



Georgia's Illiberal Forces: Political Polarization against Democracy

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Abstract

This article explores how illiberal forces are structuring in Georgia and what this evolution reveals about the weakness of Georgia's democratic institutions and liberal values. The analysis starts with a discussion of how political polarization creates the context for illiberal groups to undermine democracy. Drawing on theoretical and empirical inquiry, I suggest the causal mechanism of how weak democratic institutions enable the emergence of illiberal groups through a personalized party system. Then, I address the lack of genuine democratic commitment on the part of Georgia's main political actors. Further, I probe for the movements that are gradually changing the grassroots dynamics by promoting conservative values, and their ties to Russia. The concluding section discusses the politicization of gender issues and the polarization of political space as two concomitant trends that frustrate the search for democratic consensus in Georgia.

Keywords: Georgia, Georgian Dream, Saakashvili, Illiberalism, far right, democratization

Introduction

Political polarization, especially in non-democratically consolidated countries, provides fertile ground for illiberal groups to spring up. Often, these divisions revolve around liberal and conservative values and serve in the pursuit of power.¹ Electoral campaign seasons intensify these effects for several reasons. The socio-economic conditions of voters structure their political preferences. Political parties and leaders target a large swath of the electorate and the nature of their political campaigns can play a polarizing role. Finally, the costs of losing can be a decisive factor in mobilizing the most active and alert supporters.²

Recent developments in the Georgian political system demonstrate these general patterns. Illiberal forces are gaining momentum in Georgia, a country usually presented as the most advanced in terms of democratic reforms in the post-Soviet space.³ The most visible and culminating results of this illiberal tendency were violent acts committed against the LGBT+ community and journalists during the Tbilisi Pride on July 5, 2021. Fifty-three journalists were injured, and a cameraman died several days later after his hospitalization. His death sparked controversy as the Ministry of Internal Affairs stated that it was caused by a drug overdose. These incidents spurred counterdemonstrations of the pro-Western forces, critical media, and the opposition. The reluctance of a supposed liberal government to go tough against illiberal groups and their violence signals a crisis of democratic projects in Georgia.

In this article, I seek to identify the domestic and external sources of Georgia's illiberalism and study the dynamics by which these illiberal groups rise. I argue here that the prime suspects in permitting illiberal forces going against democracy are threefold. First is the fragmentation of political space among ideologically diverse political parties and groups. Second is the decision of ruling political elites to use illiberal groups in order to insulate political opponents and by doing so ensure their own political survival. Third, the impact of these two domestic conditions allows Russia to support illiberal groups and thereby indirectly challenge Western democratizing efforts.

Illiberal Groups and Gatekeeper Democracy

The concept of illiberalism is often equated with authoritarian forms of governance and describes the qualities of defective democracies⁴ or transitional regimes, which fall within the “gray zone” between democracies and authoritarian regimes.⁵ The term *illiberal democracies* was first coined by Fareed Zakaria to denote political regimes that may hold free and fair elections, yet bring to power authoritarian leaders who are

1 Alan I. Abramowitz and Kyle L. Saunders, “Is Polarization a Myth?,” *Journal of Politics* 70, no. 2 (April 2008): 542–55, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381608080493>.

2 Alan I. Abramowitz and Walter J. Stone, “The Bush Effect: Polarization, Turnout, and Activism in the 2004 Presidential Election,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 2, (June 2006): 141–54, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5705.2006.00295.x>.

3 Medet Tiulegenov, Eitan Tzelgov, Valeriya Mechkova, and Staffan I. Lindberg, “Georgia: A Country Report Based on Data 1900–2012,” V-Dem Country Report Series, no. 3, October 2013, https://www.v-dem.net/media/publications/cro03_georgia_v10.pdf.

4 Wolfgang Merkel, “Embedded and Defective Democracies,” *Democratization* 11, no. 5 (December 2004): 33–58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510340412331304598>.

5 Thomas Carothers, “The End of the Transition Paradigm,” *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 1 (January 2002), <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2002.0003>.

corrupt and unresponsive towards their citizens.⁶ The varieties of illiberal regimes include electoral autocracies, competitive autocracies⁷ and hybrid regimes.⁸ Unlike Dahl's polyarchy (also designated as liberal democracy), illiberal regimes cannot constrain executive power and guarantee complete judicial independence. Under these circumstances, civil and political liberties may be infringed and accountability avoided.⁹ At the more grassroots level, illiberal groups push for changing the status quo in favor of conservative values, have undemocratic attitudes, and strive for ideological homogenization of the polity.¹⁰ They oppose minorities on the ground of ideological differences and demand cultural and political equivalence between the nation and state.¹¹ This quest for homogeneity is not exclusively defined on ethnic criteria, it also includes acceptability of cultural norms such as xenophobia and homophobia.

