors:	Ketevan Bolkvadze, Sophie Gueudet, Maia Machavariani, Roman Petrov, Natalia Putină Oleksandr Sniadanko, Francesco Strazzari, Valentina Teosa
Reviewers:	Morten Bøås, Tomine Eriksdatter Giske, Kari Osland, Marianne Riddervold, Pernille Rieker
Participating beneficiaries:	Whole RE-ENGAGE Consortium
Work Package no.:	7
Work Package title:	Eastern neighbourhood
Work Package leader:	Francesco Strazzari
Work Package participants:	SSSA, EECMD, LU, USM, UESA, NUPI, CAS
Estimated person-months for deliverable:	4
Dissemination level:	PU
Nature:	Demonstrator
Version:	1
Draft/Final:	Final
No of pages (including cover):	65

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101132314

BACKGROUND PAPER

Hybridity and Hybrid Regimes in the Eastern Neighbourhood at a Time of War and Geopolitical Tensions

Ketevan Bolkvadze
Sophie Gueudet
Maia Machavariani
Roman Petrov
Natalia Putină
Oleksandr Sniadanko
Francesco Strazzari
Valentina Teosa

25 SEPTEMBER 2024

SUMMARY

This background paper delivers a comprehensive understanding of the post-independence trajectories of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine toward the consolidation of hybridity, understood as a distinct type of regime that oscillates between democratic and authoritarian practices of power. Organised in three sections, it first tackles the historical dynamics that have shaped those regimes from their transition from the Soviet system of rule. The second section zooms in on the key factors that contributed to the consolidation of hybridity, before analysing how the evolutions of the regimes affected state-society relations and social cohesion. Overall, the background paper provides necessary insights for the EU to adapt its efforts of democracy promotion to the specific nature and dynamics of hybrid regimes in its Eastern Neighbourhood at a time of renewed engagement and new prospects of enlargement.

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101132314

Introduction

This piece is the first of a series of background papers setting the stage for RE-ENGAGE research objectives - that is, to assist the EU in refining its foreign policy toolbox, (including its enlargement and neighbourhood policies) in times of war and geopolitical crises, with a special focus on building democratic resilience and countering hybrid warfare. An earlier paper in this project has investigated the EU's enlargement policies in the wake of this Russian invasion. The authors of the paper stresses that, too often, the EU privileges cooperation with political leaders and state institutions, relying heavily on a 'carrot and stick' approach that fails to bring about durable changes and consolidate the power of leaders only committed to nominal democratic reforms. They conclude by arguing that the EU should consider investing more in a bottom-up approach to strengthening democracy in the candidate countries with the aim of reducing the level of hybridity in some partner states (Buras, Dumoulin, Kelmendi and Marx, 2024).

As a first step forward, we need to deliver a comprehensive understanding of the hybrid governance structures that appear to be prevalent in political regimes in the Western Balkans and Eastern Neighbourhood, for assessing "which means are needed to reduce the room for manoeuvre enjoyed by negative internal and external influences in obstructing the EU's democracy promotion efforts" (Bøås, Giske and Osland, 2024). In order to elaborate a flexible framework for effective EU democracy promotion tailored to meet every region and country needs, RE-ENGAGE has to acknowledge the complexities of their political systems and learn from their various paths of transformations how the EU should address governance issues (Bøås, Giske and Rieker, 2024). To this purpose, we draw an analysis of the ever-evolving components of hybridity that have played a key role in shaping the political regimes and the governance systems in our three case-study countries from the Eastern Neighbourhood since their independence in 1991: Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

Our starting point is that the "transitology" paradigm (Carothers, 2002), which saw regime hybridity as a transitioning phase before externally assisted, fully-fledged liberal democracy could bloom in post-socialist countries in Southeastern and Eastern Europe, has come to an end. The period seemed auspicious for erecting Western representative democracy as a normative arrival point (Dufy and Thiriot, 2013) and assisting the former Soviet Union (FSU) countries in completing the expected "fourth wave of democratisation" (McFaul, 2002). Yet, "gradual declines of democratic regime attributes" (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019) steadily accentuated and led to the consolidation of a distinct type of regime, whose hybrid character is defined according to "a set of ambiguous institutions [...] lacking as it does one or more essential characteristics of that regime but also failing to acquire other characteristics that would make it fully democratic or authoritarian" (Morlino, 2008:7). The unsettledness (Bøås, Giske and Osland, 2024) of hybrid regimes manifest itself in ambivalent form. It displays dynamics of democratic resilience, defined as the 'persistence of democratic institutions' where the quality of democracy is threatened (Boese et al 2021), while at the same time dynamics of

backsliding towards authoritarianism can be observed. The ebbs and flows between democracy and authoritarianism in post-Soviet countries are also influenced by the enduring rent-seeking, by neo-patrimonial practices and often by state-capture that affect their political regimes. Ultimately, it results in a mutual entanglement of the formal and the informal, and in complex nexuses and constellations of incumbent and extra-incumbent actors (Knott, 2018), whose behaviours, interactions and agendas can be understood through the concept of 'theatre state' and a 'shadow state' (Bøås, Giske and Osland, 2024): the persistence of a formal state structure, in coexistence with complex networks of patrons, clients, and dependents that can run from the very national centre of power all the way out to the smallest municipality in the periphery". Those entanglements impact the quality of vertical and horizontal trust, which are crucial elements to assess political stability, societal cohesion and potential for democratic resilience of the state and society, meaning their ability to bounce back from autocratisation or the ability to avoid democratic breakdown (Bøås, Giske and Osland, 2024). We define vertical trust as the trust citizens place in their governmental institutions and political leaders, while horizontal trust is understood as inter-individual or inter-group.

Based on RE-ENGAGE conceptual framework of hybridity and democratic resilience, we seek to evidence how, since the independence of our case study countries Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia in 1991, their political regimes have experienced variations and oscillations between democratization and authoritarianism, a dynamic that Knott (2018) frames as a "democratic-authoritarian dynamic equilibrium". Entailing that there is no clear demarcation between periods of improving democratic governance and periods of backsliding, this phenomenon that leads to the systems of governance we know today, is characterized by a complex entanglement of incumbent and extra-incumbent networks of actors that intersect and operate right within or at the margins of the political arena and shaped neopatrimonial practices of power under the guise of nominal democracy. At a time of renewed EU engagement with its neighbours coinciding with the war in Ukraine and wider geostrategic reconfigurations, we aim to shed light on how the practices of political power by those networked incumbent and extra-incumbent actors participated in institutionalizing hybridity(ies) as enduring model(s) of regime and governance. To what extent they impeded democratic resilience and which interstitial spaces for mobilization in favour of democracy resisted to the hybridization of political power and governance.?

This background paper is organized to first present, in an historical perspective, the common challenges faced by our case countries in exiting and transitioning from "Really Existing Socialism" (the Soviet system of rule) and their political trajectories since 1991, with an emphasis on the recreation of political rule and the legacies of the past systems of governance, the socio-economic downsizes of the transition the security uncertainties generated by the contested transformation of new policies that set the stage of the post-independence evolutions of the regimes in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Attention will be devoted to the pivots in the emergence and consolidation of hybridity as a distinct

type of regime rather than a provisional phase in the linear progress toward full-fledged liberal democracy according to EU standards. In a second part, we will zoom in on the plural facets of hybridity, contrasted with democratic resilience, in the case-study countries: through a comprehensive analysis of the electoral system, party politics, the rule of law, the media system and civil society, we aim to highlight where the hybrid character of the regimes manifests and how the shaping and consolidation of hybridity have partaken in the evolutions of those sectors. Moreover, we will investigate the state of both vertical and horizontal trust as to assess whether it favours or on the contrary hamper the potential for democratic resilience from both the state and society.

Pathways to hybridity: an historical perspective on post-independence regime transformations and consolidations

On their way to and following independence, the trajectories of post-Socialist regimes in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine share institutional and political legacies: all countries were part of the Soviet Union. The end of the communist party-led system of rule opened new political, social and economic horizons among the citizens of the newly independent countries and, a "fourth wave of democratisation" was expected to bring the former Soviet Republics to the model of liberal democracy and an open market economy. The transition to that model, encouraged by external assistance and incentives from Western government and international organisations, was expected to be linear. In addition, the overlapping between processes democratisation and Europeanisation was supposed to speed up democratic reforms (Dimitrova, 2020), by shaping post-Socialist countries in Eastern and Southeastern Europe into suitable candidates for EU. Thirty years on, democracy is far from being consolidated in most post-Soviet countries, while constitutional, institutional and organisational reforms achieved to satisfy the requirements of democratisation programs cannot make up for the overall degraded politico-economic or elites-society relations that partake in the dynamics of backsliding in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

Before diving into the detailed analysis of key factors driving hybridity in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, we aim to give the reader a brief historical insight on the shared patterns that characterized the transitions of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine from the Soviet systems of rule, as well as an illustration of the dynamic nature of the equilibrium between democratization and authoritarianism on which the hybrid regimes are built.

Patterns of transition

A significant number of structural challenges within domestic politics, societies and economics lay in the way of transition from the Soviet system of governance: Ramet and Wagner identified them as "revival of the economy, establishment of a constitutional order to include the rule of law and guarantees for multiparty pluralism, de-monopolisation of the media and the legitimation of the new order." (2010, 9-10). To this list must be added the revival of ethnonational tensions and ramping nationalisms, and the contestation of the borders of the newly independent polities, challenged by separatism. The combination of the above factors hampered the domestic processes of democratization by maintaining some forms of status quo and encouraging the rise of hybridity as a singular model of regime. In addition, the action of the international community to encourage liberalization and promote democratization did not convincingly address those challenges. As a matter of fact, the standards set both in terms of democratic and economic objectives, the top-down incentives to fulfil them, and their ultimate outcomes, have to some extent contributed to fragmenting the political and social arenas in the countries they targeted. The governance systems that historically were formed through the interaction between the international interventions (including state building) and the agendas of local/national actors show the blending of legal and extra-legal economic spheres into hybrid political orders (Strazzari and Kamphuis, 2012). Hence, as a first step in our study of hybrid regimes in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, one needs to examine the trajectories followed when embarking on the transition and rebuilding state-society relations.

Recreating the state and political rule

Comparative studies on post-authoritarian transition highlight the existence of different transition pathways (Karl and Schmitter, 1991). In the case of countries born from the former Soviet Union (FSU), Ramet and Wagner identified specifically four pathways of transitions from above, negotiated transitions, collapse and "fragstucturation", as in a combination of fragmentation and restructuration of the state and its apparatus (Ramet and Wagner, 2010, 17). In the first case, the Communist elites have an essential part in dismantling it, making it an intra-elite phenomenon where the incumbents secured for themselves key position into the new system in the making. In the case of negotiated transitions, the reform of the system was undertaken in consultation between the conservative and reformist trends, including former dissidents. Collapse resulted in the complete renovation from the state system that crumbled either from above, or from below. Finally, "fragsturation" refers to the specific case of the Soviet Union, where the fragmentation of the internal components of the Federation led to restructuration of new polities, sometimes through violent phases. In our case-countries, born from the fragstructuration of the USRR, the new states and political systems did not emerge *ex-nihilo* and still incorporated political legacies from the Soviet Union in the new power structures, with either negotiated transition (Moldova) or transition from above (Ukraine) and collapse (Georgia) (See Way, 2022). Neither model of state

and regime transition managed to bring about radical, fundamental democratic changes and the recreation of political rule encompassed several components of the old Soviet systems, leading up to a stabilization of political power in favour of the incumbent elites after surges of political and sometimes armed violence that down the line stabilized into hybrid regimes.

The role of the elites in the capture of the state apparatus and institutions that they endeavoured to build and promote is instrumental in explaining the stalling of democratic progress and the trajectories of regime hybridisation in our case-study countries. This echoes Charles Tilly's differentiation between "bottom up" dynamics of mass mobilisation in favour of democracy, and "shorter term, instrumental, top down" promotion of democracy by domestic elites that remains somehow disconnected from its citizens and fails to account for broader political and social relationships (1995, 177). As Dimitrova argues (2020), politico-economic process of transitions from communism have empowered a category of elites that has benefited from and partaken in the stalemate of democratization and the consolidation of hybridity. The trend of "partial reforms" impulse in the early days of transition secured rents and access to state resources by its proponents, who turned out not especially keen to pursue further a reformist agenda as much in terms of politics as in terms of economy. The "double transformation", coupled with the legacies of the Soviet-time state-society dynamics (Knott, 2018), favoured the collusion between actors of the political and economic sectors and the manipulation of resources within the existing structures of the state (Ganev 2005, 435) and created extra-legal structures of political and economic governance melded as the state building effort proceeds, through governance mechanisms that blend together international and local actors' agendas at various levels of interaction and concertation. As a result, the structuration of crony capitalism sustained a reproductive system of self-enrichment and intra-elite patron-client dynamics that expended both in the interstices of state -society relations and within segments of society itself. In this context, informal politics and networks of power have become key to maintaining the status quo (Hale, 2014). Moreover, the deeper involvement of actors of the private sector who built a fortune out of privatisation and liberalisation into politics through the foundation of their own political formations, often in the opposition (e.g., Ilan Șor and Vladimir Plahotniuc in Moldova, Mikheil Saakashvili and Bidzina Ivanishvili in Georgia, Petro Poroshenko and Viktor Yanukovych in Ukraine). Use and abuse of judiciary, administrative or regulatory agencies, and parliaments and constant undermining of the principle of check and balances necessary to a functioning democracy are common practices to form, nurture and maintain those constellations of power in which incumbent and extra-incumbent actors are embedded. In addition, by doing so, they negatively affect the design and implementation of public policies and pose significant constraints to the adoption of measures likely to jeopardize the status quo, such as professionalization of the public service that is a requirement for the EU integration. The encroachment of politics and economics, and the diversion of state resources to fuel politico-economic power networks, the shortcomings and the high social costs

of the transition to a capitalist free-market economy eroded the legitimacy of the systemic reforms undertaken as part of the "double transformation" of the political systems and economies.

Socio-economic drawbacks of the economic transition

Though unevenly, by the 2000s, the foundations of market economy had been laid and strengthened in most of the FSU countries. The transition process has proven extremely painful and erratic (Dabrowski, 2023). The neoliberal policy packages designed to launch market transition reforms, with a sharp focus and priority on market liberalization, macroeconomic stabilization, and privatization reforms were implemented at a steadfast, pro-active pace that was advocated for "Institutional development (...) to spring into action from the efficiency of the market-oriented foundations (Gevorkyan, 2018, 124). The 1990s, the first decade of transition, resulted in an enormous slump for regional economies, from which the recovery turned out to be extremely slow, as revealed in the macro-economic indexes. and collapse in GDP for all countries of the former Soviet Union. For instance, following price liberalization and removal of centralized controls, Georgia saw the worst decline in annual GDP growth rates by almost 45 percent in 1992, while Ukraine and Moldova registered a decline of respectively 23 and 30 percent in 1994 (Gevorkyan, 2018, 127). Coupled with skyrocketing hyperinflation, and a tremendous loss in industrial output, the blow was so severe and that even in 2021, the pre-1989 level of GDP had not been restored for the three countries. Taking for example Georgia, which managed to attain some level of macroeconomic stability in the second decade of transition, particularly following the events of the Rose Revolution of 2003, the growth did not translate into a significant reduction in poverty or a meaningful decrease in income inequality. Key growth drivers have become real estate, energy, and communications and further entrench the dependence of the economy on a continued inflow of foreign investment. The persistent political instability of the past several years has increasingly alarmed investors, leading to a significant decrease in investment activity and contributing to a further erosion of inflows of foreign capital into Georgia's economy, aggravating Georgia's already vulnerable economic conditions (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2024). These challenges pose a serious threat not only to vital sectors of economy, but also to the broader economic landscape, including rising unemployment, triggering further currency depreciation, as well as increasing the cost of imports, making it even more difficult for Georgia to sustain long-term growth and development. Furthermore, a significant portion of Georgia's foreign debt is owed to Western development banks, such as the EBRD and World Bank. The country's increasingly troubling political climate raises the possibility of major institutions reassessing their financial support, or even leaving Georgia due to escalating authoritarian tendencies.

Other macro-economic indexes have worsened during the three decades of transition that testify of the defective results of the macroeconomics, political

economy, and social policies of transition, including the GINI index on income inequality (Milanovic, 1999). Though Ukraine has remained below the developing economy average in that regard, income inequalities have significantly accentuated compared to pre-transition rates as GDP slumped, like shows Figure 1. The main factors to have influenced this trend are to be found in the arbitrage opportunities provided to for well-connected rent-seekers emerging from price and commerce liberalization; the privatization of state assets to well-connected insider buyers, often at preferential prices; the hyperinflations of the early 1990s, which sharply reduced real incomes for most workers and those living on fixed incomes; significant increases in the shares of non-labour incomes accruing disproportionately to wealthy households and drastic cutbacks in social benefits and minimum wage levels (Slay, 2009). The decades of economic transition also led to a sharp rise in poverty indicators, especially regarding water, energy, and food insecurities. As an example, in the mid-2000s, access to improved water and sanitation services was denied to respectively 8% and 32% of the population. In Ukraine, due to the severe effects of the global crisis on domestic economy, the food prices rose up to 14% and energy tariffs up to 30% in 2009, and as a consequence 15% of the population fell below the poverty line.

Country	Change in Gini coefficient	Real per capita PPP GDP growth between 1989 and 1995
Belarus	5.6	–37.3
Bulgaria	11.0	–23.8
Czech Republic	7.2	–6.6
Estonia	12.4	–36.6
Hungary	1.6	–14.5
Kazakhstan	7.0	–38.7
Kyrgyzstan	29.3	–49.6
Latvia	8.5	–49.0
Lithuania	14.8	–44.8
Moldova	12.4	–62.4
Poland	2.8	–1.4
Romania	5.3	–15.3
Russia	24.2	–40.4
Slovakia	–1.2	–15.9
Slovenia	3.6	–7.5
Turkmenistan	9.4	–38.2
Ukraine	24.1	–57.3
Uzbekistan	5.1	–16.6

Notes: Data from Campos (2001), table 1 and Milanovic (1998, appendix 4). Per capita PPP GDP values for 1995 are calculated from the values for 1989, using annual growth rates from Campos (2001, table 1).