Post-soviet states including Georgia qualify for the title of illiberal regimes at different points in time. Although Georgia is viewed as an electoral democracy, fundamental elements of liberal democracy such as strong civil and political liberties, party systems, and an independent media and judiciary remain difficult to achieve. In 1994-2003, Eduard Shevardnadze eliminated barriers to media freedom and political opposition as well as extensive civil and political liberties, yet these liberalizing trends occurred without genuine grassroots democratization and his regime was regarded as one of unstable authoritarianism.¹² International democratizing pressures and domestic de-legitimization¹³ resulted in the Rose Revolution in 2003 that ousted Shevardnadze from power.¹⁴ But even the reformist team brought by the Rose Revolution and particularly then-President Mikheil Saakashvili, who was elected by an overwhelming majority of the vote cast (almost 97%), failed to become liberal leader. New economic policies and the fight against petty corruption did strengthen the performance and legitimacy of the government. But the series of reforms, which aimed at modernizing different arenas of the polity, did not translate into democracy.

On the contrary, Saakashvili's United National Movement created a dominant party system; oppressed critical media, nongovernmental organizations, and the opposition; and co-opted the Georgian Orthodox Church to win the electoral support of conservative voters. The Church maintained all its privileges. Saakashvili announced that he always supported the decisions of the Patriarch and the Holy

6 Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 6 (November-December 1997): 22-43, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20048274>.

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

8 Larry Jay Diamond, "Thinking about Hybrid Regimes," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2, (April 2002): 21-35, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2002.0025>.

9 Michael Coppedge, John Gerring, David Altman, Michael Bernhard, Steven Fish, Allen Hicken, Matthew Kroenig, Staffan I. Lindberg, Kelly McMann, Pamela Paxton, Holli A. Semetko, Svend-Erik Skaaning, Jeffrey Staton, and Jan Teorell, "Conceptualizing and Measuring Democracy: A New Approach," *Perspectives on Politics* 9, no. 2, (June 2011): 247-62, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592711000880>.

10 Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1-8, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511492037>.

11 Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006); Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996); Dankwart A. Rustow, "Transitions to Democracy," *Comparative Politics* 2, no. 3, (1970): 337-63, <https://doi.org/10.2307/421307>.

12 Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 22.

13 Jon C. Pevehouse, *Democracy from above: Regional Organizations and Democratization* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1-67, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511491078>.

14 Valerie Bunce and Sharon Wolchik, *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Postcommunist Countries* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 177-211.

Synod.¹⁵ Such internal dynamics contradicted declared foreign policy goals of Europeanization and NATO integration. These illiberal trajectories enabled skeptical countries within the European Union to justify their decision of rejecting Georgia's Membership Action Plan (MAP).

Saakashvili's government had announced Euro-Atlantic integration as a top foreign policy priority. In 2006, Georgia started Intensified Dialogue on Membership Issues with NATO.¹⁶ Seventy-seven percent of Georgian citizens supported their country's integration into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in the plebiscite conducted on January 5, 2008.¹⁷ After the Russo-Georgian War in August of 2008, the competitive-authoritarian potential of the regime weakened, and the opposition started to build a new coalition, the Georgian Dream, under the leadership of the oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili. Before the parliamentary elections of 2012, the release of the prison tapes depicting the torture of inmates at different Georgian penitentiary establishments sparked public outrage, and Saakashvili admitted his electoral defeat. The period of cohabitation between President Saakashvili; the Georgian Dream parliamentary majority; and its prime minister, Bidzina Ivanishvili, lasted for a year.

The second instance of the peaceful transfer of power happened when Giorgi Margvelashvili won the presidency in 2013. The new coalition government included ideologically-competing parties. But these positive changes transforming Georgia into an electoral democracy were stalled by a number of political decisions made by the Georgian Dream. The party has used illiberal methods to silence the opposition and critical media, including using law enforcement and security officers to blackmail opponents and in extreme cases to follow with legal disputes.¹⁸ The Georgian Dream also engaged in institutional conflicts with President Giorgi Margvelashvili and used harsh methods to disperse anti-occupation demonstrations against the visit of a member of the Russian Duma, Sergei Gavrilov. Furthermore, the Georgian Dream government neither took adequate measures to protect pro-democratic forces from the violence of newly-emerged far-right groups, nor to disrupt their Kremlin connections.¹⁹

Georgia's trajectory appears to be consistent with the theoretical suggestions regarding illiberal regimes and leaders. Drawing on empirical and theoretical reviews, I suggest here a causal mechanism of how illiberal groups may evolve and undermine democracy.

Illiberal groups emerge from the institutional weakness of the political system, when the key stakeholders exert political influence through a personalized party system. Such an institutional setting encourages them to develop illiberal networks and politicize sensitive issues to mobilize supporters. In this article, I explain why illiberal groups are, what are the domestic and external sources of their illiberalism,

¹⁵ "Mikheil Saakashvili Supports the Patriarch," October 20, 2021, <https://civil.ge/ka/archives/449089>.

¹⁶ NATO Offers Intensified Dialogue to Georgia, September 21, 2006, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_22173.htm?selectedLocale=en.

¹⁷ Presidential Ordinance #657, November 23, 2007, <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/96046?publication=0>. See also the concluding protocol of the plebiscite on NATO integration, <https://cesko.ge/ge/search-results/singleview/9004608-2008-wlis-5-ianvris-plebiscitis-shedegebis-shemadjamebeli-oqmebi-3339>.

¹⁸ "Rally against Sex Tape Blackmail," Civil.ge, March 19, 2016, <https://civil.ge/archives/125370>; "Freedom House Releases Nations in Transit Country Report for Georgia," Civil.ge, November 5, 2017 <https://civil.ge/archives/126387>.

¹⁹ "Letter addressed to the Government of Georgia by EU Heads of Mission on the Pride related events of 5 July and their follow-up," July 15, 2021, https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/101804/letter-addressed-government-georgia-eu-heads-mission-pride-related-events-5-july-and-their_en.

how they rise, and why and how the struggle between illiberal and liberal groups results in issue politicization and polarization of the political space.

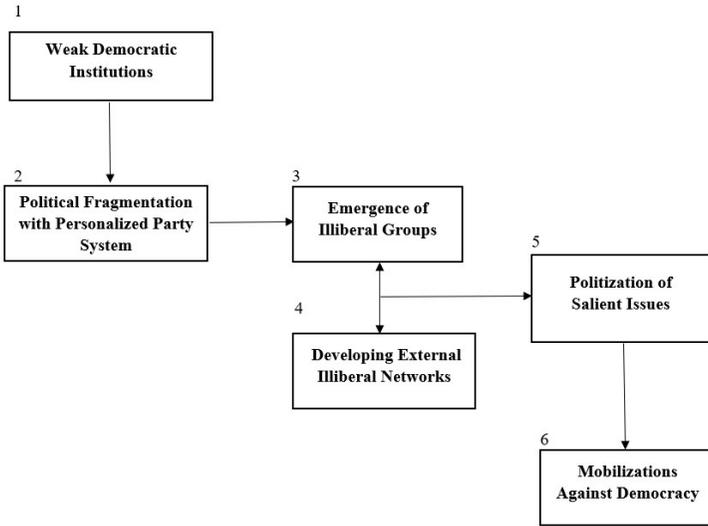


FIGURE 1. Political origins of illiberal groups (created by author)

Domestic and External Sources of Illiberalism in Georgia

The rise of illiberal forces in Georgia has domestic and external causes. Following the peaceful transfer of power after the 2012 parliamentary elections, the political space became more pluralistic. The dominant party system transformed into a two-party system, opposing Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream and Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement. The ruling Georgian Dream contained ideologically eclectic political factions that gradually broke from the coalition. In 2014, the first cracks appeared between Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili and Defense Minister Irakli Alasania of the Free Democrats. Later on, the speaker of the parliament, Davit Usupashvili, disagreed with the party leadership on core issues of judicial reforms. The coalition dissolved because of internal struggles and due to the Georgian Dream neglecting the recommendations of Western partners to be consistent and transparent during judicial appointments.

The ruling party itself used two methods that we can qualify as illiberal against its defectors. First, the law enforcement agencies initiated several lawsuits against the government's former allies, especially Irakli Alasania and his team. Second, the members of the Georgian Dream who disagreed with the party leadership decisions and eventually left the coalition suffered reputational damage from the release of surveillance tapes. No organizers were held responsible for spreading these

materials.²⁰ This selective justice and breaching the right to privacy indicate the weakness of Georgia's democratic institutions.

The Georgian Dream then decided to use far-right movements as a counterweight to its main opponent, the United National Movement, and lowered the election threshold to 5% in order to create the conditions for small radical-right parties to enter the Parliament. Noteworthy in this respect are the results of the 2016 parliamentary elections, in which the Georgian Dream received 48.68% of the proportional vote (guaranteeing it an overall majority of 115 seats in the parliament), the United National Movement 27.11%, and the radical right-wing Alliance of Patriots of Georgia 5.01%, just above the threshold.²¹ The Alliance of Patriots of Georgia's leader, the journalist Irma Inashvili, a vice-speaker of the parliament, had provided the Georgian Dream with prison tapes that largely skewed the election results in favor of Bidzina Ivanishvili's ruling party in 2012—her election then looked like returning a favor. Yet, following the 2020 parliamentary elections, the Georgian Dream invalidated the terms of office of the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia for boycotting the Parliament. Irma Inashvili claimed that her refusal to perform her parliamentary duties was aimed at improving the electoral laws, including introducing criminal liability for the abuse of administrative resources during the elections.²² She attempted to cooperate with the government and the opposition without compromising the political identity that eventually marginalized her. The members of the Alliance of Patriots then joined the European Socialists—a paradoxical alliance given that the latter claim a leftist ideology. One of the leaders of Inashvili's party, Nato Chkheidze, joined the United National Movement. These trajectories show that Georgian political parties do not have a clear values system or ideological orientation, and that they adapt their political behavior to whatever will bring results from a short-term perspective.