Among the immediate observable consequences of the reform-generated socio-economic hardships, the rise in informal economic practices, including banter and cash-in-hand work, testifies of the lived experience of transition that turned out radically different from that predicated by policy objectives. In the economies in transition, it was impossible to distinct the formal from the informal for crime, informality and corruption were paramount to guarantee access to labour market, university, and even healthcare provision and childcare (Williams, Round and Rogers, 2013, 106). The emergence of a criminal-political nexus—the alliance of the former party elite, members of the law enforcement and security apparatuses, and the gangs of organized criminals who together penetrate the licit and illicit sectors-pave the way for a rise of both low and high-level criminal activities and violence (Shelley, 1998). The subsequent generation extra-legal economic structures have had a enormous impact on electoral and legislative process and impeded the rebuilding of functioning state institutions. In addition, the outbursts of high-scale violence erupted, as shows the bloodshed in Donetsk in the 1990s after which many perpetrators joined the Party of Regions, led to a violent and monopolistic approach to economics, society and politics (Kuzio, 2014).

On the longer run, the socio-economic pitfalls of the economic transition also appear through other indicators, including the levels of well-being and happiness among the population. Though very slowly and gradually closing, the "subjective wellbeing gap" (SWB) between CEE and FSU countries and Western European countries accentuated to below pre-reform levels during the transitional recession, and to below levels of non-transition countries with similar per capita GDP. The term "iron curtain of unhappiness" was coined to describe the persistently lower levels of SWB in transitioning Eastern European countries, and despite growing satisfaction with material living levels from the late 1990s, the satisfaction with work, family life, and health was decreasing at an individual level (Skoglund, 2017). Scholars have linked the " pain, bitterness and disappointment of so many people' toward the reform process (Kornai 2006: 241) to the proliferation of social diseases such as alcoholism, tuberculosis, human immunodeficiency virus and suicide (Dye 2005) as well as dramatic drops in life expectancy until the mid-2000s. Demographics speak for themselves: fertility rates reached lowest-low levels in the late 1990s and early 2000s and a direct correlation had been established with gloomy economic prospects (Billingsley, 2010).

Likewise, the speed and steadiness of workforce- qualified or not-migrations from Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova toward the EU, the US, or Russia. As an example, young Moldovans have been leaving their country in large numbers for the EU and Russia, which has had and will continue to have an impact on internal politics and domestic economy by decreasing domestic civic involvement and increasing reliance on remittances, which can stabilize the economy but also increase dependency on outside players. Remittances from Moldovans employed abroad, mostly in the European Union and Russia, account for a sizeable amount of the country's GDP. In 2010 there were 423.6 thousand people aged between 19 and

24 in Moldova and that by 2025, their number would fall to 222.6 thousand people or only 5% of the population (Makhanov, 2022). This issue will certainly have deep negative socio-economic consequences such as population aging, increased expenditure on health care, labor-force shortages and deceleration of the economic growth due to fewer working-age people in the economy. Particularly relevant for our study, political and economic insecurity also stands out as a driver of chronic unhappiness within societies of the FSU countries. As a matter of fact, economic and political stability still have a stronger influence on life satisfaction than economic growth in transition countries, which explains why, despite improvement in material conditions, the SWB gap is so difficult to fill as a general sense of socio-economic insecurity and uncertainty has creeped in and has generated a certain degree of reform fatigue and plundered the legitimacy of the reform objectives (Skoglund, 2017).

As a result, reforms toward a capitalist market economy caused throughout the 1990s the contraction of economies, rampant pauperization, income inequality, social and political violence, the deepening social divides and, as a result, general socio-economic insecurity. Perhaps unsurprisingly, international policymakers and 'consultants' who were their prime designers failed to call into question their conception of the "right path to reform". The observed persistence of informal economic and political practices was often reduced to a problem of systemic corruption inherited from the past: the implication was a call for more vigorous reforms that could be implemented through a stronger role of international actors vis-à-vis local institutions (Strazzari and Belloni, 2014). Externally-assisted economic reforms generated new incentives and opportunities for new and old elites: along their implementation, compromises emerged whenever it became clear that it would be too politically costly, if not destabilizing, to dismantle those patron-client networks that presented themselves as the key interlocutors in establishing the new order (Strazzari and Kamphuis, 2012). In all three case studies,on the short or longer runm the deterioration of economies and subsequent socio-economic insecurities they raised have been instrumental to the rise or return to power of political parties whose commitment to democracy was more than questionable.

Contested polities and territories

When exiting the authoritarian modernization model that communist leaders imposed, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine faced several security challenges, both of internal and external nature. The surge of competing nationalisms after decades of Soviet assimilation policies made of identity politics a driving force of the political transition from communism. In Moldova and Georgia, the territorialisation and politisation of ethnic identities and the structuration along those lines to movements of opposition to the nationalising agenda of the central authorities sparked separatism and armed conflict in Transnistria, South-Ossetia and Abkhazia

(Harrington, 2024; Melikyan, Veliyev, Sartania, and Abdullazade, 2018). The failure from Chisinau and Tbilisi to affirm control, by force or negotiation, over breakaway territories posed a direct challenge to the sovereignty of the new polities, which contours were contested and which had to face the internal threats caused by the endurance of foreign-backed de facto states, short of long-lasting and viable mechanisms of conflict resolution (Gueudet, 2024). In Ukraine, from 2004 Yanukovych's Party of Regions, well implanted in the Donbas, engineered and ingnited interregional conflicts through the waging of divisive narratives on Ukrainian vs Russian/Soviet nationalism, religious affairs and symbolic politics (Zhurzhenko, 2014; Kuzio, 2015). Following the "Euromaidan" and the "Revolution of Dignity", the political void left by the collapse of Yanukovych's heavy political machinery opened a window of opportunity for Russia's swift annexation of Crimea, and the sponsoring of violent separatism in the East of the country, where the weaponisation of identity politics had prepared the ground for conflict.

In addition to the threats raised by the emergence and persistence of armed separatist conflicts on their territories, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine had to face since the collapse of the Soviet Union and their independence an extremely volatile security environment and a delicate geostrategic position, especially *vis-à-vis* Russia. Ukraine had to negotiate the security conditions of its independence, with the Budapest Memorandum, signed in December 1994, under which the country agreed to give up the stockpile of former Soviet nuclear weapons on its soil in exchange for guarantees on its security, independence and sovereignty. Moldova have circa 2000 troops stationed in Transnistria as part Russian Operational Group (OGRF for Operational Group of Russian Forces) operating without a mandate, illegally monitoring a massive depot that houses approximately 20,000 tons of munition in Cobasna and running unauthorised training exercises in the security zone defined by the ceasefire. Likewise, the Russian "peacekeeping missions" in Abkhazia and South-Ossetia perpetuated a controlled instability (Gueudet, 2024) that gives Moscow leverage in its relations with Georgia and could possibly reignite conflict at Moscow's convenience. Putin's hostile foreign policy and revival of Russian imperialism, driven by the ideological and geopolitical construction of Russian World (Toal, 2017), keeps those countries vulnerable to hybrid warfare and, as the 2008 war against Georgia, the 2015 conflict in Donbas and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine have shown to military aggression.

Trajectories and consolidation of hybrid regimes

Hybrid regimes are characterized by a dynamic democratic-authoritarian equilibrium, entailing that neither democratization nor backsliding corresponds to linear processes occurring in segmented periods. Instead, they must be understood as a fluid phenomenon of oscillation, or "ebbs and flows" (Knott, 2018) between developments that consolidate democracy and developments that mark a stalling, or even a reverse of previous democratic progresses. Both dynamics are deeply

entangled with one another and can even occur simultaneously: hybridity is not a phase toward fully fledged democracy, but rather a distinct category of regime with specific practices of governance based on the interactions between incumbent and extra-incumbent actors. We aim to give the reader a short illustration of those ebbs and flows between democratization and backsliding in each case countries through a short political history evidencing that the resilience of extra-legal power structures and neo-patrimonial networks to democratic momentums and attempts to reform and the persistence of a status quo on which hybridity thrives.

Georgia

In Georgia, the first elected government of the former Soviet dissident Zviad Gamsakhurdia struggled with outburst of violence in politics and society, driven by the attempts from the political establishment to preserve their vested interests, access to resources and privileged positions. At that time, rather than consolidating a regime, it was the very foundations of the newly independent state that needed consolidation (Levinsky and Way), as well as the contours of the new independent polity. The government had to face the growing power of warlords and this confrontation radicalised and antagonised even further politics, and the breakout of separatist conflicts in Abkhazia and South-Ossetia only reinforced the structural instability in the country. Levinsky and Way speak of "failed authoritarianism" to reflect on Gamsakhurdia's term, due to the incapacity to oppose centrifugal military and paramilitary forces and set the basis for a functional system of governance. The military coup of December 1991-January 1992 drove Gamsakhurdia and its government in exile and Shevardnadze, former Georgian Communist Party Secretary and former Soviet Foreign Minister, was called back from exile to lead the next, unelected, government with other opponents to the former President. Under Shevardnadze, the polity, the state, but also the hybrid nature of the regime consolidated. The proclamation of the Constitution and the holding of Presidential and legislative elections in 1995 did not mask the numerous abuses of power from the government. On the contrary, patron-client relationships became defining characterizers of his practice of power, meant to ensure the control of the government and the Georgian Citizens' Union (CUG), the President's Party founded in 1993, over all level sof governance in the country. In addition, blatant violation of public rights occurred, the main medias were controlled by the regime, and independent journalists victims of harassment and repression. Despite the organisation of presidential and legislative elections, electoral frauds were regular and opposition candidates met substantial obstacles during their local and national campaigns. The "anti-crisis" economic program allowed privatisations to grant substantial resources to the regime's clients. According to Gogolashvili (2011,173), Shevardnadze's economic policy "adjusted to the interest of the rent-seeking part of society". Notwithstanding, economic pluralism, though hampered by neo-patrimonial dynamics, had for consequence to foster a new category of extra-

incumbent actors in the private sector that ended up founding their own political formations with claims on policymaking (for instance, Gamkrelidze's New Rights) or media companies and started directly challenging Shevardnadze.

The 2003 Rose revolution, attributed to the "collapse of the coercive apparatus" that held the regime and to massive elite defection from its ranks (Radnitz, 2010; Hale, 2006), did not bring about significant democratisation for Georgia. In spite of popular demonstrations against electoral frauds in the November 2003 parliamentary elections, neo-patrimonialism and state capture by Shevardnadze's clique (Gegeshidze, 2011, 32), it did not mark a momentum for regime change. Borrowing from Dominioni (2014, 16)"the Rose Revolution did bring to an end the Shevardnadze's presidency and system, however it did not bring to an end the hybridity of the system. The Presidential elections of January 2004 brought Saakashvili to power with an outstanding majority of 96%, despite fraud and irregularities that evidence the new regime reproduced the same electoral practices as its predecessor. Another common feature with Shevardnadze's regime was the merging of Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM), with the state apparatus, which enabled the replacement of public officials with members of the President's inner circles. Though the new incumbents were labelled as coming from the civil society, this lustration enhanced a new system of neo-patrimonialism that, combined with long constitutional reforms, consolidated further Saakashvili's presidential power, as well as the hybrid character of the regime. Contested from within until this end of his terms, Saakhashvili however benefited greatly from international leverage induced by military and economic assistance, which contributed to improve the country's economy and increase the popularity of the President. Moreover, the adoption of anti-corruption policies, reforms in the sector of justice and law enforcement, despite later being used to target the regime's opponents, maintained a degree of democratisation sufficient to obtain the good graces of the US, the EU and international organisations, willing to turn a blind eye on the regime's borderline practices of governance (Rochowanski, 2004).

One of the most prominent Georgia oligarchs, Ivanishvili, started campaigning against the government in 2011 and founded the Georgian Dream party. At first, Georgian Dream was more of an aggregate of individual networks of actors of the private sector that were calling into question the government's economic, social and civil rights policies.Ironically, it was the blatant abuse of legal, institutional political power perpetrated by Saakhashvili that paved to GD the way to electoral victory (Fairbanks and Gugushvili, 2013). Georgia's first change in government through the ballot box, the party had campaigned on a liberal agenda committed to liberal democratic values, minority rights, freedom of expression and reverse the repressive trends of the previous government (2021) During its first term, the ruling coalition that GD formed with a wide range of political parties enhanced democratic pluralism, but the split of the coalition before the 2016 facilitated the shifts in GD discourses and policies reflected a transformation of into a much more conservative party, leaning toward authoritarianism (Jones &

Sabanadze 2023) and incline to follow a party-rule direction (Samkharadze, 2023) through restrictive legislations intended to secure the party's control over opposition parties, civil society and civic movements and independent medias.

Moldova

While dealing with separatisms that challenged its definition as a polity, post-independence Moldova had to define the nature of its regime. As Way stresses, chances for a quick democratization were low (Way, 2022). Yet, despite attempts during Snegur's presidency at restricting freedom of expression, especially against the President himself, civil liberties expanded from 1991, a phenomenon that was attributed to the weakness of the government's repressive apparatus (Levinsky and Way, 2010). The fluidity of party politics and constant partisan re-positioning, in addition, did significantly weaken his incumbent's status (Levinsky and Way, 2010), since the successive demise of his coalitions with the leading political forces, respectively the MPF in 1991 over nationalist policies and with the Agrarian Democratic Party (ADP) in 1996 over the party's internal quarrels, constrained any attempts at consolidating an authoritarian rule. The 1994 Constitution, passed under the ADP majority in Parliament, was thought as ethnically inclusive and designed a strong system of check and balances over the executive. Snegur's successor. Luchinschi former Chair of the Parliament ran as an independent candidate but enjoyed a convenient control over the state media (Levinsky and Way, 2010, 231). Though he began his term with a sizeable majority in Parliament, the new President suffered like his predecessor from unstable coalitions and had to diversify his support base to counter the volatility of party politics. Any attempts to consolidate presidential rule were met with swift responses from the Parliament, which fully filled its function of check and balance.

The progressive come back of the Communist Party, banned in 1991 but re-authorised in 1993 marked a significant change both in party politics, since it became the only truly institutionalised and structure political force under the leadership of Vladimir Voronin, and in terms of regime consolidation. Thanks to its crushing victory in the 2001 elections, the Communist Party secured an absolute control over the Parliament, which means, after the previous constitutional reforms, that with Voronin elected President, it would rule without much check and balance (Dura 2007). Way underlines that most of policymaking was taking place outside the legislature and within the party's high circles. Voronin, with his heavy party machinery, succeeded where Snegur and Luchinschi failed, at consolidating control over the state apparatus and imposing a stronger curtailment of political and civic rights. State media had to fall in line with the directives of the party, leading the massive censure and prosecution of critical journalists, which the governing party's strong grip over the judiciary greatly facilitated (Way, 2002, 131). The trends toward democratisation that the country experienced previously stalled, due to the capacity of the Communist party to secure strong incumbent power. The following

government, run by the Alliance for European Integration (AEI) committed to enhanced political pluralism, major improvements in the field of political and civic rights and increased commitment to the EU democratic standards. Short of a stable coalition the fragmentation of incumbent power made the country's governance extremely permeable to the intervention of extra-incumbent actors, including oligarchs whose profiles changed following the overthrown of the communists to become more European-oriented like Plahotniuc (Knott, 2018).

Acute dynamics of state-capture and structural rent-seeking politics deteriorated the country's democratic status. Governmental instability and inaction propelled extra-incumbent rivalries over the state and its resources. It turned the country into an oligarchic regime, with serious regressions as corruption, illegal thefts and privatizations of public property, total control over the judicial system, exercised by the oligarchy, and numerous attacks on citizens' rights and liberties, the blocking of reforms and the European integration process (IPN, 2022). The Plahotniuc case is extremely illustrative in that regard. This oligarch, who has barely held any incumbent function due to his striking unpopularity in Moldova, managed to endorse proxy candidates who allowed him to gain significant power over domestic politics and within the state apparatus (Knott and Pops,oi 2016). Penetration of the state apparatus and political system by Plahotniuc and his cronies is illustrated by the 2014 bank fraud scandal that cost Moldova a loss of 12% of its total GDP and involvement prominent incumbent and extra-incumbent actors of the politico-financial system, including Vladimir Filat, leader of the Liberal Democratic Party of Moldova and former Prime Minister and Ilan Shor, Chairman of the board at *Banca de Economii.* Plahotniuc, who was also part of the scheme and even considered its mastermind, was never prosecuted at the time. This shows the oligarch's not insertion into the business-political nexus and his strong influence over the judiciary, used and abused to defeat his direct opponents (Knott and Pops,oi 2016). Moreover, the reintroduction of semi-presidentialism allowed Plahotniuc to increase the seats of his Democratic Party in Parliament and to place his proxies in the race for president, now directly elected. This blatant capture of the rule of law marked a significant moment of backsliding in the country and consolidated the hybrid nature of the regime that further intensified during Dodon's presidency in 2016. The capture of the Moldovan state had gone from "factional to hegemonic", and under Dodon, , the political power house remained Plahotniuc under the guise of the Democratic Party. To borrow from Crowther (2023), in post-independence Moldova, "weak state institutions, an enabling political culture, and the absence of external constraints engendered a political class that thrived on clientelism and personal enrichment", which hampered the process of democratization and fostered hybridity. Sandu's elections in 2020 and the four-year term have contributed to un-stall democratic reforms in the country, without fully delivering on her reformist agenda and merely tackling two issues identified as critical for in-depth political transformations: systemic corruption in state institutions and political interference with the work of state agencies. The emphasis put on security following Russia's invasion of Ukraine has scaled down the government's focus on

decentralization reform, undermined by the lack of consensus between central and local authorities, the independence of the judiciary remains to be significantly improved and the government does not address the civil society's concerns about the misuse of state institutions for political purposes (Nizhnikau and Moshes, 2023).