The leading role of the Georgian Orthodox Church

The Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia is another driver of illiberal values in the country. Opinion polls suggest that the Church is the most trusted institution: 79% of those surveyed view it as essential in forming national identity.²³ This credibility derives from the Church's role played in the history of Georgia when guarding its statehood against enemies. In 1917, the Georgian Orthodox Church regained its independence from the Russian Orthodox Church, and at the end of the 20th century it defied Communist rule. In 2002, the government of Georgia signed a concordat with the Church to recognize its merits and granted it tax, economic, and other privileges.²⁴ Leading the Church thus means being an influential veto player

20 Giorgi Lomsadze, "Georgia's Sex-Tapes Politics Returns: An Explicit Video of a Prominent Lawmaker Has Hit the Internet amid a Rift in the Ruling Party. Georgians Are Asking Why This Keeps Happening," February 5, 2019, <https://eurasianet.org/georgias-sex-tapes-politics-returns>; Claire Bigg, "Georgian Female TV Host Takes Bold Stand in Face of Sex-Tape Scandal," 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-sex-tape-scandal-grigolia/27622049.html>.

21 "Summary Protocol on the Final Results of October 8, 2016 Parliamentary Elections of Georgia," Central Election Commission of Georgia, 2016, <https://cesko.ge/geo/static/2448/archevnebis-shedjameba>.

22 "Boycott Ended Because the Key Requirement Was about the Electoral Amendments," March 12, 2020, 1TV, <https://itv.ge/news/irma-inashvili-boikotis-redjimi-davasrulet-radgan-chveni-mtavari-motkhovna-saarchevno-sistemis-cvilebas-ukavshirdeboda/>.

23 "Future of Georgia: Survey Report," Caucasus Research Resource Centers of Georgia, 2021, p. 23, https://crrc.ge/uploads/tinyince/documents/Future%20of%20Georgia/Final%20FoG_Eng_08_04_2021.pdf; "Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Georgia," February 2021, Center for Insights in Survey Research, International Republican Institute, p. 57, https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri_poll_presentation-georgia_february_2021_1.pdf.

24 "The Constitutional Decree of the Parliament of Georgia on the Approval of the Concordat (Constitutional Agreement) between Georgia and the Georgian Autocephalic Orthodox Church," October 22, 2002, <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/41626?publication=0>.

in Georgian society and politics, and managing an important source of wealth that allows it to buy spiritual and political power.

The Church is divided between its conservative and liberal factions. The fact that the health of Georgian Patriarch Ilia II is unstable exacerbates struggles within the ecclesiastical institution for the position of the patriarchy. The will of the patriarch concerning the interim leader of the Church will be made public only after his death. The Church's bylaws enable an interim patriarch to invite its Extended Council within two months to elect a new Patriarch from a list of three nominees.²⁵ So far, the *locum tenens*²⁶ of the Georgian patriarch is Shio Mujiri, who studied at the Moscow Theological Academy and openly backs illiberal forces. In his most recent addresses, Shio Mujiri blamed the LGBT+ community for challenging the nation, using ideological and moral pressures against the majority, and inciting violence. He has also stressed that the Church never excludes sinners if they repent of their sins, but normalizing adultery is unacceptable. In the same appeal, he requested the government to adopt a law prohibiting the insult of religious and national feelings.²⁷ Furthermore, he did not attempt to reconcile the Georgian Dream and the United National Movement following Saakashvili's arrest—quite the opposite: he declared that “biblical canons did not urge us to forgive everyone and everything.”²⁸ Georgian authorities brought charges against Saakashvili. The violent dispersals of November 7, 2007, and May 26, 2011 demonstrations are notable. On June 28, 2018, the Tbilisi City Court sentenced Saakashvili in absentia to eight years in prison for ordering the beating of Valeri Gelashvili, a member of the Georgian Parliament from the Republican Party.²⁹ Recently leaked state security service files show the close contacts of Mujiri with a pro-Russian businessman, Levan Vasadze, and his uncompromising approach towards Western diplomats when discussing LGBT+ community protests. Based on these files, Shio Mujiri understands well that appealing to such sensitive gender issues and holding counterdemonstrations tilts public attitudes to the advantage of Russia.³⁰

The fight between both liberal and conservative factions culminated when Archpriest Giorgi Mamaladze was arrested in 2017 while going to visit the patriarch in Germany, accused of an attempt to poison him. The police discovered cyanide in his luggage after he reached the passport control, but the collection of evidence occurred in breach of procedural laws.³¹ According to the report of the Office of the Public Defender, the state authorities failed to allow the defense team its right to collect evidence, and the government authorities, including the prime minister, neglected the presumption of innocence.³² Inside the Church, the eparch of Chkondidi backed the archpriest and

25 “Bylaws of the Georgian Autocephalic Orthodox Church,” September 18–19, 1995, <http://www.orthodoxy.ge/samartali/debuleba.htm>.

26 That is, the interim patriarch-designate.

27 Preaching of Shio Mujiri, Patriarchal Locum Tenens, Bishop of Senaki and Chkhorotku, July 5, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LfUnw88F7Q>.

28 Shio Mujiri, Interim Patriarch-Designate, Bishop of Senaki and Chkhorotku, October 17, 2021, <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31515027.html>.

29 Court Pleaded Guilty Mikheil Saakashvili, June 28, 2018, <https://tcc.court.ge/ka/Decision/mixeil-saakashvili-sasamarTlom-damashaved-cno>.

30 “How the Church and the Government Attempted to Cancel the 2019 Pride,” Leaked files of surveillance, September 22, 2021, <https://tabula.ge/ge/news/673301-rogor-tsdilobda-mtavroba-eklesia-2019-clis>.

31 “Report on the case file of the archpriest Giorgi Mamaladze,” EMC, 2018, <https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/emc-is-shefaseba-dekanoz-giorgi-mamaladzis-sakmeze>.

32 “The Monitoring Report on “the so-called cyanide criminal case,” Public Defender of Georgia, November 15, 2017, <https://ombudsman.ge/geo/akhali-ambebi/saxalxo-damcveli-ew-cianidis-saqmis-monitoringis-angarishs-aqveynebs#>.

contradicted the patriarch, but was expelled by the Synod³³ Soso Okhanashvili, the chief bodyguard of the patriarch, and son-in-law of Metropolitan Dimitri Shiolashvili as well as nephew of Patriarch Ilia II, argued that Archpriest Giorgi Mamaladze was innocent. He testified before the prosecutors about the transgressions happening inside the Church. But pressures from the Church's conservative faction were high and he had to resign from his position and leave for Ukraine.³⁴

The government stands with the Church's conservative mainstream: it lets this conservative wing regularly abuse state-sponsored privileges offered in exchange for support during elections. The government annually grants substantial financial support, gifts lands and properties to the Church, and in the 2021 state budget, assigned 25 million Georgian lari (US \$8 million) to the Church.³⁵ The conservative wing is led by Chorbishop Iakob Iakobishvili, who claimed that former Prime Ministers Giorgi Kvirikashvili and Giorgi Gakharia, as well as Minister of the Interior Vaktang Gomelauri, were convincing him to assist in removing the patriarch in favor of Shio Mujiri, as well as getting Archpriest Mamaladze to plead guilty in the imputed crime. Chorbishop Iakob Iakobishvili openly claimed his responsibility for physically attacking Petre Tsaava, the archbishop of Chkondidi, because of his revolt against the Patriarch.³⁶ Chorbishop Iakobishvili works closely with Chorbishop Theodore Chuadze, who represented the Church at the inauguration of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow in 2009 and met President Putin in 2017.³⁷ He is also allied with Shorena Tetrushvili, a personal aid to the Georgian Patriarch.

A famous female figure within the Church without any official status, Shorena Tetrushvili influences the clergy and has a close connection with the nun Natalia, a biological sister of Patriarch Ilia II. Carefully avoiding the media, Tetrushvili's rare appearances have included at Mamaladze's trial as the law enforcement authorities granted her the status of victim to represent the patriarch.³⁸ The Church's conservative forces openly called for violence against the LGBT+ community and backed radical right movements in their attacks on the 2021 Tbilisi Pride. For instance, some priests justified different forms of physical assaults against the Pride activists who had posters supporting the LGBT+ community and propagated values that contradicted the Church's norms.³⁹

33 "The minutes of the proceedings of the Holy Synod," The Patriarchate, October 2019, <https://patriarchate.ge/news/2554>.

34 "The Deal between Giorgi Kvirikashvili and the Bishop," Formula News, January 2020, <https://formulanews.ge/News/18672>.

35 Beka Chedia, "The Georgian Orthodox Church as a Political Actor in Uncertain Times," October 2021, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/the-georgian-orthodox-church-as-a-political-actor-in-uncertain-times/>; State Budget of Georgia, 2021, <https://www.mof.ge/images/File/2021-biujeti/27-07-2021/combinepdf.pdf>.

36 "Interview with Chorbishop Iakob Iakobishvili," TV Imedi, November 24, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=etXon-pBXCc>; "Accusations of Chorbishop Iakob Iakobishvili," October 26, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vo4us5sCJBo>.

37 "The Bishop of Akhaltsikhe and Tao-Klarjeti, Theodore (Dimitri) Chuadze," August, 2020, Ifact, <https://bit.ly/3OGt9oK>.

38 She appeared at Mamaladze's court hearing because Tetrushvili was recognized as victim of the act allegedly committed by Mamaladze. The same act was pronounced by law enforcers directed against the patriarch, but since he could not be moved often due to health conditions and his status, his aid Tetrushvili was recognized as victim. However, the authorities further claimed that the assassination of Tetrushvili was also considered, as he did not allow others frequent access to the patriarch.

39 "Who Supports and Who Goes against the Tbilisi Pride?" Radio Liberty, June 30, 2021, <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31334344.html>.

Grassroots illiberal movements and their foreign ties

The Church is not the only actor in this burgeoning right-wing sphere. Several right-wing movements have emerged in recent years. More openly political is the Georgian March, a non-parliamentary ally of the Alliance of Patriots, founded in 2017. Bringing together neo-Nazi and xenophobic groups, it proclaimed itself a political party in July 2020 and elected Sandro Bregadze, a former Georgian Dream member and a deputy minister, as its party leader.⁴⁰ The targets of its aggressive actions are immigrants of Iranian and Turkish origin, LGBT+ community members, liberal groups of pro-Western political orientation, and independent journalists.