Ukraine

Ukraine's trajectory toward a hybrid regime also begins with the structural instability of the post-independence regime. Ukraine had found with "Rukh" (The Popular Front) a strong and structured opposition movement but unlike in Moldova, it failed in winning over the majority of the legislature and therefore carry on its own the country toward independence. This is why Leonid Kravchuk's "national communist" faction did well in presenting a confederal project of 'Union of Soviet Sovereign States" ahead of the March 1991 referendum and, strengthened by popular support, bargained with Rukh to ensure the endurance of the Soviet-time communist elites in power in exchange for their support for independence. From the onset, no leading political force emerged, Kravchuk's first government enjoyed minimal control over the Parliament, and the central state struggled to establish control over the regional and local administrations in Eastern and Southeastern Ukraine. Chronic political instability and incapacities from the executive to act upon urgent reforms were worsened by political and social violence that broke out in the Donbas, forcing the President to accept politically motivated appointments of members of the Donetsk oligarch clan to key positions in the state apparatus. Kravchuk gradually lost the support of the state security apparatus that enabled the regime to survive, opening the way for further elites' defection that led to his defeat in the 1994 elections. In the meantime, the strengthening of the executive power enabled the misuse of the nominally democratic institutions at the benefits of the regime's incumbents and their clienteles.

When Leonid Kuchma took over the presidential function in 1994, he took advantage of the fragile power-sharing arrangements and made the authoritarian-democratic equilibrium evolve in favour of authoritarianism while increasing regime stability. To do so, he could count on coalitions formed with oligarchs and their parties, the most prominent of which being Viktor Yanukovich's Party of Regions, well rooted in Eastern Ukraine or Viktor Medvedchuk, the owner of three TV stations who became in 2002 head of the Presidential Administration and a kingpin of the regime's information policy of the regime. Learning from Kravchuk's mistakes, Kuchma ensured a firm vertical control over regional and local administration, thanks to patron-client networks that facilitated the dismissals of opponents and the politically motivated appointments of clients. The establishment of a business-politic nexus and allowed the concentration of economic resources based on neo-patrimonial logics and a quasi-hegemonic state-capture. Even elections, which hybrid regimes traditionally use to maintain cosmetic elements of nominal democracy, became the object of blatant abuse of executive power. The

misuse of the tax administration to pressure opponents has proven extremely efficient to dismantle any possible structuration of a unified opposition front and the authoritarian turn escalated even further by the resort to political assassination, ordered by Kuchma against independent journalist Georgii Gongadze.

Like in Georgia during the Rose revolution, it was elite defections that contributed to oust Kuchma's intended successor Yanukovych, despite a dynamic parliamentary opposition frequent wave of protests that shook Ukraine from 2000 to 2001 after Gongadze' murder. Pro-governmental factions who retained autonomous economic resources relaunched themselves as opposition forces, like Tymochenko's Fatherland or Viktor Yushchenko's "Our Ukraine", financially backed by oligarch Petro Poroshenko. This transformation of party politics impacted significantly the outcomes of the 2002 legislative elections, as according to Wilson, it ensured "Our Ukraine" a fair "share of 'administrative resources' and some shelter from negative campaigning" (Wilson, 2005b: 65) that led Yushchenko' party to win 24 percent of the vote. Yet, the prospects for regime change were particularly gloom before the 2004 presidential elections. The presidential campaign left no doubt on the authoritarian nature of Kuchma's governance, as showed the common media bias, harassment of journalists and opposition activists, an attempted assassination of Yushchenko, and massive fraud in parts of eastern Ukraine. The result of the second turn that placed Yanoukovitch ahead by a thread were immediately contested and thousands of citizens took the street to demand re-elections and bring an end to the regime, showing tremendous resolve in fighting for the country's democratic future. Incumbent and extra-incumbent elites operated a major and decisive shift, by encouraging protests (Wilson, 2005, p. 125), offering political and financial support and attempting at rallying the opposition forces central in the success of the Orange Revolution (d'Anieri, 2006). Elite defection that proves the ever-ending importance of the status-quo between old and new elites and the resilience of the "shadow state" power structures, was instrumental in the negotiation and enforcement of an EU-brokered deal that led to new elections, which Yushchenko won with 52 percent.

From there, the trend democratic-authoritarian equilibrium reversed, with major improvements included media pluralism, and the restoration of free and fair elections. Nevertheless, the Orange Revolution did not bring about "the watershed moment that catapulted Ukraine towards a liberal democracy that was first expected (Åslund 2009; McFaul 2007). Firstly, due to their crucial role in helping the opposition structure, the Orange Revolution paved the way for a deeper of oligarchs into politics (Kuzio, 2007), blurring further the distinction between incumbent and extra-incumbent power. Secondly, in the name of consolidating democracy, Yushchenko targeted the economic base of the old regime's political forces that had entered opposition, made use of mass sacking within public servants in regional and local administrations, and distorted some constitutional arrangements to dissolve the parliament (Kudelia and Kuzio 2014; Way, 2022). Thirdly, progresses toward democratisation were in addition hampered by the implosion of the coalition led by

Yushchenko's Our Ukraine with the help of Tymoshenko's Batkyvshina. Knott points out that such a stalemate in reversing the legacies of the old regime allowed the "pact between those holding formal power and those wielding informal power" to maintain those entangled systems in place (2018, 8), allowing Yanoukovitch's come back in 2010.

When entering opposition after the Orange Revolution, Yanoukovitch built a heavy political machinery through the Party of Regions, which had retained its stronghold in the east and benefited from financial backing of the Donetsk oligarchs Rinat Akhmetov and Dmytro Firtash (Kudelia, 2014). Like in Moldova, the coming to power of a political formation whose organisational and financial means surpassed all the others led to a swift dynamic of power consolidation, which the predecessors of Yanoukovitch failed to do. It resulted in a deeper state-capture, unhinged use of formal coercion and distorsion of the constitution to re-introduce a mixed-electoral system that profited his own party and reforms to strengthen presidential power. Pretending to abide by EU recommendations on democracy promotions and fight against corruption (Smith, 2014), Yanoukovitch used his firm control over law enforcement agencies and the judiciary to target its opponents, including Tymoshenko, and resorted to politically motivated appointments of his cronies to key positions in the state apparatus (Knott, 2018; Way, 2022). When Euromaidan started in 2013, the degree of repression and political violence deployed by the police, security services and militias turned the movement into the "Revolution of Dignity", driven by anti-system protest and with the potential to be a vector of transformations from below. Yanoukovitch fled the country in a dire economic situation, mostly of his own making, and left the state apparatus and the political system extremely vulnerable and deprived of central authority. This debacle was seen as Russia as the perfect opportunity to seize Crimea and start waging war in the East through the backing of separatist forces that operated secession and proclaimed the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics.

Yet, the democratic momentum impulsed by Euromaidan and the Revolution of Dignity found itself considerably undermined by the electoral outcomes of it and its co-option by elites closely affiliated to former regimes (Smith, 2014). Oligarch Petro Poroshenko, who had financially backed Yushchenko in 2002, was elected President of a contested polity with a contested political system, structural issues that none of his predecessors had been keen to address, and with a precarious security situation. As Smith underlines, Poroshenko's commitment to democracy has been extremely vocal, but in practice the government still resorted to limitations of civic rights, especially regarding freedom of press, justified by the security situation and the conflict in Donbas. Overall, compared to Yanoukovitch's term, the democratic-authoritarian equilibrium has been leaning toward democracy under Poroshenko, as political pluralism expanded, and the violent repression of the opposition was ended. Moreover, the weight of civil society and civic movements had considerably expanded after the Revolution of Dignity and has a significant impact on decision making, as shows the government backing down of proclaiming

martial law in 2018, which would have resulted in cancelling the upcoming elections after facing public backslash and protests. Zelensky, who defined himself as an anti-system candidate was the first presidential incumbent to win a majority in Parliament, opening more space for reforms. Five years into his term, the President had limited achievements in fighting corruption and the promised and long-awaited de-oligarchisation of the country. However prior to the full-scale invasion of the country, Zelensky had nevertheless undertaken concrete steps toward, with a focus on judicial reforms, the creation of a land market, and the cleaning up of the defense and banking sectors.

After providing an historical insight on the patterns of transition and trajectories of hybridity experienced by Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, the paper will take a closer look at the impact of hybridity on the evolutions of key sectors of the countries' domestic politics and how it has influenced the trust of their citizens toward the political authorities and institutions, as well as between segments of the societies.

Dimensions of hybridity and democratic resilience

Here, we will focus on sectors that we have identified as relevant to analyse the manifestations of hybridity and democratic resilience in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine's political systems: elections and the electoral system, party politics, the state of the rule of law, the media and civil society. We also include an analysis of the level of vertical and horizontal trust in those societies, so to grasp how regime legitimacy and social cohesion are affected by the hybrid nature of the regime and whether it enhances or undermines democratic resilience.

Electoralism and usable electoral systems

Despite the definitional debates that surround hybridity and hybrid regimes, one solid consensus is that those regimes retain components of democratic governance, first among which the holding of elections. Yet, the design of the electoral systems, the electoral practices, and the aftermaths of the elections reveal the "uneven playing field" on which political competition between parties takes place and unravel a very minimalist conception of democratic governance from the incumbent elites (Diamond, 1996). In Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, electoral systems are one of the primary factors contributing to the democratic deficit and hybrid nature of the regime, undermining the country's capacity for genuine democratic growth and remaining a major source of political and social turmoil. Moreover, electoral reforms are often used by the main political powerhouses to gatekeep the political arena.

In Georgia the electoral system is one of the primary factor contributing to the democratic deficit and hybrid nature of the regime, undermining the country's capacity for genuine democratic growth and remaining a major source of political and social turmoil. The failure of Georgia's electoral democracy is deeply rooted in its mixed electoral system, influenced by historical post-Soviet factors that have persisted throughout most of Georgia's independent history. For over two decades, half of the 150 members of the national parliament were elected via proportional representation, while the other half were chosen from single-mandate seats based on plurality outcomes. (Georgia's Parliamentary Electoral System: Options for Advancing Voter Equality, 2011)

Through this arrangement, the election results were heavily influenced by the outcomes in single-mandate constituencies, typically representing the ruling parties and leading to an uneven distribution of parliamentary seats among various political parties in Georgia. This eventually contributed to the formation of a dominant party system, allowing the ruling party whether during the Shevardnadze, Saakashvili, or the Georgian Dream governance to independently enact major reforms, including constitutional changes. Furthermore, the significant financial advantages typically enjoyed by ruling parties, have strengthened the rigid dominant party system and weakened the positions of opposition political parties. Only in 2021, as a result of the EU-brokered April 19 agreement, (Panchulidze and youngs, 2021) was Georgia's electoral system revised to a relatively more proportional format with a reduced number of majoritarian seats, resulting in 120 seats elected by proportional representation and 30 by majoritarian constituencies, with a 1% threshold. Although the design and setup of the Central Electoral Commission further guaranteed effective one-party control over the electoral process.

As the 2024 Parliamentary Elections approach, Georgia has shifted to a fully proportional election system with a 5% threshold, following constitutional changes enacted in 2017. (Agreement on the Electoral System Creates an Opportunity to Get out of the Crisis and Create a Stable Electoral Environment | ISFED, 2024). However, the recent reforms have raised additional concerns, including changes to the CEC, (appointment of key commission members, bypassing the need for broader political consensus); the reintroduction of majoritarian elements, and the abolition of gender quotas. Skepticism towards these reforms has called into question the fairness of the forthcoming vote. While these changes have shifted toward a proportional representation system, the high risk of institutional-based manipulation of the electoral outcome by the ruling party remains high. These electoral reforms, while presenting a façade of progress, further consolidate the hybrid nature of the regime in Georgia. While there may be a formal appearance of democratic processes, the electoral system is manipulated to ensure the dominance of the ruling party. Thus, achieving free, fair, and competitive elections which allow a peaceful and constitutional transfer of power remains a

challenging objective for Georgia. Without major systemic reforms, Georgia is unlikely to escape the continues cycle of democratic decline and hybridity that has defined its political landscape for the past 30 years.

Moldova

Similar dynamics are observable in Moldova, where the electoral system is prone to instrumentalization by heavy political machineries, to the detriment of smaller political forces. From 1994, Moldova has used a List Proportional Representation (PR) system to elect its legislators. In a single electoral district covering the entire country, seats are allocated based on closed party lists. Parties that are a single political party must receive 5 percent of the vote to enter parliament; blocks made up of two or more parties must receive 7 percent of the vote. To be elected, independent candidates must receive at least 2% of the vote. Since its implementation, changes have been made to the current electoral system, including to the electoral formula used to allocate seats and the legal threshold for parties to enter the parliament (Electoral Code, 2022). In February 2019, Moldova held its first parliamentary elections using a mixed electoral system, under which 51 lawmakers were elected in single-member constituencies through the first-past-the-post system and 50 were elected through proportional representation from closed party lists in one national constituency. Following inconclusive parliamentary elections on 24 February 2019, the Democratic Party of Moldova (PDM) lost power, and in June was replaced by a short-lived coalition of three opposition parties (SPRM, Political Bloc" Acum"). In June, Vlad Plahotniuc, the strong leader of the PDM who was influential in policymaking despite not having an electoral office and having little popular support, left the country, thereby exiting Moldovan politics as well (Nation in Tranzit, 2020). In 2020 Former premier Maia Sandu of the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS) became Moldova's first female president, defeating incumbent Igor Dodon in a free and fair two-round November election. The parliament passed a new electoral code in December 2022, which includes many important modifications to many parts of elections. The first reading of the document was approved by the PAS majority in Parliament in July 2022, but some of its features, including as the proposed CEC member selection procedure, were attacked by the opposition.

The Venice Commission of the Council of Europe (CoE) made several suggestions in a report released in October, including modifications to the proposed procedure for CEC members to be fired (Freedom House, 2023). Several recommendations made by the ODIHR are addressed by the recent legislative changes, in an attempt to counter electoral policies and prevent misuses of the electoral system. These recommendations cover topics such as inclusive legislative reform, media monitoring during the interim between elections, effective sanctions for media violations, and a review of the election administration bodies' nomination process (ODIHR Report, 2023). Many important changes include modifications to

the structure of election management organizations, rules regarding different types of referenda, regulation and oversight of campaign financing, voting rights, including the ability to vote overseas, and the conduct of the election campaign. To prevent vote-buying, the new Electoral Code includes a few stringent provisions. It is currently forbidden for contestants to plan competitions, concerts, or other gatherings where entertainers or artists promote politics or hand out campaign materials. On election day, voters are not permitted to be transported to their polling places under another new regulation (Electoral Code, 2022). The CEC faces many obstacles in putting the new Electoral Code's legislative changes into practice, such as updating its digital administrative systems for different parts of the election process, conducting extensive voter education, and bringing several regulations up to date. (ODIHR Report, 2023). The new election laws' practical efficacy cannot yet be discussed; the 2024 and 2025 presidential and parliamentary elections will put them to the test. In addition, as the Venice Commission advised (Venice Commission, 2023), the implementation of new procedures for restricting and punishing electoral actors needs to be well-considered and well-founded. Despite this, the Republic of Moldova's New Electoral Code could significantly lessen the power of the hybrid regime by promoting democracy, guaranteeing fair representation, and enhancing transparency. It would eliminate opportunities for election tampering, lessen the influence of established elites, and foster a political climate that is conducive to the development of democratic institutions. Increased political stability and resistance to authoritarian inclinations would result from this change.

Ukraine

Initially, post-independence Ukraine had adopted a mixed electoral system combining proportional representation with single-member districts. This system was intended to balance broad representation with local accountability. However, it also facilitated the rise of oligarchic control as powerful figures could manipulate the system to their advantage. Both elections in 1999 and 2002 saw significant allegations of electoral fraud. The 1999 presidential election, which saw Leonid Kuchma re-elected, and the 2002 parliamentary elections were marked by reports of vote manipulation and other irregularities. The frequent manipulation of the electoral process highlighted the hybrid nature of the regime, where formal democratic procedures were in place but effectively undermined by corrupt practices and centralization of power. Considering Kuchma's presidency (1994-2004) in more details, centralization of power and manipulation of democratic processes prevailed. The regime used its control over media and state institutions to suppress opposition and manage electoral outcomes. Electoral fraud became prevalent, undermining the legitimacy of elections. At the same time, the formal democratic framework existed, but actual governance exhibited authoritarian traits, including limited political freedoms, judicial manipulation, and the centralization of power.

The Orange Revolution was triggered by allegations of widespread electoral fraud in the presidential election, leading to mass protests and demands for democratic reforms. The mass mobilisation led to a re-run of the election and the victory of Viktor Yushchenko, signalling a significant shift towards democratic reforms and greater transparency. Following the Orange Revolution, there was an attempt to reform the electoral system to reduce fraud (2006 Parliamentary Elections). The system was adjusted to a mixed-member proportional representation model, which aimed to balance proportionality with local representation. However, despite reforms, the elections continued to be marred by allegations of fraud and manipulation. A great example is 2007 Parliamentary Elections. The persistence of these issues revealed that while formal reforms were introduced, entrenched corruption and political infighting continued to undermine the democratic process. Hence, Yanukovych's election in 2010 was also characterized by allegations of fraud and irregularities. The hybrid nature of the regime was reflected in the administration's centralization of power and manipulation of electoral processes. The next elections to Parliament in 2012 were similarly marked by reports of vote rigging and other undemocratic practices, further entrenching electoralism as an hybrid practice of power.

The post-Maidan period (2014-present) was characterized by significant reforms undertaken by the new government, led by figures like Petro Poroshenko and Volodymyr Zelenskyy. It includes efforts to tackle corruption, decentralize power, and improve governance. First reforms aimed at improving the electoral system, after Yanukovych's ousting. Parliamentary elections in 2014 were conducted under a mixed-member proportional representation system, designed to reduce corruption and improve representation. Local elections in 2015 implemented reforms to decentralize power and give local governments more authority, reflecting an effort to enhance democratic governance at the local level. Essential electoral reforms, such as the introduction of a new Electoral Code of 2019 and proportional representation, were aimed at improving political accountability and reducing electoral fraud and increasing transparency. The system was intended to decrease the influence of individual candidates and oligarchs. While the reforms were a step towards improving the democratic process, challenges remained. The implementation of these reforms faced obstacles, including entrenched corruption and political resistance. In wartime Ukraine, the holding of elections has been put on hold by the Zelenski government, referring to the country's lack of funds, the absence of legislation regarding the organization of elections under martial law, the security concerns, and the impossibility to maintain democratic electoral standards due to temporary restrictions on political rights and freedoms. A particular attention must be paid to keeping up with the last decade's improvement of the electoral system and move beyond mere electoralism.