Radical right-wing groups such as the Georgian March and Georgian National Unity (National Socialist Movement) have regularly organized counterdemonstrations to disperse anti-government protests. One of the emblematic examples was the police raid of the Basiani nightclub in May 2018 to supposedly prevent drug crimes. Basiani symbolized the proximity of Georgian and Western cultures and was associated with the success of modernizing reforms. Young people protested by holding a rave dance party in the streets. Giorgi Gakharia, then interior minister, apologized and called for an end to the demonstrations, stating that it would be difficult for the police to prevent clashes between radical right and liberal groups. Georgian National Unity, led by Giorgi Chelidze, created punitive forces to use against liberals during demonstrations and called for taking ownership of the political agenda.⁴¹ The Georgian March actively used social media to disseminate defamatory and threatening messages against its opponents. It targeted the journalists and media outlets affiliated with the former ruling party, the United National Movement.

The Georgian Dream inconsistently responded to the actions of the Georgian March and Georgian National Unity and detained some of the latter's members only after the organization set up vigilante patrols to expose the crimes of immigrants. But the ruling party, Georgian Dream, has been divided on the issue, and some of its conservative members expressed readiness to post bail for the arrested activists of the Georgian March.⁴² In 2021, the same movements destroyed the offices of the Tbilisi Pride and the Shame Movement that formed to protest against the Russian occupation of the secessionist provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and burned the EU flag. Earlier in 2019, the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia and its leader, Irma Inashvili, organized anti-American demonstrations in front of the US Embassy after attacking former State Department officials at the Tbilisi International Conference.⁴³

A myriad of conservative social movements were also organized within civil society in recent years. Their leaders often have direct or indirect connections to Russia. This is the case, for instance, with Dimitri Lortkipanidze, a member of parliament from the United Opposition in 2008 who then tried, unsuccessfully, to become a public defender. Lortkipanidze chairs the Primakov Georgian-Russian Public Center.⁴⁴ The Center offers free Russian language courses and organizes thematic conferences and seminars on foreign policy issues. It supports events emphasizing the political,

40 "Ultra Nationalist Movement 'Georgian March' Transformed into a Political Party," July 7, 2020, [Civil.ge](https://civil.ge/ka/archives/358253).

41 "Fascist Group Moves to Freedom Square," *Newspaper Liberal*, May 15, 2018, <http://liberali.ge/news/view/36612/LIVE-modzraoba-erovnuli-ertobis-tsevrebi-dinamodan-rustavelisken-miemartebian>.

42 "Anatomy of Georgian Neo-Nazism," *Transparency International*, May 18, 2018, <https://www.transparency.ge/en/blog/anatomy-georgian-neo-nazism>.

43 "What Did the Alliance of Patriots Demand at the United States Embassy?" *Radio Liberty*, September 15, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3MEoUKA>.

44 Primakov Georgian-Russian Public Center, <https://gorchakovfund.ru/en/centers/georgia/>.

cultural, and religious ties between Russia and Georgia. Lortkipanidze has close contacts with pro-Russian political parties such as the United Georgia Democratic Movement led by Nino Burjanadze, a former speaker of the Parliament of Georgia and a leader of the Rose Revolution; and with Free Georgia, which strives to defend Georgian identity, integrate with EU, and resolve conflicts with Russia.⁴⁵

Notorious oligarch Levan Vasadze, who made his fortune in Russia, mainly in investment and insurance sectors, and who has strong connections with the far-right Russian ideologue Aleksandr Dugin, is a key sponsor of illiberal groups such as the Georgian Demographic Revival Fund, National Religious Institute, Nation and State, and Georgian Idea.⁴⁶ Vasadze developed connections with conservative organizations worldwide, including the US-based International Organization for the Family (IOF) and its leader Brian Brown, who was invited to Tbilisi to share knowledge on how to fight against same-sex marriage and liberal values.⁴⁷ Vasadze organized the 2016 World Congress of Families in Tbilisi. The Congress is an annual meeting held by the conservative Christian family organization, and hosted in a different global city each year. The IOF had been planning to hold its 2014 world congress in Russia, but canceled those plans following the annexation of Crimea.⁴⁸ Levan Vasadze, Mamuka Khazaradze, and Badri Japaridze, along with other oligarchs and media magnates, joined the Supervisory Council of the Georgian Demographic Revival Fund, which calls for promoting family and conservative values in order to reverse the trend of population decline in the country. Vasadze hoped to achieve this goal through raising funds and by engaging in ideological outreach with youth.⁴⁹ It is noteworthy that the National Religious Institute, Nation and State, and Georgian Idea assist Vasadze to recruit new members within his political movement.⁵⁰

Zviad Tomaradze, a lawyer and self-proclaimed human rights activist, chairs the National Religious Institute and Nation and State. These two organizations were set up to promote conservative values, including petitioning against mandatory Covid vaccination⁵¹ and spreading pro-Russian foreign policy discourse. He assisted Emzar Kvitsiani, a member of parliament for the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia, with drafting the bill introducing criminal liability for “insulting religious feelings.” Human rights organizations criticized this bill, as it contradicted the right to freedom of expression and urged the Georgian Parliament to block it. The bill ultimately did not pass.⁵² Levan Chachua, a former member of the Orthodox Parents Union who was convicted of interfering in the activities of journalists, established a new political

45 “Political Party Programs,” Partiebi.ge, 2012–2020, <https://partiebi.ge/2020/geo/home>.

46 “Anatomy of Georgian Neo-Nazism,” Transparency International, May 18, 2018, <https://www.transparency.org/en/blog/anatomy-georgian-neo-nazism>; These groups help Vasadze to recruit new members into his organization Unity, Identity, Hope (abbreviated in Georgian as ERI, or Nation), <https://isfed.ge/geo/blogi/qartuli-ideis-koordinirebuli-qseli>.

47 “Interview with Brian Brown about American Conservatism,” International Organization for the Family, February 20, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b05qX9MbQIM>; “Press Conference: Levan Vasadze, Brian Brown, Irakli Gogava,” World Congress of Families, June 16, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4vYChwayHEw>.

48 “Interview: Guram Phalavandishvili and Levan Vasadze,” Talk Show with Phalavandishvili, June 13, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mih-2DKVOWQ>.

49 Eka Kevanishvili, “Businessmen for Demographic Revival,” Radio Liberty, July 16, 2013, <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/biznesmenebi-demografis-gadasarchenad/25047430.html>.

50 “Coordinated Network of the ‘Georgian Idea’ on Facebook.”

51 Petition 1-152888/21 filed on November 25, 2021, <https://info.parliament.ge/file/1/BillReviewContent/286875>.

52 “Georgia’s Rights Committee Supports Bill against Insulting Religious Feelings,” OC Media, April 25, 2018, <https://oc-media.org/georgias-rights-committee-supports-bill-against-insulting-religious-feelings/>.

movement, the Georgian Idea, advocating against “liberal internationalism” by strengthening ties with Russia.⁵³

During the election campaigns, these conservative groups appeal to traditional values and emphasize the supremacy of Orthodox Christianity.⁵⁴ On May 6, 2021, Vasadze himself established a new movement called “Unity, Identity, Hope,” intended to protect the traditional and religious values of Georgians.⁵⁵ It is noteworthy that Vasadze is a close friend of Shio Mujiri, and met Dugin in Moscow, who later endorsed Georgian far-right groups’ “heroic acts” during the Tbilisi Pride and described these series of violence as the national awakening of Georgia. Furthermore, Dugin reshared the videos of violent attacks at the Office of the Tbilisi Pride and published the bank account details created by his proxies in Georgia on his Facebook page to raise funds in order to post bail for the detainees from the counterdemonstration.⁵⁶

To propagate these values, Vasadze sponsored the television channel Alt Info, launched in 2019 and whose name is openly inspired by the US alt-right. Alt Info rallies radical right-wing groups and broadcasts aggressive and xenophobic programs. It has hosted and featured Dugin to propagate the ideology of Eurasianism and anti-Atlanticism.⁵⁷ Alt Info coordinates multiple Facebook pages and groups spreading misinformation, and uses entertaining pages to attract subscribers, practices that pushed Facebook to block them several times.⁵⁸ In November 2020, the Georgian Communications Commission authorized the broadcasting of this private media outlet.⁵⁹ Although the Communications Commission fined Alt Info several times, it required the internet provider Silknet to include it in its service package.⁶⁰ The two Alt Info creators also established the non-governmental organization Alternative for Georgia, whose board of directors includes key members of the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia: Konstantine Morgoshia, who funds the Georgian March; Shota Martinenko, who owns 50% of Alt Info’s shares; along with Zurab Makharadze, Irakli Kizilashvili, and Giorgi Kardava, all of whom are linked to Irma Inashvili and the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia.⁶¹

All these illiberal groups have common beliefs. They express extreme intolerance towards sexual minorities, support antiliberal views, and violently enforce them. Their fundamentals are the “natural family” and conservative values. They emphasize the need for strengthening the constitutional status of the Georgian language and intend to solve the demographic crisis by banning abortions and developing natalist policies, as well as creating alternative (to the West) sources of information. They are also against foreign ownership of Georgian land, they support the nationalization

53 “Legion of Antichrist Cannot Win War against the Georgian Nation,” Interview with Levan Chachua, July 14, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3ymoQA1>.

54 “Georgian Idea,” Myth Detector, July 25, 2017, <https://www.mythdetector.ge/en/profile/georgian-idea/>; “Electoral Platform,” <http://qartuliidea.ge/>; for additional information, see: <http://qartuliidea.ge/bmulebi/>.

55 “Unity, Identity, Hope,” <https://eri.ge/about/>.

56 “Dugin’s 26 Facebook Posts in Support of Violent Protest,” July 28, 2021, <https://www.mythdetector.ge/ka/myth/duginis-26-fb-posti-dzaladobrivi-aktsiis-mkhardasacherad>.

57 “Interview with Alexandr Dugin,” Alt-Info, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kkRMTnXXznI>. This video’s content has become unavailable following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

58 “Coordinated and Secret Operations of Alt-Info on Facebook,” ISFED, August 2020, <https://www.isfed.ge/geo/sotsialuri-mediis-monitoring/alt-infos-koordinirebuli-faruli-operatsia-Facebook-ze>.