Fragmented multiparty systems

In hybrid regimes, building a strong multi-party system based on independent political formations is a complex process, not only due to the systematic and profound distortion of electoral competition and the uneven playing field on which contenders evolve. Political pluralism and the independence and integrity of political parties or at least, their "seriousness" (Schmitter and Karl 1993) count among the criteria of democracy, at the bare minimum. Yet, the raison d'être of major political parties in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, infiltrated by neo-patrimonial network, is often to maintain a democratic façade at the incumbent's benefits or to advance extra-incumbent interests in the legislative, executive and electoral spheres. Opposition movements that denounced those dynamics are constrained by the uneven playing field, or end up preserving the status quo, facilitated by the biased electoral systems, as detailed in the above section.

Georgia

Despite maintaining consistent ratings over the years, Georgia's ruling parties have followed diverse ideological paths and exhibited varied fundamental traits since the country gained independence in 1992. These variations, highlighted by different modes of power transition, provide a valuable perspective for examining the internal dynamics of ruling parties in hybrid regimes. Thirty years after gaining independence, Georgia still faces substantial challenges in its political culture. The current landscape is marked by high polarization among political parties, often driven in personal rather than ideological differences. This polarization leads to social and political exclusion, further isolating political parties from their constituents and hindering meaningful political dialogue and engagement A distinctive feature of Georgian political parties, is that much of their leadership originates from above, typically representing defected members of the government and business elites turned opposition leaders seeking governmental authority. The general decline in political culture and the inability of political parties to become an institutionalized force have several reasons. Both ruling and opposition political parties and movements in the region did not arise as a natural continuation of political activity but as tools for the political action of individual leaders. Consequently, they are mostly characterized as fragmented and ineffective, established around individuals and lacking a strong ideological platform and policy agenda.

Due to the highly personalized nature of politics in the country, most political parties remain institutionally weak, with a lack of vision, a vague and confused ideological standpoint, and a tendency to respond to the government's unpopular policies and decisions rather than taking proactive action to gain popular support. The landscape is further complicated by mistrust among Georgian constituents of these groups and within the parties themselves. This mistrust can result from historical divisions, personal rivalries, or a lack of transparent communication and coordination. Other major causes of fragmentation include

structural factors such as a fractured organizational structure, insufficient resource mobilization (particularly among opposition political parties), poor ideological and organizational consolidation, the absence of alternative policies, and a lack of democratic political traditions. In addition, social and political cleavages, as well as informal politics inside major political parties, continue to be significant impediments to the development of the country's party system.

Establishing a strong, independent, and effective political party system is crucial for Georgia's democratic transformation. However, the historical context of personalism, polarization, and institutional weaknesses presents significant challenges to achieving this goal.

Moldova

Party politics in Moldova has as its starting point the national revival movement, which, in turn, was generated by the restructuring policy (perestroika). (Boțan, Cernecu, 2009). Moldova did not have any "historic" political groups that might have come back to prominence following the lengthy Soviet rule. The political climate in Moldova was referred to as "geopolitical parties" (Boțan, 2008). In Moldova's party system, it is difficult to locate a party with a traditional left- or right-wing profile. Different perspectives on geographical and historical issues, rather than ideological or economic disparities, account for the country's political divides. New political formations aspire to establish themselves as credible representatives of clearly defined political ideologies, such as "left-wing" or "right-wing," rather than trying to compete by presenting appealing economic or social programs. Political elites find these divisions highly advantageous as they facilitate the easy capture of specific segments of the public (Calus, 2016). The political divides in the nation do not correspond to differences in viewpoints. of ideology or economic beliefs, but rather divergent perspectives on historical and geopolitical events.

The shared Moldovan identity, on the other hand, is emphasised by centrists as an asset that may maintain harmony amongst the diverse ethnic and cultural groupings. But this does not imply that voters in Moldova only consider ethnic factors: age, ancestry, and urbanity should all be considered in any research. Left-wing parties are usually pro-Russian and/or pro-CIS parties; right-wing parties - pro-Romanian and/or pro-Western; centrist - pro-Moldovan parties, promoters of the independent idea of the Republic of Moldova and a "multi-vector" foreign policy (Parmentier, 2023). The left-wing parties in Moldova have their roots in Moldovan ideology; they support tight links with Moscow and profess nostalgia for the Soviet era. They are in favour of joining the Eurasian Economic Union and see Russia as the guardian of Moldova's independence, perceiving as a danger Bucharest's plans to merge with Romania. Some elements of these parties argue for the designation of Russian as the second official language, and they support and fight for the rights of the Russian-speaking minorities in Moldova. Pan-Romanian ideologies are rejected by the Moldovan left, which emphasises the uniqueness of the Moldovan people and language. It's interesting to note that these left-wing organisations support traditional values by working with the Orthodox Church to maintain traditional

values and opposing the rights of sexual minorities. The center-right segment is represented by parties that insisted on some message topics such as: democratization, reform, private initiative, European integration. Finally, the Moldovan political right was characterized by a message in which such elements as: Romanian nationalism, democratization of societies, conservatism, European integration can be found (Bucătaru, 2013). Even after more than 30 years of pluralism, the party system in the Republic of Moldova remains unconsolidated. If there have been some positive advances, the results remain to be awaited. We can find the explanation in a multitude of interrelated factors - the short-term experience of political pluralism in Moldova; cultural, institutional and functional causes; the Soviet ideological legacy; clientelist and patriarchal political relations; the lack of the rule of law - all lead to the procrastination of the consolidation of the party system in the Republic of Moldova. The party system in Moldova was dominated by formations with strong leaders, which do not represent the interests of wider segments of society but serve as tools to achieve the political and business goals of their leaders and sponsors. The Democratic Party was an example, being taken over in late 2009 and early 2010 by Vlad Plahotniuc to support his interests on the political scene of the Republic of Moldova. The main left-wing parties, such as Igor Dodon's Socialist Party, Renato Usatîi's "Our Party" and formerly the Communist Party, the Former "Sor" Party, were dependent on Moscow, which provides them with financial, political and media support, considering them as tools for its own political objectives towards Moldova.

The absolute proportional *electoral system* had a significant impact on the evolution of the party structure in the Republic of Moldova. The elections for the Supreme Soviet of the SSR in February and March 1990 preceded the switch to the proportional system. They were held based on political rivalry for the first time in about 50 years. The majority system gave way to the proportional one because, following the 1990 elections, a sizable part of parliamentarians wished to disassociate themselves from the political organisations that supported them (e-democracy, 2008). The political parties and intellectual elites of Moldova have not been able to come to an agreement on "the course and model of the country's development", nor have they been able to present a cogent national vision that could bring the country's citizens together. Adding another divide to an already fragmented multiparty system, the political scene in Moldova is defined by a fluctuating coalition of pro-European and pro-Russian parties. Because of this political duality, the regime shifts its policies between democratic and authoritarian ones based on which party is in power. In addition, the lack of an identity model that appeals to all Moldovans has impeded the country's efforts to create a cohesive society. Not only does the population of Moldova continue to be divided along linguistic and ethnic lines, but, more significantly, divisions also exist within the titular majority due to the lack of a cohesive Moldovan identity. The lack of a desirable and comprehensive identity model has made solving the issue challenging, if not impossible (Calus, 2016).

Ukraine operates within a multi-party system characterized by a plethora of political parties. No single party typically garners enough support to secure power independently, necessitating cooperation among parties to form coalition governments. Ukraine's political landscape has been characterized by frequent party fragmentation and the formation of new political parties, often driven by personalistic leadership rather than cohesive platforms. This fragmentation undermines political stability, as it results in frequent shifts in party alliances and policy priorities. The lack of institutionalized parties with stable platforms has led to inconsistent policy agendas and difficulties in implementing long-term reforms. Political parties that are more focused on personalistic leadership rather than ideological coherence struggle to maintain a unified approach to governance and reform. The split between President Viktor Yushchenko and Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko following the Orange Revolution (2005-2009) is a prime example of how personal rivalries and lack of institutional cohesion can undermine the reform process. Their personal conflicts led to paralysis in the reform agenda, with key initiatives being stalled or abandoned due to the lack of cooperation between the executive and legislative branches. The infighting contributed to political instability and frequent changes in government, which hindered consistent policy implementation and reform progress. Consequently, the heavy machinery of the Party of Regions, led by Viktor Yanukovych, managed to consolidate its power and strengthen its regional base following the Orange Revolution. The Party of Regions became a dominant force in Eastern Ukraine, where it had strong regional support. This regional anchoring allowed it to mobilize resources and political support effectively, contributing to its dominance in national politics. The consolidation of the Party of Regions altered the political balance, impacting the reform agenda. The party's focus on maintaining its regional power often conflicted with national reform efforts, leading to delays and inconsistencies in policy implementation. Andrew Wilson (Ukraine Crisis: What It Means for the West, Yale University Press, 2014) states that the regional strongholds of political parties, such as the Party of Regions, contribute to the fragmentation of the political system and hinder the development of a coherent reform strategy.

According to Paul D'Anieri (2019) who has been analyzing how the Maidan Revolution and subsequent political shifts have impacted the effectiveness of reform processes, the lack of institutionalized political formations as a factor in the slow pace of reforms and the persistence of hybrid regime characteristics. Political parties in Ukraine have often been heavily influenced by regional strongholds, where local elites exert significant control over political processes. The strong regional bases of parties create a situation where local elites have substantial influence over national politics. This can lead to regional interests taking precedence over national policy needs, complicating the reform process. The fragmentation along regional lines results in inconsistent national policies, as different regions may prioritize different issues based on local needs and interests. Steven Smith (2017) regards that regional political dynamics and the lack of

institutional cohesion contribute to a fragmented political environment, which undermines efforts to implement comprehensive national reforms. Moreover, significant portion of Ukraine's political landscape comprises parties with minimal memberships and limited public recognition. Party affiliation in Ukraine remains below 1% of the eligible voting population, contrasting sharply with the European Union's average of 4.7%. While certain national parties lack representation in the Verkhovna Rada, Ukraine's national parliament, they maintain a presence in municipal councils. Previously, small parties would unite in electoral blocs to contest parliamentary elections. Afterwards, this practice was prohibited by an election law. Many parties function mainly during elections and have little activity or contact with citizens outside of the citizens outside of the electoral cycle. However, some parties have more developed branch structures than others and during last years have made efforts to build their party branches and improving internal communications. For example, in recent years, some Ukrainian parties, such as "Servant of the People" led by Volodymyr Zelensky, have made efforts to strengthen their internal organization and improve their branch structures. This includes establishing better communication channels between the central leadership and local branches, which helps in maintaining party cohesion and responding to political challenges. Informal power structures such as political clans and extra-incumbent actors play a critical role in Ukraine by prioritizing their own interests over national reform agendas, creating a corresponding hybrid regime under which formal political institutions and processes are undermined. The presence of these informal power structures often blocks or delays reforms in Ukraine, as political decisions are influenced by the needs and preferences of these powerful groups rather than by a coherent national strategy. Timothy Snyder also stated that In Ukraine, as in other post-Soviet states, informal power structures and political elites often manipulate and undermine formal democratic institutions. This results in a hybrid regime where real power lies outside the formal structures of government, impeding genuine democratic progress and reform. Ukrainian oligarchs also exert significant influence over political parties through financial backing and other forms of support. This financial support can sway political decisions and prioritize the interests of the oligarchs over the public good in policy agendas and legislative activities. In addition, many oligarchs are directly involved in politics, either by holding political office themselves or by closely aligning with political figures and parties. This direct involvement blurs the lines between business and politics, leading to potential conflicts of interest. The cases of Viktor Pinchuk, Rinat Akhmetov and Ihor Kolomoyskyi offer very illustrative examples on how oligarch's influence have expanded beyond the economic and financial sectors to deeply shape policies through influential tools such as media outlets and funding of political parties. The interplay between oligarchic influence and low public trust contributes significantly to the endurance of the hybrid nature of Ukraine's political system. The combination of oligarchic control, corruption, and ineffective governance creates a system where democratic processes are undermined by entrenched interests and political patronage.

Instrumentalised rule of law and blurry separation of powers

Since the independences, rule of law has undoubtedly improved thanks to reformation of the judicial system and other bodies that ensured the respect of civil liberties. Yet, to diverse extent, each country faces structural obstacles to keep the three powers separated and guarantee a system of checks and balances, which hinders the overall progresses made in that sector over the last thirty years and enables extra-legal structures of political power. In addition, as with the electoral systems, when reforms are undertaken, they tend to bring moderate outcomes, or worse can be instrumentalized in cases of "rule of law backsliding" and judicial capture(Laurent and Scheppele, 2017), to the benefits of the party(ies) in power and their neo-patrimonial networks (Knott, 2018).

Georgia

Over the past three decades, the authorities in Georgia have consistently failed to establish a truly independent judiciary. This persistent lack of commitment has significantly impeded the development of a robust, fair, and transparent legal system.[1]Following its independence, Georgia's judicial system was plagued by corruption and political interference. Despite initial efforts to reform the judiciary, these attempts were often superficial and lacked the necessary depth to bring about substantial change. The Rose Revolution in 2003 and the subsequent reforms by Mikheil Saakashvili brought some hope for judicial independence. However, these reforms fell short of addressing the deep-seated issues within the system. (Saakashvili: Georgia's Flamboyant Reformer, 2021)

The peaceful transition of power in 2012 to the Georgian Dream party introduced new changes in the juridical system. The party initiated two waves of justice reform between 2016-2020, focusing on modernizing the institutional framework and refining legislation rather than large-scale personnel and organizational transformations. The political system maintained its control over the judiciary, making concessions to influential groups within the judicial corps, failing to establish meaningful safeguards for judicial independence. (The State of the Judicial System 2016-2020, TI, 2016)

The influence of clan governance extended beyond the common courts and infiltrated the Constitutional Court, staffed with individuals loyal to the parliamentary majority and influential judges. The failure to adopt legislation aligned with international standards allowed the parliamentary majority to manipulate the selection process, undermining the judiciary's independence. As a result, public trust in the Constitutional Court diminished, significantly damaging its authority. As of 2024, Georgia's score on judicial independence remains low,

[1] Georgia's current score remains at 2.5 points in 2025 - Corruption and political and corporate interference in the judiciary threatened Georgian democracy in 2023.

reflecting ongoing issues with corruption, political, and corporate interference. (Georgia: Freedom in the World 2024 Country Report, 2024) The judicial system continues to be marred by scandals, a lack of comprehensive reforms, and international sanctions against key judges. (Boffey, 2023) This environment threatens Georgia's democratic resilience, as the judiciary is a crucial pillar for upholding democratic principles and ensuring accountability.

Moldova

In Moldova, the state of the judiciary cannot be assessed as independent neither does not offer the safeguards and mechanisms of check and balance that are necessary for a stable democracy. There is also a lack of institutional competence in the judiciary and the executive prevails giving in to tactics like "telephone justice". Other issues include judges' limited ability, low pay, a lack of internal controls to prevent corruption, flaws in the system for selecting and elevating judges, subpar case and administrative management, and a failure to uphold court orders (USAID, 2005). Some evaluations give good assessments to the legal system, focusing on such criteria as fundamental respect for human rights, law and public order, as well as providing reasonable guarantees of personal safety. However, there are many other serious procedural and enforcement problems, such as how pre-trial detention is managed and the conditions in which detainees are treated. At the same time, the Republic of Moldova is one of the nations that submits the most requests to the European Court of Human Rights is Moldova (LRCM, 2003). Since the ratification of the ECHR in 1997, by 31 December 2022, the ECtHR has delivered 575 judgments in Moldovan cases. In 492 (86%) of these cases at least one human rights violation was found. The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has determined that nonenforcement of verdicts, mistreatment, inadequate investigation of mistreatment and fatalities, incarceration in deplorable conditions, unlawful detention, and irregular annulment of irrevocable judicial decisions are the most common types of violations in Moldovan cases. The Republic of Moldova was required to pay 22,813,920 EUR by the end of 2023, of which 365,722 EUR was due in 2023, based on all rulings and decisions rendered at that time (LRCM, 2003)[2].

The Republic of Moldova does mediocrely in every category according to the *Global State of Democracy* framework. In terms of Political and Social Group Equality, Gender Equality, and Effective Parliament, it ranks in the top 25% of countries worldwide, while corruption remains a key challenge. In terms of representation (credible elections, an effective parliament), rights (freedom of expression, freedom

[2]Since the ratification of the ECHR in 1997, by 31 December 2022, the ECtHR has delivered 575 judgments in Moldovan cases. In 492 (86%) of these cases at least one human rights violation was found. In this respect, Moldova is far ahead of the United Kingdom, Germany, Spain and the Netherlands, which ratified the ECHR long before Moldova and have a much larger population. By 31 December 2022, the Republic of Moldova has been ordered by the ECtHR to pay 22 448 198 euros, of which 544 448 euros in 2022.

of the press, gender equality), and rule of law (absence of corruption, predictable enforcement, personal integrity, and security), there have been significant advancements during the last five years. There haven't been any notable drops in it at that time. (International IDEA's Global State of Democracy Indices, 2023). A frequent phenomenon in Moldova is the use of criminal cases to pressure and influence political opponents. Court cases were used as a means of settling conflicts amongst the elite groups because there was a weak rule of law in place. Furthermore, Moldova's political system has become ingrained with the pervasive corruption of the political elite (Crowther 2023; Putină 2020).

One of the biggest obstacles to the Republic of Moldova's reform and economic recovery is corruption. The World Bank, UNDP, IMF, and Transparency International are just a few of the international organisations that work with Moldova and have acknowledged this. The unofficial relationships among top officials, those with access to resources such as money, information, and services, remained unbroken during the first phase (1989–1994) of the shift from an administrative, command system to a market system (commonly referred to as the system of blat). Belonging to a political "clan" served as a sort of safety net for them, keeping information about their activities—including illegal ones—from being discovered by law enforcement agencies. This type of "grand" level corruption means that although there were very few corrupt individuals, there were many corrupt transactions on a large scale. Later in the transitional period (1995–2000), associated with a certain degree of capital accumulation, the number of such transactions increased significantly (Carasciuc, 2017). A persistent and complicated problem, corruption has an impact on many facets of Moldova's political, economic, and social institutions. Several incidents involving high-ranking officials have exposed Moldova to severe political corruption. This covers cases of embezzlement, bribery, and misappropriation of public monies. The infamous "Billion Dollar Theft" of 2014, in which three Moldovan banks were used to syphon off around $1 billion, brought to light the extent of corruption and its effects on the national economy. The public's confidence in the judicial system has been eroded by the corruption that has beset Moldova's court. Moldova scored 42 points out of 100 on the 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index reported by Transparency International. Corruption Index in Moldova averaged 31.04 Points from 1999 until 2023, reaching an all-time high of 42.00 Points in 2023 and a record low of 21.00 Points in 2002 (Transparency International, 2002-2023). Moldova is prepared to some extent for the fight against corruption. While there has been some progress, much more work is required to clear the numerous obstacles that still stand in the way of the reform initiatives. In July 2023, the National Anticorruption Centre and the Anticorruption Prosecutor's Office clarified their respective duties by amendments made to the statute by the Parliament. Two well-known oligarchs were the subject of a case that culminated in a judgment rendered using new legislation for trials in absentia that went into effect in July 2022. The number of high-level corruption prosecutions has somewhat increased over time. Parliament passed changes to the whistleblower statute in June 2023 (European Commission, 2023).