59 “Authorizations of Broadcasting,” Communications Commission, June 22, 2021, <https://registry.comcom.ge/BAuthorizations.aspx>.

60 “Silknet Includes Alt-Info in its Network,” Radio Liberty, September 9, 2021, <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31452111.html>.

61 “Coordinated Network of the ‘Georgian Idea’ on Facebook.”

of natural resources and the protection of local production,⁶² and are willing to use elements of direct democracy such as referendums to change unwanted politics.

Concerning their foreign policy positions, all these illiberal groups are willing to cooperate with Russia and do not perceive it as an occupier in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Leaders of the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia have visited Russia several times and attempted to establish direct contacts with the de facto authorities in Abkhazia. Irma Inashvili's secret visit to Sokhumi, the capital of Abkhazia, caused controversy among Abkhaz politicians: some viewed it as unhelpful to their republic's interests, while others alleged that the Alliance of Patriots approved the recognition of the breakaway region, and this attitude might lay the foundation for mutually-beneficial cooperation.⁶³ The pro-Russian stance of these illiberal groups translates into anti-NATO attitudes, and softer anti-EU positions, insisting on the need to build a European state without linking it to the issue of EU membership.

Gender Issues and the Vicious Circle of Polarization

One of the most visible drivers of illiberal politics in today's Georgia relates to gender issues and their weaponization. For decades, the politicization of identity was based on national identity/territorial sovereignty issues, more than sexual and gender identity. This has partly changed, with now illiberal actors using LGBT+ issues during the pre-election periods to attract conservative voters. Some Church priests preach intolerance to the extent that some parishioners openly oppose them in the name of the same Christian values.⁶⁴ The government has been using a similar illiberal language when, for instance, Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili stated that 95% of Georgians were against the Tbilisi Pride and advised canceling this demonstration, blaming the United National Movement for organizing the march.⁶⁵

This rise of illiberal voices around identity politics is part of a broader context of polarization in which the liberal left is also politically active. Even if the Georgian Dream positioned itself as embracing the values of social democracy, its conservative wing prevailed, and the rights of the majority dominated its political agenda. Against it, the Georgian left, empowered by Western support (for example, the Heinrich Böll Stiftung and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung South Caucasus), hold that the government uses identity politics to avoid social and economic responsibilities. These leftist groups now mobilize against monopolistic pharmacies and big corporations, as well as for environmental issues. For example, leftist groups organized demonstrations in West Georgia against the Namokhvani Dam to be built by the Turkish company ENKA.⁶⁶ Young leftists have supported local communities by giving them access to social media to voice their concerns. Newly emerging small parties draw their electoral communications from left-wing populism (for example, Aleko Elisashvili, who chairs Citizens; and Ana Dolidze, who chairs the For People political party). These parties

62 "Who is Zviad Tomaradze?," 2018, Ifact, <https://www.ifact.ge/tomaradze/>; "Zviad Tomaradze Announces the Formation of a New Organization – Nation and State," January 18, 2019, GMTV, <https://www.gmtv.ge/?p=53544>.

63 "Unpatriotic Act of the Alliance of Patriots," Ifact, October 2020, <https://www.ifact.ge/aliansi/>; Jimsher Rekhviashvili, "Pilgrimage under the Blessing of the Occupant," Radio Liberty, August 2020, <https://bit.ly/3OLYzTg>.

64 "Bishop Iakob Is Informed about Clergy's Violent Incitements on July 5 during Preaching," Radio Liberty, July 12, 2021, <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31354372.html>.

65 "PM on 'March of Dignity': '95% of the Population Is against the Propaganda March,'" Civil.Ge, July 12, 2021, <https://civil.ge/ka/archives/431681>.

66 "Assessment of Namokhvani HPP Agreement," Social Justice Center, March 4, 2021, <https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/namokhvani-hesis-khelshekrulebis-shefaseba>

have advocated for equal access to social, health, and educational opportunities and demanded a fair redistribution of wealth. Even the center-right political parties such as Lelo and the United National Movement use the elements of left-wing populism in their election programs. In the context of such polarization, LGBT+ community members have different views on the methods of fighting for their rights. Their main concern is that the issue's politicization causes its marginalization, and political and social conditions of the LGBT+ community remain unimproved even with a so-called liberal government in power.

This polarization around gender and sexual identity amplifies the broader polarization of the political space. Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream and Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement do not have equal political opportunities because the former controls administrative resources and oligarchic capital. Though Ivanishvili has officially left politics, he still influences the decisions of the ruling party, and several media outlets have close ties with the Georgian Dream. On the other side, the United National Movement cannot unify the opposition and become a front-runner because its leaders are unwilling to share power with other opposition forces. Since the United National Movement had seized TV Imedi, Ivanishvili's new Georgian Dream government returned this television station to the family of the oligarch Arkadi Patarkatsishvili. Similarly, the Georgian Dream government used legal tools to register the ownership of another television channel, Rustavi 2, under Kibar Khalvashi, another