Ukraine

Ukraine has long struggled with corrupt and politicized courts, and reform initiatives have often stalled or fallen short of expectations. However, despite ongoing challenges, authorities have implemented some recent improvements. The reestablishment of the High Council of Justice and the High Qualification Commission of Judges in 2023 paved the way to start the process of filling more than 2,000 judicial vacancies and vetting some 1,900 sitting judges, all of which had been on hold due to political gridlock since 2019. The reestablishment of these bodies was a crucial step in restoring the functionality and credibility of the Ukrainian judiciary. These actions were positively assessed by international observers and experts as significant steps towards judicial reform. The 2023 adoption of a merit-based procedure for the appointment of Constitutional Court judges was another long-awaited achievement aimed at reducing political influence and enhancing the independence of the judiciary. This reform is expected to improve the credibility and impartiality of the Constitutional Court, which plays a vital role in interpreting the constitution and ensuring the rule of law. The merit-based appointment procedure was a key factor in the European Union's decision to open accession negotiations with Ukraine, reflecting international recognition of Ukraine’s commitment to judicial reform. In addition, in August and September 2023 Ukraine enacted laws improving disciplinary proceedings against judges as well as the selection processes for officials overseeing those procedures. These reforms aim to strengthen accountability and oversight within the judiciary, addressing longstanding issues of corruption and inefficiency.

EU accession prospects have been a driving force for reforming the rule of law to meet EU standards. After the Revolution of Dignity in 2014, significant progresses were made towards combating corruption. Specifically, specialized anti-corruption bodies were created and began operating: the National Anti-Corruption Bureau (NABU) in 2015, the Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office (SAP) in 2015, and the High Anti-Corruption Court in 2019. In 2021, the Verkhovna Rada adopted laws regarding the renewal of the High Council of Justice (HCJ) and the High Qualification Commission of Judges (HQCJ). This included the formation of an Ethical Council, which was tasked with conducting a one-time integrity check on all current members of the HCJ and vetting all new candidates for the HCJ. Additionally, a competition for the HQCJ was initiated in November 2022, it adopted a law on the prevention and counteraction of money laundering, but amendments were added that weakened financial monitoring of public officials. In October 2023, revised law to strengthen financial monitoring of politically exposed persons (PEPs) sparked a lot of controversies, due to overly formal and excessive checks that banking institutions indiscriminately apply to former officials and their families, before being voted in Parliament and ratified by the President.

The drivers for mentioned reforms were also directly related to domestic political transformation in Ukraine. Ukraine's vibrant civil society and public demand for change, particularly following events like the Euromaidan protests in 2014, were significant internal "push" for reforms. The widespread public desire for European integration and an end to corruption such as changes in parliamentary procedures, judicial independence, and anti-corruption institutions, provided a more favourable environment for the adoption of reforms. Domestic efforts to address political instability and improve governance were critical in supporting the reform process.

Constrained media freedom

Despite media freedom being assessed as a central criterion of democratic governance, hybrid regimes rely on ever-lasting attempts at restricting and coercing media agency to impose a dominant public narrative during pivotal times, like elections and campaigns (Voltmer, Selvik and Høigilt 2021). Media capture, through the concentration of ownership of media in the hands of powerful extra-incumbent actors with close links to incumbent elites and inroads into political arena (Knott, 2018) favoured the appearance of a media-politics nexus that aims to shrink the space for media freedom, without nevertheless succeeding erasing independent press.

Georgia

Media freedom in Georgia has demonstrated a dual nature over the years. While it has served as a platform for a wide range of critical groups, state-run or affiliated media have significantly shaped the media landscape, often reinforcing political polarization. Throughout the governance of Shevardnadze, Saakashvili and the Georgian Dream party, the Georgian media landscape, particularly television, which is the primary source of information for many Georgians, has been widespread with manipulation, hate speech, and disinformation.

Despite certain hope for improvement in 2012, when Georgia was the only country in Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia to make significant progress in media freedom, the past decade has seen a disturbing trend of violence and harassment against journalists in the country. (CRRC, 2013) This has been evident in incidents such as the arrest of the director of a government-critical television station and undermining of editorial independence of key critical media channels, both of which have contributed to an increasingly polarized and politicized media environment. (Service RFE, 2021) As a result, media independence ratings declined from 3.50 to 3.25 in 2022, raising concerns among domestic and international observers. (Freedom House, 2023)

Another undemocratic move by the Georgian Dream party was the adoption of a law on Broadcasting in 2022,_that enable the government to ban anything deemed

inappropriate, hateful, offensive, or supportive of terrorism, undermining the independence of critical media outlets and leading to censorship. Furthermore, major challenges include journalist safety, censorship and surveillance efforts, unjust treatment of media outlets, and the suppression of government-critical voices. Furthermore, restricting media access to public information undermines accountability for governmental entities and limits the capacity of media outlets to report accurately.

However, the most recent and alarming move by the Georgian government was the adoption of the law "On Transparency of Foreign Influence," requiring nonprofits and media outlets receiving more than 20% of their funding from abroad to register as "organizations pursuing the interests of a foreign power". This law threatens the foundations of media freedom in Georgia and its ability to operate freely and objectively and thereby weakening the democratic fabric of the country. (DeMarco, 2024).

Moldova

The media landscape in Moldova is comparatively tiny, with a disproportionate amount of influence from private, frequently oligarchic interests. Independent media sources face unstable financial conditions. The market is primarily located in Chișinău, the country's capital and largest city; less affluent parts of Moldova do not have any local retailers. The most popular medium for consuming news is still television. For Moldovans, online media sources rank as their second-most significant news sources. Due to their affiliation with television stations, many notable digital publications share the same worries over the editorial influence of their owners. In addition, independent media sources are most prevalent online in comparison to other platforms (USAID, 2021). The country remains highly polarised politically and socially, which is why journalists face a somewhat insecure working environment. According to RWB's most recent Press Freedom Index, Moldova is ranked 89th out of 180 nations. Nonetheless, Moldova was ranked 56 in 2014. In 2022, Moldova registered a positive transition from a "problematic" to a "satisfactory" situation in the field of media freedom, according to the RFS Score (RFS, 2022-2024). Journalists have also attacked the funding and licensing policies of Moldova's media regulating agency, the Broadcast Coordinating Council (BCC), according to IREX. "Preferential treatment to stations with certain political ties; they obtain licenses and funds much more easily," is the charge leveled against BCC (Media Sustenability Index, 2017).

Ukraine

Historically, media ownership in Ukraine has lacked transparency. The majority of the media landscape is under the control of oligarchs, alternatively referred to as "media barons," a select group of affluent individuals who also have vested interests in various industries and political spheres. These individuals, categorized as

"external owners," are primarily entrepreneurs whose main businesses lie elsewhere, with media outlets serving as auxiliary ventures rather than primary revenue sources. They utilize television platforms to amass political sway, which they leverage to support their core business endeavors. Their motivations are not primarily dictated by market dynamics. This significant concentration of ownership erects formidable barriers to entry within the media market. It led, before the Russian invasion in 2022, to a highly fragmented and politicized media landscape. Media outlets were frequently aligned with various political and oligarchic interests, resulting in a lack of impartiality and significant bias in news reporting. Powerful media barons-individuals or business groups with substantial control over media outlets played a significant role in shaping public opinion and political discourse. Their influence extended beyond media ownership to direct involvement in political processes and affiliations. Prime examples of this are Inter Media Group owned by Dmytro Firtash, a prominent Ukrainian oligarch with significant political connections, 1+1 Media Group owned by Ihor Kolomoyskyi, a major Ukrainian oligarch and businessman, and Media Groups owned by Rinat Akhmetov, one of Ukraine's wealthiest oligarchs. Media barons used their platforms to influence election outcomes. For example, during the 2010 presidential elections, media controlled by Akhmetov and Firtash were accused of promoting Viktor Yanukovych and undermining his opponents, thus affecting the electoral landscape.

This was particularly evident in how media outlets handled coverage of protests and political dissent. During the Euromaidan protests in 2013-2014, media aligned with pro-government interests were criticized for underreporting or distorting the events, while media aligned with opposition forces provided more supportive coverage. In addition, media barons provided significant support to political campaigns through favourable coverage and advertisements. For example, Kolomoyskyi's media group played a crucial role in promoting Zelenskyy's presidential campaign, reflecting the direct involvement of media barons in shaping political outcomes. This environment contributed to the hybrid nature of Ukraine's political system, where media and politics were closely intertwined, affecting the overall integrity and transparency of governance. Since the Russian invasion in 2022, the Ukrainian state has become a central media actor, with the media sector facing severe disruptions, with increased state involvement in media management and a focus on countering Russian propaganda. Ukrainian media in Russian-controlled territories has been silenced and replaced by Kremlin propaganda.

Even before the invasion, an "information war" with Russia led to a toxic climate, with pro-Kremlin media banned and access to Russian social media restricted. These measures intensified after the invasion, and media outlets relaying Russian propaganda were blocked. The Russian army targeted journalists and media infrastructure to prevent independent news. Several media laws have been adopted to improve transparency, access to information, and the protection of journalists. The creation of the independent public broadcaster Suspilne and new media legislation aligned with European standards are notable reforms. Martial law

sometimes imposes reporting restrictions on journalists, especially on the frontline. The invasion weakened the economy, causing media outlets to lose subscribers and advertisers. Material destruction, disrupted supply chains, and the forced exile of employees threaten the survival of many media outlets. Hundreds have closed or reduced activities, with local and print media being the most affected. The war has turned most of journalists into war news reporters. This shift has involved covering the frontlines, documenting the human impact of the conflict, and providing real-time updates on military developments. Despite the focus on war, many journalists continue to address social issues and expose corruption, showing their commitment to broader societal concerns even amidst the crisis. Investigative journalism remains crucial in uncovering corruption and holding power to account, demonstrating the resilience and dedication of the media sector despite the challenging conditions.

Gender inequality in the media, especially in giving a voice to experts, has worsened since the invasion. Women experts and voices have become even less visible, both in war reporting and in broader media coverage. This underrepresentation is a significant concern as diverse perspectives are crucial in comprehensive reporting and analysis. Journalists face heightened threats, often being targeted despite "Press" identification. Many have been injured or killed, and media outlets damaged by airstrikes. Before the war, journalists were also targets of violence during protests. Cyberattacks, breaches of confidentiality, and restrictions on access to information remain significant concerns. The environment of media suppression and violence contributed to the hybrid nature of Ukraine's political system, where democratic norms were often undermined by political and oligarchic interests The war has intensified the role of media as a political tool. Both Ukrainian and Russian media are used to propagate official narratives and influence public opinion. The use of media for political purposes reinforces the hybrid nature of the regime, where information dissemination is closely tied to political interests.

State-regulation of civil societies and resilience of civicness

The three regimes have shown a regulatory approach to the mobilization and activism of domestic civil society organisations, ranging from full-scale repression to attempts at organizing and them and keeping them in check (Beimenbetov, 2021). Coupled with the legacies of the Soviet times that discourage civic action against the state, the e encroachment of state and leading parties the organized civil society mitigated their potential for vectoring regime changes. Particularly in Georgia and Ukraine, where collective actions have succeeded in bringing about significant regime changes, society networks were a "weak dispatcher" for the protest movements (Way 2014). It is spontaneous individual mobilisation that on the contrary, impulse the momentums, showing that collective civic actions, in hybrid regimes acts as a check on elites by making them more accountable (Diamond, 1994) and by demanding citizen' participation in the political arena.

Georgian civil society has consistently demonstrated to be strong and vibrant. The modern civil society landscape in Georgia took shape in early 1990's, with the emergence of first political parties and movements, students, activists and youth. These groups were characterized by strong anti-Communist values and liberal principles, as the country had been devastated by the civil war and economic crisis. The active rise of CSOs in Georgia began in 1994, when foreign funding began to pour into the country, and international organizations established branches in Georgia, offering much-needed financial and technical assistance as well as introducing best practices integral to their sustainability and effectiveness. Over time, the number of CSOs in Georgia increased, and they began to challenge the Shevadnadze government, culminating in the transformative events of Rose Revolution in 2003. These revolutionary events marked a new stage in the development of civil society, with watchdog, advocacy and human right organizations gaining significant support. Following the flaws and authoritarian tendencies of the Saakashvili government from 2007 onwards, these CSOs became even more active and received heightened backing, holding the government accountable and advocating for democratic reforms became increasingly prominent. Although the concept of civil society in Georgia has been primarily associated with NGOs, recent years particularly since 2019, have seen a resurgence of civic activism and engagement, especially among young people, characterized by strong anti-Russian and anti-occupation sentiments widely shared by the Georgian population.

The strength of Georgian civil society has been demonstrated most recently in the protests over the reintroduction of a controversial law "On Transparency of Foreign Influence," labelling non-governmental organizations that receive foreign funding as "Foreign Agents". Originally initiated in 2023, this legislation was withdrawn after three days of vigorous protest. (Between Two Russian Laws: A Year since March Protests, 2024). However, despite the strongly negative reaction by the civil society to the first attempt at passing the law, the ruling "Georgian Dream" party has reintroduced the similar version of the law, eventually adopting it on June 3rd, 2024. (DeMarco, 2024) Domestically, the proposed legislation has been met with massive opposition among the majority of the Georgian population. The two month non-stop protests culminated on May 12th attended by largest 250,000 people. The massive protests were brutally dispersed by the riot police, triggering similar demonstrations in other regions of Georgia. This brought regional activists and active youth to the capital, giving the movement nationwide momentum.

As the political system continues to deteriorate, the active civil society in Georgia remains the primary force still capable of safeguarding democratic values against the prevailing anti-democratic trends in Georgia. The approaching 2024 parliamentary elections hold immense significance for the nation's democracy, where active participation of civil society will significantly shape the country's democratic trajectory.

Moldova

Unlike Georgia, Moldova's civil society has structurally suffered from disarray and low levels of civic engagement. Through NGOs, "transnational civil society" attempted to resurrect citizens' civic engagement. Varzari and Tăbîrță claim that "civil society in the Republic of Moldova has reached a certain level of development," citing examples like the "events of April 6-7, 2009" or the demonstrations against the "Kozak Memorandum" that took place in November 2003 with the participation of opposition political parties. However, these representations of Moldovan civil society were more protest-oriented than actively engaged, which would have encouraged and fully supported the establishment of the rule of law (Varzari, Tăbîrță 2010). Political players in the Republic of Moldova have occasionally attempted to curtail the influence of CSOs at the action level by establishing a bad reputation in the community and introducing legislation to restrict their financial capabilities. The Republic of Moldova introduced a draft law in 2017 that would restrict NGOs' ability to receive international donations. The draft law was amended by the Minister of Justice to incorporate unique clauses pertaining to non-governmental organisations' political involvement (Putină, Brie, 2023). The limitations imposed on groups that help create and advance public policies meant to have an impact on the legislative process, engage in political activities, campaigns, or initiatives, or provide their support to political parties or candidates. International norms prohibiting such constraints on NGO operations were broken by these prohibitions. After reviewing the proposal, the Venice Commission concluded that only three Council of Europe members -Russia, Hungary, and Azerbaijan - have these kinds of restrictions. A delegation of CSO members also expressed disapproval of the idea (Promo-Lex 2017). The majority of Moldova's active CSOs (61.1%) are centred on Chisinau, with smaller concentrations in the regions of the Centre (14.2%), North (13.4%), South (11.1%), and Gagauzia (11.1%). The bulk of CSOs (59%) concentrate on youth, culture, and education; the remaining 25%, 19%, and so on operate in human rights, social work, and other areas. Around 70% of CSOs' yearly income comes from grants from outside sources, per several studies and polls conducted in recent years. The sustainability and resilience of civil society are restricted by its reliance on foreign finance (EU Roadmap 2018).

Ukraine

After independence, a national civil society began to emerge in Ukraine. Early NGOs and civic groups focused on various issues, including human rights, environmental protection, and anti-corruption. However, these organizations faced significant challenges due to a lack of funding, political interference, and the dominance of oligarchic interests. During this period, civil society had limited influence on national decision-making. The dominance of oligarchs and political clans often sidelined civic voices. However, the Orange Revolution marked a turning point for civil society in Ukraine. Civic organizations, student groups, and grassroots movements played a crucial role in mobilizing public protests against electoral fraud

of presidential elections in 2004. Groups such as the "Committee of Voters of Ukraine" and "Our Ukraine" were instrumental in organizing demonstrations and advocating for democratic reforms. As a result, civil society's strength and influence became more pronounced. The massive mobilization of citizens from various backgrounds demonstrated the ability of civic groups to challenge the status quo and demand political change. This period showed how well-organized and coordinated civil society could exert significant pressure on political leaders.

The "Revolution of Dignity" of 2013-14 saw unprecedented and the highest levels of civic engagement in Ukraine. Civil society organizations, student groups, and activists from across the country united to protest against President Yanukovych's decision to suspend the EU association agreement and address broader issues of corruption and governance. Groups like "Euromaidan SOS" and "AutoMaidan" were pivotal in organizing and sustaining the protests. Ukrainians understood that changes should be implemented qualitatively and quickly – this is a matter of building institutions for the country's survival. After the Revolution of Dignity, the participation of civil society into the political arena and its influence of policymaking increased. Promising judicial reform was launched, despite Russia's full-scale invasion. New members of the High Council of Justice were chosen. Among them – a lawyer and a civil society activist Roman Maselko. He swapped a high-flying corporate career to fight against corruption and find justice for those who lost their lives during the Revolution of Dignity. He is an example of how grassroot activism merged into civil service.

Additionally, a considerable number of transparency tools have been introduced. Digitization is of great importance here, as Ukraine is one of the leaders in the world in this field. Prime examples of digitalization in Ukraine are (1) the online "Diia" portal which is a comprehensive digital platform that provides access to a wide range of government services, including business registration, document issuance, and more; (2) the "E-court" system provides for the digitization of case management, documentation, and court proceedings; and (3) Open data platforms that offer citizens with access to a wealth of government data, including financial and budgetary information increasing transparency and enabling public oversight. Digital tools enable more rigorous auditing and monitoring of government activities. Automated systems can track expenditures, detect anomalies, and ensure compliance with regulations, thereby strengthening accountability and reducing the scope for misuse of public resources. Platforms for digital consultations, petitions, and participatory budgeting allow citizens to directly influence policy decisions and budget allocations. This increased participation enhances democratic engagement and ensures that government decisions reflect the will of the people. Digital tools can support the implementation of various reforms by simplifying administrative processes, enhancing data management, and improving communication between government bodies and the public. For example, reforms in the judicial sector can be more effectively executed through digital case management systems and online legal resources. The availability of data and

analytics from digital systems supports evidence-based policy making. Decision-makers can use real-time data to assess the impact of policies, identify areas for improvement, and make informed decisions. The full-scale invasion of the country by Russia demonstrated the reactiveness and capacity of mobilization not only of the more organized sections of the civil society, but also from individuals who partake through civic activism in collective action to defend the country and to maintaining its social infrastructure and, since 2014, emerging democratic public authority.

As a conclusion, in all three cases it appears that hybridity as a model of political regime is shaped by entangled of networks of incumbent and extra-incumbent actors that forms extra-legal power structures and makes the "shadow state" the real centre of power and policymaking. The "theatre state" mostly conveys a nominal commitment to democracy through electoral practices and cosmetic reforms that only perpetuate the status quo between conservative and reformist elites that enables state-capture and rent-seeking politics. The degree of hybridity that defines the three regimes varies based on the evolutions of the dynamic equilibrium that oscillates between democratisation and backsliding, but all share one commonality: any attempt from below to topple the status quo and break the patterns of hybridity ends up hijacked by old or new actors who will reproduce them, showing the resilience of the shadow state's power structure over democratic momentums.

Degraded state-society relations and social cohesion

The consolidation of hybridity as a distinct type of political regime in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine has tremendous consequences for state-society relations in the three case countries. Structural mechanisms of state-capture, ever-enduring neo-patrimonial logics and the embedment of politics into nexuses that have generated extra-legal structures of power result in the incapacities of the incumbent actors to secure both output and input legitimacy through the quality of state governance and the participation of the citizens to the political arena. This translates into low level of vertical trust, and affects negatively the relations between segments of society, since the level of horizontal trust reveals a degraded social cohesion.

Dynamics of Vertical and Horizontal Trust in Georgia

In Georgia, vertical trust has significantly fluctuated over the years, influenced by political events, broader socio-economic changes, as well as the external threats posed to the country. While specific quantitative data on vertical trust from the 1990s is limited, qualitative insights provide a clear picture of widespread

disenchantment with state institutions. According to Devdariani (2004, 96) "Impoverishment of the majority of the population led to political apathy". This distrust reflected the public's frustration with the pervasive corruption and inability of the government to provide basic order or public services. In the second half of 1990s, under the leadership of President Eduard Shevardnadze, Georgia began to restore basic order and implement first steps aimed at stabilizing the economy. The early attempts at reforms did lay some groundwork for future improvements, but they were insufficient to build-up vertical trust. In the late 1990s and early 2000s Shaverdnadze increasingly relied on patron-clientelist networks to retain power, which did little to improve public confidence. Ultimately, widespread discontent with failing state led to popular uprising in November 2003, which ousted the Shevardnadze government. The Rose Revolution of 2003 marked a turning point for Georgia. After taking the reins of power, President Saakashvili and his United National Movement (UNM), embarked on a series of comprehensive reforms aimed at reducing corruption, that had plagued Georgia for years, improving delivery of public services, and modernizing the entire state apparatus. These measures had an immediate positive impact on public trust. According to the 2004 survey, trust in the government increased significantly, with 60% of respondents expressing confidence in the new administration's commitment to fighting corruption.

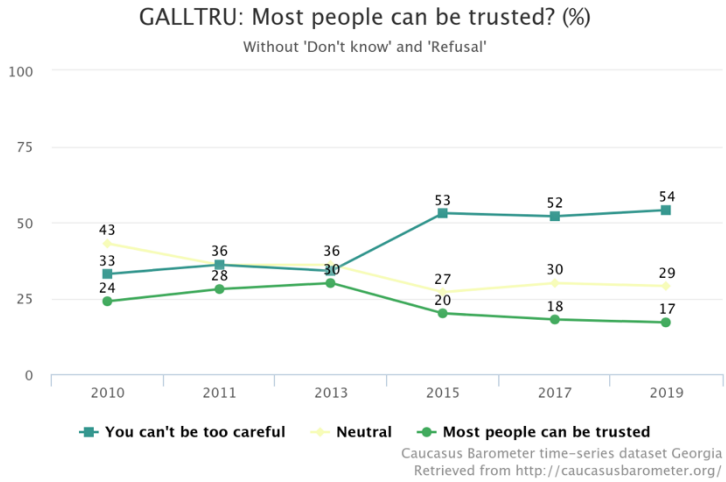
In the subsequent years, the levels of institutional trust started to steadily grow and "institutions that were so widely distrusted under Shevardnadze, such as the police, the education, and healthcare system, reached record high levels of trust in the post-communist history of Georgia (Aliyev 2014, 28). For instance, if in 2003 only 2.3 percent of citizens trusted the police, a decade later in 2012 the number increased to 88 percent, while 98 percent of respondents said they had not paid bribes to the officers (IRI 2012, 29). Notably throughout the years of the UNM rule, the public trust in President remained higher than in other government institutions. Although during the 2007 political crises the trust in the President dropped to 32 percent, after the 2008 August war it rose back to 51% and even witnessed slight increase in the following years (CRRC 2009). Unlike the President, the levels of trust in the Parliament and the executive government (the Prime Minister and ministers) were slightly lower, which, some attributed "to the lower degree to which most MPs and cabinet members are perceived to be politically independent figures" (CRRC 2009). During the 2007 political crises the trust in the Parliament decreased to 19%. After the 2008 August war it increased to 34% but remained consistently lower than trust in the President. According to the CRRC, these trends reflected "how the level of trust in government institutions may be related to the political crises and external threats to the country, as well as to the personalities representing these institutions" (CRRC 2009). Overall, despite the significant improvements in vertical trust that followed the UNM's anti-corruption and state-building drive, the sustainability of this trust was challenged by allegations of authoritarianism and human rights abuses towards the end of Saakashvili's tenure. Trust in institutions began to wane as political opposition and civil society raised concerns about the concentration of power and the erosion of democratic norms. This was most evident

in relation to the trust towards the judicial system in Georgia, which despite initial improvements, remained the Achilles' heel of the Saakashvili government.

While most Georgians agreed that judicial system improved since 2003, widespread associations were still not overwhelmingly positive, and opinion polls consistently reflected the widespread perception that courts were "influenced by the government, and [were] too routinely strict when handing out punishments" (USAID 2012). According to the 2012 survey, two-thirds of Georgians were "uncertain as to whether their legal system can be trusted," (CRRC 2012, 6), while, "most would never take a case to court, and most see verdicts as no more fair or unfair than informal means of dispute resolution". Overall, in the second half of Saakashvili's tenure there were perceptions that state-building efforts took precedence over protecting democratic values, which started to undermine vertical trust. The increasing sense of scepticism towards the fairness of the system coincided with the "Prison Scandal" (involving leaked video showing abuse of inmates in the prison system) shortly before the elections, which led to the UNM's loss of power. The 2012 parliamentary elections resulted in a peaceful transfer of power to the Georgian Dream (GD) coalition, led by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili. The transition period was characterized by promises of greater transparency, accountability, and a shift away from what was perceived as authoritarian tendencies, all of which resonated well with the public. This initial public optimism, however, was soon overshadowed by the rise in shadow governance and patronage practices. Despite Ivanishvili's formal departure from politics, he informally continued to exercise major influence on Georgian politics, effectively undermining democratic checks and balances. The emergence of shadow governance eroded the transparency and accountability of key state institutions, leading to public scepticism and mistrust in them. The Caucasus Barometer Survey conducted in 2019 found that overall, more respondents distrusted the prime minister, the parliament, election authorities, and courts than believed in those institutions (CRRC 2019). The lack of trust was most evident in relation to the judiciary, which in 2019 was one of the least trusted institutions in the country. Moreover, despite Georgia's overall impressive anti-corruption measures, perceptions of corruption increased under GD's tenure. According to the CRRC, the percentage of Georgians who believe that corruption is a widespread problem in their country rose from 37% in 2012 to 57% in 2019Another crucial trend has been the rising distrust towards political parties: if in 2012 only 21 percent distrusted parties, by 2019 the number had risen to 55%, with more than half of the population being sceptical. Despite these fluctuations in vertical trust, however, two institutions that have continuously enjoyed high trust from Georgians are the Army and the Church, which according to the 2019 CRRC surveys were trusted by 73% and 71% of the population, respectively.

To understand the dynamics of horizontal trust in Georgia, it is essential to differentiate between bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding capital refers to the strong ties within homogeneous groups, such as family units, close friends, and tightly knit communities. Bridging capital, on the other hand, involves the connections between diverse social groups, enabling broader societal integration

and cooperation. In Georgia, bonding capital has traditionally been strong, with family bonds often extending beyond the nuclear family to include a wide network of relatives. These relationships have been characterized by high levels of trust and mutual support, providing a safety net in times of need. However, the connections that bridge diverse social, ethnic, and regional groups have been weaker, limiting the potential for collective action and broader social cohesion. According to Gutbrod (2012, 2) "when required, groups can form – among neighbors or farmers, for example – to fix a particularly pressing problem." However, even when Georgians collaborate beyond their immediate in-groups they "rarely formalize and institutionalize their collaboration". As a result, Georgia ranks extremely low with only about 5% of the population engaged in associations or other formalized activity. This is also evident in World Values Surveys, which has consistently ranked Georgia among the low trust societies. According to the data from 2008, "82 percent of Georgians felt that "you can't be too careful" when dealing with other people – only 18 percent felt that most people could be trusted, well towards the lower end of the international trust scale. In countries like Switzerland, 54 percent felt that most people could be trusted; in Norway and Sweden this figure rose to over 65 percent" (as cited in Gutbrod 2012, 12). According to the CRRC data from 2019, only about 15% of Georgians believe that most people can be trusted. The figure below shows that despite slight improvements around 2012-13, the generalized trust in the country remains low, pervasive caution characterizes social interactions and the number of those that are sceptical has even increased in the last decade.



Many attribute the low levels of horizontal trust to the Communist legacy and its impact on the social fabric of Georgia throughout the years. The state centralized control, pervasive surveillance, and a network of informants under the Soviet era cultivated a culture of suspicion and fear, as individuals were constantly wary of being reported for anti-state activities by their peers. This environment significantly weakened trust between disparate groups and instead tightly knit informal networks – usually centered around family and close friends – became

essential for navigating the repressive and bureaucratic state. The transition from a Soviet republic to an independent state did not immediately resolve these issues. As described earlier, the early years of independence were marked by political instability, extreme economic hardship, and civil conflicts, which compounded societal mistrust. From 1990 to 1995 Georgia's GDP declined by 70%. This abrupt and painful transition accompanied by conflict and collapse of the basic public services further reinforced reliance on immediate connections and informality. World Values Survey conducted in 1996-1997, found that "over 90% of its respondents in Georgia reported relying heavily on their family" (Aliyev 2014). According to Dershem and Gzirishvili (1998, p. 1828): "Informal social networks are a financial safety net by way of borrowing, identifying and gaining access to scarce goods and services, and obtaining remittances and gifts. Not only do informal social networks provide food and financial assistance, but they also provide physical and labour support." By the end of Shevardnadze era, the Georgian state had been overtaken by informal networks that had nearly replaced dysfunctional formal institutions and took over many of their public functions (Aliyev 2014). However, as described earlier, the immediate aftermath of the Rose Revolution saw a comprehensive set of reforms aimed at reducing corruption and modernizing the state. Economic reforms led to significant growth, which improved living standards for many Georgians. This economic stability contributed to a more positive social environment, where trust among citizens could potentially flourish. Indeed, by the end of UNM's tenure the generalized trust almost doubled and according to CRRC data in 2011 and 2013 almost one third of the population (28% and 30% respectively) believed that other people could be trusted. However, the subsequent years witnessed a drop in generalized trust and significant rise in those that are sceptical of others. In 2019, only 17% agreed that most people can be trusted, while more than half (54%) agreed with the notion that you can't be too careful when dealing with others. The rise in informality and patronage in the recent years have been named among the potential reasons, however it is difficult to point to the exact causes behind the overall cautions outlook of Georgians. Georgians also remain generally cautions about the ethnic minorities. WVS includes questions about social distance, such as the willingness to have ethnic minorities as neighbors or colleagues. In 2020, about 30% of Georgians expressed comfort with having ethnic minorities as neighbors, up from 22% in 2010. This gradual increase points to a slow but positive change in attitudes. However, the same survey highlighted that only 15% would be comfortable with an ethnic minority member in their immediate family, indicating that while social distance is decreasing in public spheres, it remains significant in private domains.

Despite these overall low levels of horizontal trust however, there are also some positive trends. Younger Georgians are increasingly involved in activism and advocacy, often through social media and digital platforms. These tools facilitate the organization of protests, awareness campaigns, and community projects, promoting solidarity and mutual support. According to CRRC data, youth participation in civic activities has increased by 15% from 2014 to 2021 (GFSIS 2021).

Moreover, younger generations in Georgia exhibit more tolerant and inclusive attitudes towards diversity compared to older generations. WVS data from 2020 revealed that younger Georgians (aged 18-29) are more likely to express trust towards ethnic minorities, with 25% indicating positive attitudes compared to only 10% among those aged 50 and above. This suggests a generational shift towards greater inclusivity and acceptance; however, much work still needs to be done to foster trust and cooperation among diverse ethnic, religious, and social groups to strengthen the overall horizontal trust, crucial for resilient societies.

Dynamics of Vertical and Horizontal Trust in Moldova

The institutions of the central power enjoy public trust, quite moderate around 25-35%, respectively the Government around 25%, oscillating from 20 (2001) to 28 in 2003, Parliament 16 (2001) and 35% after 2009-2023[3]. Confidence in the President varied from 16% to 40%, with certain peaks during Voronin's period 50.5 (April, 2006), Dodon 43.15 (April 2017), Sandu 52.5 (February, 2021)[4]The degree of trust in the Judiciary varies around 25%, and civil society organizations (NGOs) — about 25–30%. Moldovan citizens have much more trust in traditional institutions than in those modernized as a result of democratization. It is important to mention that the most important institutions in defending and articulating the current interests of citizens — trade unions and political parties, have the lowest trust rating, of approximately 20% and 15%, respectively. Thus, the institution with the highest degree of trust is the Church, varying in some cases around 70-80% in the early 2000s, later experiencing a decrease to 58% (2019; 2023), related to the engagement of the church in political propaganda actions in the period of COVID-19 and the War in Ukraine. Some parties (CPRM, SPRM) used the relationship with the Church to persuade the electorate through the Patriarchate of Moldova, which is under the jurisdiction of Russia. The local public administration constantly enjoys the trust of 35-55% (2001-2023), with an above-average increase in 2014 (65.9%), the period when the mixed electoral system was implemented, and the role of local authorities and local leaders was accentuated by the campaigns to promote the mixed system.

Over time, opinions about the CSO's image shift. If CSOs were trusted by 33, 5, and 30% in 2009 and 2010, respectively, then with time that number dropped to 23, 8 in 2021. The level of mistrust has also significantly increased, rising from 8.1% high distrust to 36.8% high distrust at the same time. If, in 2009, roughly 31% of respondents held a neutral stance or knew nothing about CSOs, then by 2021, a sizable portion of them had abandoned their neutral viewpoint and developed an unfavourable perception (POB 2009–2021). The public discourse primarily

[3] The data obtained by the Public Policy Institute, which produces the Public Opinion Barometer, starting in 2001, were taken as a reference

[4] For the analysis of the degree of trust in Presidents Voronin, Dodon and Sandu, the periods surveyed after taking office were taken as a benchmark.

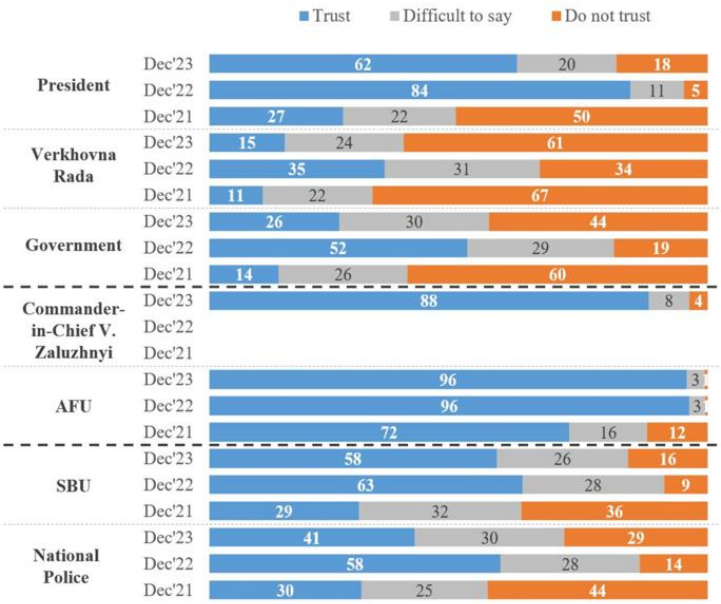
spearheaded by left-wing parties and the mass media under their control, which portrays CSOs in the Republic of Moldova as Western agents advancing foreign political agendas at odds with domestic ones, are largely to blame for this unfavourable perception. Similart o this, a negative perception of NGOs spreads, seen as funded by outside sources and earning disproportionate wages that would make their workers privileged. This speaks volume about the weak organisation and public space presence of local organisations, which are generally underdeveloped and underfunded (Putină, Brie, 2023).

The low levels of public trust in Moldova are caused by several factors. First, corruption is a widespread problem in Moldova that affects public institutions and government at all levels. Prominent instances of corruption, like the "Billion Dollar Bank Scandal," have seriously damaged public confidence (RFE/RL, 2015). The second is the low trust in the legal system is a result of both the perceived political influence over the court and the absence of judicial independence. Reforming the judiciary has not happened quickly and has encountered opposition (World Justice Project, 2022). The ability of the media to hold public institutions accountable is hampered by limited media freedom and the ownership of the media being concentrated in the hands of a small number of political and commercial elites. Public mistrust and cynicism are exacerbated by this (Reporters Without Borders, 2022). Trust is weakened by inconsistent government performance, especially when it comes to resolving economic issues and shortcomings in public services. Citizens' mistrust of government is exacerbated by their experiences with subpar services and unstable economies. The media is very important in influencing how the general public views the government. While biased or controlled media can propagate false information and undermine trust, independent and transparent media can build trust by holding the government accountable. Concerns regarding media ownership and control impacting information dissemination have occasionally jeopardized media freedom in Moldova. Public mistrust may result from this, particularly if media organizations are thought to be biased or to be political interests' mouthpieces. In the Republic of Moldova, there is a clear link between democratization and popular trust. Low public confidence in important institutions threatens the validity of democratic processes, impedes efficient government, and fuels political unrest.

Dynamics of Vertical and Horizontal Trust in Ukraine

Vertical trust in Ukraine has evolved through periods of political upheaval and reform. The early years of independence were marked by low trust due to corruption and instability, which saw temporary improvements during the Orange Revolution. The Euromaidan protests highlighted public dissatisfaction and the need for change, while recent anti-corruption efforts and digital reforms have worked towards rebuilding trust, though challenges remain due to ongoing war and political instability. In the early 1990s, regional disparities were evident. For instance, the western region of Ukraine, including Lviv, was more pro-European and supportive

of closer ties with the EU, while the eastern region, including Donetsk and Luhansk, had a significant Russian-speaking population that leaned towards closer ties with Russia. This divide influenced political support and social cohesion. Interestingly, the trust in government authorities has surged during the war, driven by a collective focus on defense and security. However, this is viewed as a wartime phenomenon, with concerns over socio-economic challenges and corruption likely to resurface post-conflict.



Compared to December 2022, criticism of the authorities is growing. In particular, the share of those who trust the Verkhovna Rada decreased from 35% to 15%, and the share of those who do not trust it increased from 34% to 61%. Trust in the Government decreased from 52% to 26%, distrust increased from 19% to 44%. Although there is also a downward trend in the case of the President, he retains the overwhelming trust of the Ukrainian public. Yes, currently 62% trust the President, while 18% do not. In December 2022, 84% trusted the President, 5% did not. Accordingly, if the trust-distrust balance for the President in December 2022 was +80%, now it is +42%. That is, on the one hand, we see a significant decrease, but on the other hand, it remains unequivocally positive with a significant preponderance of those who trust the President compared to those who do not trust him. The Armed Forces retain absolute trust in society - as in December 2022, and now 96% trust the Armed Forces.

The dissatisfaction of society, which manifested in the Orange Revolution, brought together diverse groups, including students, civil society activists, and political

parties from various regions, in a unified protest against electoral fraud. This coalition demonstrated an increased level of horizontal trust, as people from different backgrounds collaborated to demand electoral fairness and reform. However, after Viktor Yushchenko's presidency began, internal divisions resurfaced again. The political infighting between Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko led to ineffective governance and failure to address regional concerns. This failure to unify the country and deliver on promises deepened existing regional and political divides. This situation led to the Euromaidan protests.

The "Euromaidan" was characterized by broad participation from various societal groups, including youth, intellectuals, and workers from different regions of Ukraine. The movement united people across regional and social divides in opposition to President Yanukovych's decision to suspend the EU association agreement and in protest against corruption. This period saw a significant boost in horizontal trust among protestors from different backgrounds. Also, the violent response to "Euromaidan" and the subsequent annexation of Crimea highlighted underlying tensions. The conflict in eastern Ukraine saw the rise of separatist sentiments and a polarized society, with pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian factions clashing. The war in Donbas further strained relationships between different regions and ethnic groups. In this context, the Ukrainian government has made efforts to address regional disparities through programs like the "Donbas Social Fund," which supports infrastructure rebuilding and humanitarian aid in conflict-affected areas. These efforts aim to foster reconciliation and improve horizontal trust between different regions. The ongoing war with Russia and the annexation of the Ukrainian territories created significant divisions within Ukrainian society. The conflict has led to displacement and the creation of internally displaced persons (IDPs), who often face difficulties integrating into new regions. The disparity between government-controlled areas and conflict zones has affected horizontal trust, with tensions between displaced populations and host communities.

The latest surveys conducted in Ukraine by the Sociological Group "Rating" at the request of the transformation communications activity supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), implemented by Chemonics international inc. show a general positive trust radius in Ukrainian society, with a higher trust level noted among the older population compared to the younger demographic. This disparity poses challenges to the country's social capital, especially since the youth are crucial for future human development. Ukrainian society generally displays a positive radius of trust, with more people trusting others than not. However, significant differences exist across age groups: older individuals are more trusting, while younger ones are more closed-off, which weakens social capital. Trust levels also correlate with income, as higher-income individuals are more open than those with lower incomes. The survey also uncovers a paradox in social attitudes. While there is a general balance of trust and distrust in others, an extremely high level of trust is reserved for immediate family and relatives, reflecting deep-rooted family values in Ukrainian culture. In contrast,

significant distrust is directed towards strangers, those of different nationalities, or differing political views, underscoring societal divides. This distrust poses risks given Ukraine's historical and ideological differences. However, the collective spirit and willingness to sacrifice for the group are significant advantages during crises. Volunteering and neighborhood associations played crucial roles in the initial defense during the full-scale war. High trust in charity foundations and CSOs has persisted through the last years, indicating potential for further social capital development and a decentralized interaction model within society.

Comparison and conclusive remarks

Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine's pathways towards hybridity have shared some strong commonalities in their exit of Soviet rule, when the recreation of states and political systems was challenged by the enduring legacies of the old regime and adopted political arrangements and practices of power prompting state-capture, rant-seeking politics and neo-patrimonial networks within and at the fringe of the political arena. In addition, transitions from communism were further complicated by the socio-economic hardships of the transition toward a capitalist free market economy, the eruption and irresolution of territorial separatist conflicts in Georgia and Moldova and the contestation of the new polities from within and without. All combined, those patterns of transition have considerably degraded the state-society relations in the newly independent states and paved the way for a consolidation of hybridity, as their practice of governance damaged from the onset the output and input legitimacy of the regime by confiscating the political arena at the benefit and failing to deliver effective outcomes of policymaking. The cohabitation of new and former incumbent and extra-incumbent elites within a stable but enduring *status quo* has encouraged the concentration of power into extralegal political and economic structures and the emergence of interconnected nexuses: business and politics, media and politics, organized crime and politics. As a matter of fact, those structures appear extremely resilient against democratic momentums (Orange revolution, Rose Revolution and Euromaidan for instance) and have proven able to re-invent themselves (post-Bank theft in Moldova).

As detailed in our analysis, it is extremely difficult to distinguish in the post-independence political trajectories of the three countries define periods of democratization and backsliding, since the extralegal power structures are so well embedded into the political arena and system of governance. The ebbs and flows that have instead characterised the regimes' evolutions have enabled to shape and solidify key logics, drivers and practices of hybridity that manifest in several sectors of the state and society. Over the last few decades, a distinctive blend of democratic and authoritarian agendas has shaped Georgian, Moldovan and Ukrainian political landscape, determining the emergence of a hybrid type of governance. Although, the three governments have retained key elements of

façade democracies, such as elections, parliamentary and non-parliamentary political parties, performative rule of law and commitment to human rights and participation of – an organised- civil society, it has significantly strengthened authoritarian aspects of its governance. This has been evident in the implementation of cohesive and repressive measures, the deterioration of civil liberties, freedom of speech, and active suppression of all forms of political contestation. Understanding the interplay between key factors, such as elections, the role of political parties, civil society, media freedom and the rule of law, is essential for examining how democratic resilience has been undermined and authoritarianism has been enabled.

The electoral systems, the cornerstone of democratic governance, have often failed to ensure justice and versed into electoralism. In Georgia, the electoral system historically has been biased toward the ruling party, completely neutralizing political competition and reinforcing the latter's grip on key government institutions. As a result, elections have become a tool to uphold a facade of democracy, projecting an image of legitimacy while lacking real political contestation. Moreover, the fragmentation of political parties had an adverse impact on their representational role towards the public, which contributed to the democratic deficit. Further, this led to a very polarized political climate wherein opposition parties are marginalized and largely cut off from the constituents. Georgia's democratic decline has also been significantly impacted by the erosion of the rule of law. Due to high-level of corruption and the clan governance, judiciary has failed to establish itself as an independent body that can hold those in power accountable. The foundation of democratic resilience, civil society, has likewise been under constant attack, by the government's growing suppression of civil society and the enactment of restrictive legislation such as the "Foreign Agents" Law. In addition, the adoption of the same law has further weakened the free media in Georgia, execrated by the increasing a propaganda environment and further eroding the foundation of democracy. As the political system continues to deteriorate, civil society and media freedom remains as one of the forces still capable of safeguarding democratic values and institutions against the prevailing anti-democratic trends and widespread apathy towards the public and political life. Together, these components create a political environment in Georgia in which Georgian government allows authoritarianism to thrive, preventing the emergence of true democratic resilience. These troubling transformations are not merely a theoretical concern but represent a tangible and immediate danger to Georgia’s democratic functioning and its European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

The hybrid regime in Moldova combines, on one hand, a functioning parliament, regular elections, and a relatively active civil society engagement with, on the other, vote-buying, clientelism, media manipulation, and political meddling in the legal system that are examples of authoritarian practices. Because of these abuses of power, elites are able to control important economic sectors and create unofficial networks of patronage, which allow them to subvert democratic processes, hold onto power and build political powerhouses able to influence directly the evolutions of the political system. Meanwhile, outside parties such as Russia take advantage of these weaknesses, strengthening the system's authoritarian components. Moldova's hybrid political system is by social and economic uncertainty and insecurity. They facilitate the continuation of authoritarian tactics within the democratic framework, erode democratic institutions, and leave the populace open to manipulation by elites. Reforms and democratic institutions have been reinforced by Moldova's ambitions for EU inclusion (European Commission, Republic of Moldova 2023 Report). Though progress has been uneven, EU conditionality has contributed to the promotion of democratic resilience. Moldova's resilience is defined by internal opposition, external pressure, and its aspirations for European integration.

Ukraine also features the characteristics of hybrid regime, accentuated by the long-standing baleful influence of oligarchs, deep politico-territorial divides and regular outbursts of high-scale political violence and repression that have led to stunted political developments. Ukraine's electoral system, while formally democratic, has been struggling with corruption, oligarchic control, and electoral fraud. Despite efforts to introduce transparency through reforms of the 2019 Electoral Code, the hybrid nature of Ukraine's regime—where formal institutions coexist with informal practices—remains evident. The suspension of presidential and parliamentary elections due to martial law of 2022 considerably worsened the state of electoral democracy in Ukraine. As a result, Ukraine's electoral system remains a battleground between democratic aspirations and entrenched hybrid regime characteristics. This adds up to the weakness of political parties and fragmentation of the multiparty, where personal leadership has prevailed over coherent ideological platforms. Oligarchic influence is paramount, with parties serving as vehicles for individual or regional interests rather than national policy. This lack of institutionalization undermines the development of a stable political system capable of long-term reform. While some newer parties, like "Servant of the People," attempt to bring about internal reforms, these efforts are overshadowed by low public trust in parties due to corruption and inefficacy. The future of Ukrainian democracy hinges on the ability of political parties to shed personalistic and oligarchic control, institutionalize their platforms, and restore public trust. Without this, political fragmentation and instability will persist, impeding reform efforts. Meanwhile, in time of war, the personalistic influence within the political system of Ukraine remains dominant. However, civil society and civic movements have shown remarkable resilience, particularly during moments of political crisis such as the Orange Revolution and Euromaidan (2014). The ongoing war with Russia has further strengthened civil society, as citizens and organizations have mobilized to support

the war effort and push for reforms. Digitalization, transparency tools, and decentralization have empowered civil society, making it a critical force in Ukraine's democratic development. Considering this, civil society remains one of Ukraine's strongest assets in its fight for democracy. Continued support for civil society organizations and further efforts to decentralize power will be essential in ensuring that democratic reforms are not just top-down initiatives but are rooted in grassroots movements that can hold the government accountable. Yet, one of the most difficult obstacles to overcome on that direction are economic and social insecurities that are not merely consequences of the hybrid regime in Ukraine – they are also drivers of it. By maintaining economic and social instability, elites can manipulate the population, offering short-term solutions while perpetuating a system that prioritizes their own interests. Citizens, meanwhile, are trapped in a cycle where they must navigate informal networks and personal relationships to survive, further entrenching informal power structures. This cycle of insecurity and manipulation ensures that formal democratic reforms, while occasionally implemented, fail to dismantle the underlying power dynamics that sustain the hybrid regime.

The hybrid nature of political institutions in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine has significantly influenced both vertical and horizontal trust in these countries and reflects the degraded state-society relations. This hybridity has led to inconsistent trust dynamics, as citizens grapple with governments that often claim democratic legitimacy while simultaneously undermining institutional independence and transparency. Each country's unique historical, political, and external pressures have further shaped how hybrid institutions impact the trust of their citizens in both the government and one another. In terms of **vertical trust**, all three countries show fluctuations, but the causes and trajectories vary. In **Georgia**, political reforms, such as those following the Rose Revolution, briefly boosted public confidence in government institutions, particularly through anti-corruption efforts. However, the persistence of power centralization and informal networks of control, particularly in the judiciary, led to a decline in trust as citizens became disillusioned with the partial and inconsistent nature of the reforms. This trend has further continued and even exacerbated under the rule of the Georgian Dream party. **Moldova** has witnessed a slightly different pattern of democratic reforms coexisting with corruption, but in Moldova, external influences, particularly from Russia through the Orthodox Church and political elites, play a more prominent role. This hybrid system results in more consistent but fragile levels of vertical trust, as citizens recognize the influence of foreign powers within their institutions. In **Ukraine**, oligarchic control shapes the hybrid nature of governance, creating deep-seated mistrust in political parties and other institutions. However, Ukraine has experienced sharper rises in trust during times of national crisis, such as the Euromaidan protests and the ongoing war with Russia, though this trust is often temporary, with underlying corruption undermining its sustainability.

Horizontal trust across these countries also reflects the hybrid nature of their institutions, though the patterns are shaped by different historical and social

factors. In **Georgia** and **Moldova**, horizontal trust remains low, largely a result of post-Soviet reliance on informal networks and deep-seated corruption. In Georgia, strong familial bonds dominate, but broader societal trust is limited, with citizens largely sceptical of civic organizations and institutions. In Moldova, civil society organizations (CSOs) face similar challenges, with the added complexity of media portrayals that frame these organizations as foreign agents, further undermining public confidence. **Ukraine**, while also suffering from low horizontal trust, particularly between its diverse regions, has experienced moments of solidarity, particularly during national crises. However, these gains in social cohesion are often short-lived, as oligarchic influence and regional divides continue to fracture long-term trust among citizens.

Ultimately hybrid political regimes create the appearance of democratic governance while maintaining a reality where corruption, informal power, and external influence dominate. Such regimes, built on facades of reform and modernization, lack the substantive institutional independence necessary for real democratic trust to flourish. The result is a shaky foundation of both vertical and horizontal trust, where citizens remain sceptical of their governments' true intentions. While war, crises, or reform movements may temporarily bolster confidence or unify the populace, the inherent weaknesses of these regimes, often designed more for show than for genuine accountability, ultimately prevent the development of lasting and cohesive trust within the society.

Coherent with its objective to build democratic resilience in aspiring members states in the Western Balkans and the Eastern neighbourhood, the EU will need to engage with hybrid regimes in "a more principled way, by supporting civil society and non-state initiatives to bring about change from below», as advocated by RE-ENGAGE partners in a recent background paper (Buras, Dumoulin, Kelmendi and Marx, 2024). The geopolitical and security stakes of a renewed engagement and enlargement process should not eclipse the need to demand accountability from the incumbent elites when democratic standards are flouted and the need for Brussels to bear in mind that EU financial assistance can offer a substantial leverage to those same elites. As such, the transformative power of the EU, which has in its previous phases of engagement failed to bring about concrete, long-lasting democratic changes, should help rebuild the political system from below by focusing not only on the organized civil society- often regulated by the regimes- but rather on movements of civicness that operate on the fringes of the political and civil society arenas. Moreover, the emphasis of stability and security has too often taken the priority over fundamental changes, which has made the EU paid lip service to moderate reformists who would end up preserving the status quo on which hybridity thrives and hence discredited the legitimacy of its actions.

References

Georgia's Parliamentary Electoral System: Options for Advancing Voter Equality (2011). https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/migrate/georgias_parliamentary_electoral_system_2011_0.pd

Defusing Georgia's Political Crisis: An EU Foreign Policy Success? (2021). Carnegieendowment.org. https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2021/05/defusing-georgias-political-crisis-an-eu-foreign-policy-success?lang=en&center=europe

Agreement on the electoral system creates an opportunity to get out of the crisis and create a stable electoral environment | ISFED. (2024). Isfed.ge. https://www.isfed.ge/eng/gantskhadebebi/saarchevno-sistemaze-shetankhmeba-krizisidan-gamosvlisa-da-stabiluri-saarchevno-garemos-shesadzleblobas-achens

Saakashvili: Georgia's flamboyant reformer. (2021, October 1). France 24. https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20211001-saakashvili-georgia-s-flamboyant-reformer

The State of the Judicial System 2016-2020. (2016). Transparency International Georgia. https://transparency.ge/en/post/state-judicial-system-2016-2020

Georgia: Freedom in the World 2024 Country Report. (2024). Freedom House. https://freedomhouse.org/country/georgia/freedom-world/2024

Between Two Russian Laws: A Year Since March Protests. (2024, March 8). Civil Georgia. https://civil.ge/archives/585913

Aliyev, H. (2014). The effects of the Saakashvili era reforms on informal practices in the Republic of Georgia. *Studies of Transition States and Societies*, *6*(1), 19-33.

Åslund, A. (2009). *How Ukraine became a market economy and democracy*. Columbia University Press.

Beimenbetov, S. (2021). State regulation of organized civil society in hybrid regimes: A systematic assessment of cross-national variations in the regulation of

civil society organizations in seven post-Soviet countries. *Central Asian Affairs*, *8*(2), 120-149.

Belloni, R., & Strazzari, F. (2014). Corruption in post-conflict Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo: A deal among friends. *Third World Quarterly, 35*(5), 855–871.

Billingsley S. (2010). The Post-Communist Fertility Puzzle. *Population research and policy review*, *29*(2), 193–231

Bøås, M., Giske, M., Osland, K. (2024), Democracy and trust, hybrid regimes and resilience, RE-ENGAGE,

Boese, V.A., Edgell, A.B., Hellmeier, S., Maerz, S.F. and Lindberg, S.I. (2021). How democracies prevail: democratic resilience as a two-stage process. *Democratisation*, 28(5), 885-907.

Boffey, D. (2023, April 12). US puts sanctions on four Georgian judges over "significant corruption." The Guardian; The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/12/us-puts-sanctions-on-four-georgian-judges-over-significant-corruption

Buras, P., Dumoulin, M., Kelmendi, T., & Mark, M. (2024). *The interest of values: The EU's democracy promotion in the Western Balkans and the eastern neighbourhood*. re-Engage. https://re-engaging.eu/the-interest-of-values-the-eus-democracy-promotion-in-the-western-balkans-and-the-eastern-neig

Carothers, T. (2002). The end of the transition paradigm. *Journal of democracy*, *13*(1), 5-21.

Chatham House. (2023). *Democracy in Ukraine*. Retrieved from https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/11/democracy-ukraine

Cianetti, L., Dawson, J., & Hanley, S. (Eds.). (2019). *Rethinking'democratic backsliding'in Central and Eastern Europe*. London & New York: Routledge.

Crowther, W. (2023). Moldova's first quarter century: Flawed transition and failed democracy. *Nationalities Papers*, *51*(1), 33-46.

CRRC (2009) The Level of Trust in Government Institutions in Georgia: The Dynamics of the Past Three Years. Accessed online: https://crrc.ge/the-level-of-trust-in-government-institutions-in-georgia-the-dynamics-of-the-past-three-years/

CRRC (2012) Attitudes towards the judicial system in Georgia. Accessed online: https:/crrc.ge/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/crrc_report.public_attitudes_judicial_system_eng.pdf

CRRC (2013, May 6). Freedom of Press in the South Caucasus - CRRC. CRRC. https://crrc.ge/en/freedom-of-press-in-the-south-caucasus/

CRRC (2019) Caucasus Barometer 2019 Georgia. Accessed online: https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/datasets/

D'Anieri, P.(2011). "Structural Constraints in Ukrainian Politics." East European Politics& Societies 25 (1):28-46.

D'Anieri, P. (2019). *Ukraine and the Politics of Identity: The Impact of the Maidan Revolution*. Cambridge University Press.

DeMarco, M. (2024, April 5). 2024 Georgia Draft Law on Foreign Influence Transparency. ICNL; ICNL. https://www.icnl.org/post/analysis/draft-law-of-georgia-on-foreign-influence-transparency

Dershem, L., & Gzirishvili, D. (1998). Informal Social Support Networks and Household Vulnerability: Empirical Findings From Georgia. *World Development*, 26(10), 1827-1838.

Devdariani, J. (2004). Georgia: Rise and fall of the façade democracy. Demokratizatsyia *12*(1), 79-116.

Diamond, L. (1994). Rethinking civil society: Toward democratic consolidation. *Journal of democracy*, *5*(3), 4-17.

Diamond, L. J. (1996). Is the third wave over?. *Journal of democracy*, *7*(3), 20-37.

Dimitrova, A. L. (2020). The uncertain road to sustainable democracy: elite coalitions, citizen protests and the prospects of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe. In *Rethinking'Democratic Backsliding'in Central and Eastern Europe* (pp. 15-33). Routledge.

Dominioni, S. (2014, September). *Consolidating a hybrid regime: The case of Georgia under Shevardnadze and Saakashvili*. Paper presented at the Società Italiana di Scienza Politica (SISP) conference, University of Perugia, Italy

Dufy C., Thiriot C., (2013). « Les apories de la transitologie : quelques pistes de recherche à la lumière d'exemples africains et post-soviétiques » Revue internationale de politique comparée, (Vol. 20) (3), 19-40. https://doi.org/10.3917/ripc.203.0019.

Dura, G. (2007). EU membership gives Romania new opportunities in its relations with Moldova. *EuroJournal. org-Journal of Foreign Policy of Moldova*, (01).

European Commission. (2023). *Ukraine Report 2023*. Retrieved from https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_699%20Ukraine%20report.pdf

Fairbanks Jr, C. H., & Gugushvili, A. (2013). A new chance for Georgian democracy. *Journal of Democracy*, *24*(1), 116-127.

Freedom House. (2024). *Ukraine: Freedom in the World 2024*. Retrieved from https://freedomhouse.org/country/ukraine/freedom-world/2024

Ganev, V. I. (2005). Post-communism as an episode of state building: A reversed Tillyan perspective. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, *38*(4), 425-445.

Gegeshidze, A. (2011). Georgia's political transformation: democracy in Zigzag. *South Caucasus–20 Years of Independence*.

Gelashvili, T. (2021). The Georgian far right and the post-election crisis. *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, 123

Gevorkyan, A. V. (2018). *Transition economies: Transformation, development, and society in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union*. Routledge.

GFSIS (2021) Youth Values and Politica Activism in Georgia. Accessed online: https://gfsis.org.ge/files/library/pdf/Youth-Values-and-Political-Activism-in-Georgia--3190.pdf

Giske, M. T. E., Bøås, M., & Rieker, P. (2024). *Theory and methods: Towards social theory?* Re-Engage Working Paper. Re-engaging.eu. https://re-engaging.eu/theory-and-methods-towards-social-theory/

Gutbrod, H. (2012). "Social Capital in Georgia: Final Report and Recommendations." Washington, D.C: USAID Publications.

Gogolashvili, K. (2011). In search of Georgia's economic model. *South Caucasus. 20 years of independence*, 173-193.

Gueudet, S. (2024). The Ukraine War and the Nature of Russian Power (PeaceRep Ukraine Policy Brief). Conflict and Civicness Research Group, London School of Economics

Hale, H. E. (2006). Democracy or autocracy on the march? The colored revolutions as normal dynamics of patronal presidentialism. *Communist and post-communist studies*, *39*(3), 305-329.

Hale, H. E. (2014). *Patronal politics: Eurasian regime dynamics in comparative perspective*. Cambridge University Press.

Harrington, K. (2024). The Rise and Fall of the Popular Front of Moldova: The Activities of Local Branches of the Popular Front of Moldova from 1989 to 1992. *Journal of Romanian Studies*, *6*(1), 71-94.

ICPS. (n.d.). *Rating of Political Party Activity and Effectiveness in Ukraine*. Retrieved from https://icps.com.ua/en/mtspd-predstavyv-reytynh-aktyvnosti-ta-efektyvnosti-partiy-ukrayiny/

IRI. 2012. "International Republican Institute: Georgian National Study, June 26 – July 4, 2012." Baltic Surveys/The Gallup Organization.

Jones, S., & Sabanadze, N. (2023). *Elections are not enough: Georgia needs a new model of democracy*. Eurasianet. https://eurasianet.org/elections-are-not-enough-georgia-needs-a-new-model-of-democracy

Karl, T. L., & Schmitter, P. C. (1991). Modes of Transition in Latin America, Southern and Eastern Europe. *International Social Science Journal*, *43*(127).

KIIS. (n.d.). *Reports*. Retrieved from https://kiis.com.ua/?cat=reports&id=1335&lang=eng&page=1

Knott, E. (2018) Perpetually 'partly free': lessons from post-Soviet hybrid regimes on backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe. *East European Politics*.

Kolstø, P., Edemsky, A., & Kalashnikova, N. (1993). The Dniester conflict: between irredentism and separatism. *Europe-Asia Studies*, *45*(6), 973-1000.

Kornai, J. (2006) The great transformation of Central Eastern Europe: success and disappointment. Economics of Transition, 14, 2, 207–44.

Kubiček, P. (2009). Problems of post-post-communism: Ukraine after the Orange Revolution. Democratization, 16(2), 323–343.

Kudelia, S. (2014). The Maidan and beyond: The house that Yanukovych built. *Journal of Democracy*, *25*(3), 19-34.

Kudelia, S., & Kuzio, T. (2015). Nothing personal: explaining the rise and decline of political machines in Ukraine. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, *31*(3), 250-278.

Kuzio, T. (2007). Oligarchs, tapes and oranges: "Kuchmagate" to the Orange Revolution. Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics, 23(1), 30–56.

Kuzio, T. (2014). Crime, politics and business in 1990s Ukraine. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, *47*(2), 195-210.

Kuzio, T. (2015). *Ukraine: Democratization, Corruption, and the New Russian Imperialism*. Praeger Security International.

Laurent, P., & Scheppele, K. L. (2017). Illiberalism within: rule of law backsliding in the EU. Cambridge Yearbook of European Legal Studies, 19, 3-47.

Levitsky, A. and Way, L. (2010). *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Lührmann, A., & Lindberg, S. I. (2019). A third wave of autocratization is here: what is new about it?. *Democratization*, *26*(7), 1095-1113.

McFaul, M. (2002). The fourth wave of democracy and dictatorship: noncooperative transitions in the postcommunist world. *World politics*, *54*(2), 212-244.

McFaul, M. (2007). Ukraine imports democracy: External influences on the Orange Revolution. *International security*, *32*(2), 45-83.

Media Freedom Watch. (2015). *Eastern Partnership: Media Freedom and its Challenges*. Retrieved from http://mediafreedomwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/EaP-MFW-Final-Publication-2015-EN.pdf

Melikyan, A., Veliyev, J., Sartania, K., & Abdullazade, S. (2018). The rise of new nationalism in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia in the late 1980s and early 1990s. *Journal of Conflict Transformation*

Milanovic, B. (1998). *Income, inequality, and poverty during the transition from planned to market economy* (p. 237). Washington, DC: World Bank

Milanovic, B. (1999). Explaining the increase in inequality during transition. *Economics of transition*, *7*(2), 299-341.

Morlino, L. (2008). Hybrid regimes or regimes in transition. FRIDE *Working Paper (70)*.

Radnitz, S. (2010). The color of money: privatization, economic dispersion, and the post-Soviet "revolutions". *Comparative Politics*, *42*(2), 127-146.

Nizhnikau, R., & Moshes, A. (2023). *A Window of Opportunity by Default: Will Moldova Use It*. PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo 854. https://www. ponarseurasia. org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Pepm854_Nizhnikau-Moshes_September2023. pdf.

Osland, K., Giske, M. T. E., & Bøås, M. (2024). *Key concepts: Democracy and trust, hybrid regimes and resilience*. re-Engage. https://re-engaging.eu/key-concepts-democracy-and-trust-hybrid-regimes-and-resilience/

Plokhy, S. (2015). *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine*. Basic Books.

Ramet, S. P. (Ed.). (2010). *Central and southeast European politics since 1989*. Cambridge University Press.

Ramet, S. P., & Wagner, F. P. (2010). Post-socialist models of rule in Central and Southeastern Europe. *Central and Southeast European politics since 1989*, 9-36.

Risse, T. (2021). Building Governance Capacity on Areas of Limited Statehood. In R. Chami (ed.) et al. *Macroeconomic Policy in Fragile States*, p. 82-106.

Rochowanski, A. (2004). EU extends cooperation with Georgia, but expresses caution on accession issue. *Eurasia Insight*, *17*.

RSF. (n.d.). *Reporters Without Borders: Ukraine*. Retrieved from https://rsf.org/en/country/ukraine

Ryabinska, N. (n.d.). *The Media Market and Media Ownership in Ukraine*. Retrieved from https://web.archive.org/web/20170326220603/http://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/30293289/Ukrainian_Media_Market_Ryabinska_ppc.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAIWOWYYGZ2Y53UL3A&Expires=1490569369&Signature=NbfsW0J2ZSUcst4%2FTgB%2B7vFkC3g%3D&response-content-disposition=attachment%3B+filename%3DThe_Media_Market_and_Media_Ownership_in.pdf

Samkharadze, N. (2023). ***Georgian dreams: Populist conservatism and the fight to legitimise and hold on to power*** Georgia Innovation Project. https://gip.ge/publication-post/georgian-dreams-populist-conservatism-fight-to-legitimise-and-hold-on-to-power/

Shelley, L. (1998). Organized crime and corruption in Ukraine: impediments to the development of a free market economy. *Demokratizatsiya*, *6*(4), 648-63.

Slay, B. (2009). Poverty, inequality, and social policy reform in the former Soviet Union. *United Nations Development Programme*, 1-19

Strazzari, F., & Kamphuis, B. (2012). Hybrid economies and statebuilding: On the resilience of the extralegal. *Global Governance*, *18*, 57.Tilly, C. (1995). Citizenship, identity and social history. *International review of social history*, *40*(S3), 1-17.

Undp. (2019). *Integrity and Inclusiveness Report* (12 March 2019). Retrieved from https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/ua/Integrity-and-Inclusiveness-report-FINAL_12-03-2019.pdf

Undp. (2019). *Integrity and Inclusiveness Report* (22 May 2019). Retrieved from https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/ua/Ukr_Integrity-and-Inclusiveness-report-FINAL_22-05-2019.pdf

USAID (2012) Judicial Independence and Legal Empowerment Project. Accessed online: https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00K6MZ.pdf

Voltmer, K., Selvik, K., & Høigilt, J. (2021). Hybrid media and hybrid politics: Contesting informational uncertainty in Lebanon and Tunisia. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *26*(4), 842-860.

War Ukraine. (n.d.). *The Land of Free People: How Reforms and Civil Society Push Ukrainian Democracy Forward*. Retrieved from https://war.ukraine.ua/articles/the-land-of-free-people-how-reforms-and-civil-society-push-ukrainian-democracy-forward/

Way, L. (2002). Pluralism by default in Moldova. *Journal of democracy*, *13*(4), 127-141.

Way, L. A. (2003). Weak states and pluralism: The case of Moldova. *East European Politics and Societies*, *17*(03), 454-482.

Way, L. A. (2006). The sources and dynamics of competitive authoritarianism in Ukraine. In *The quality of democracy in post-communist Europe* (pp. 143-161). Routledge.

Way, L. (2015). *Pluralism by default: Weak autocrats and the rise of competitive politics*. JHU Press.

Way, L. A. (2022). Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. In Mainwaring, S. (2022). *Democracy in Hard Places* (p. 1). T. Masoud (Ed.). Oxford University Press.

Williams, C. C., Round, J., & Rodgers, P. (2013). *The role of informal economies in the post-Soviet world: The end of transition?*. Routledge.

Wilson, A. (2005). *Ukraine's Orange Revolution*. Yale University Press.

Wilson, A. (2014). *Ukraine Crisis: What It Means for the West*. Yale University Press.

Zhurzhenko, T. (2014). A divided nation? Reconsidering the role of identity politics in the Ukraine crisis. *Die Friedens-Warte*, 249-267.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ketevan Bolkvadze is an Associate Senior Lecturer in political science at Lund University, Sweden. Her research deals with the provision of public goods and services in hybrid regimes, with a particular focus on justice and security. Her work has appeared in journals such as *Comparative Political Studies, European Journal of Political Research*, and *Democratization*, among others."

Sophie Gueudet is RE-ENGAGE research fellow at the Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna and an associate researcher with the PeaceRep Ukraine programme at the London School of Economics and Political Science. A historian, she is a specialist of separatist conflicts and contested territories and sovereignties in the post-Yugoslav and post-Soviet spaces.

Maia Machavariani works as a Director of Programs (and currently, as an Acting Director) at the Eastern European Centre for Multiparty Democracy (EECMD). In 2013-2015 she led the South Caucasus Regional Programme at the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD). In 2012-2013 Maia worked at MSI Georgia, Good Governance in Georgia (G3) Program under USAID Contract in the Outreach Department.

Roman Petrov ls founder and honourable President of the Ukrainian European Studies Association and Head of the Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence in European Studies. Areas of Prof. Dr. Petrov's research and teaching include: EU Law, EU External Relations Law; Approximation and Harmonisation of Legislation in the EU; Rights of Third Country Nationals in the EU, EU-Ukraine Association, Legal Aspects of Regional Integration in the Post-Soviet Area.

Natalia Putină is Vice-dean at Faculty of International Relations, Political and Administrative Sciences, Moldova State University (since 2016), associate professor of Political and Administrative Sciences and Department of International of International Relations. Dr. Putină is also co-founder of Centre of Political and Administrative Sciences and Center for Security Studies and Conflict Management.

Francesco Strazzari is Professor in International Relations at Scuola Universitaria Superiore Sant'Anna with PhD assignments at the Scuola Normale Superiore (SPS Department, Florence). He is also an adjunct professor at the Bologna-based SAIS Europe - The Johns Hopkins University. He specialises in peace and conflict studies,

with a specific focus on armed violence and extra-legal governance (transnational organised crime).

Valentina Teosa is Associate Professor at the Moldova State University.

ABOUT RE-ENGAGE

Russia's war against Ukraine has radically altered European security. Confronted by the direst security crisis in decades, EU policymakers are forced to fundamentally rethink their security policies. Europe has demonstrated unexpected unity and resolve, adopting a series of sanctions against Russia, increasing national defence spending, but also by deciding on a historic revival of the EU enlargement process.

Still, there is an urgent need to make sure that this process contributes to democratic, well-functioning and stable neighbourhood states, capable of countering external threats, particularly those posed by hybrid warfare. A thorough investigation is required to determine how this can be achieved without compromising the EU's values and security in the current context.

RE-ENGAGE's overarching ambition is to assist the EU in refining its foreign policy toolbox, including its enlargement and neighbourhood policies. This will enhance the Union's geopolitical leverage and provide better tools for democracy promotion in its neighbourhood. To achieve this goal, RE-ENGAGE will conduct in-depth studies in six candidate countries – three in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Serbia) and three in the Eastern Neighbourhood (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine).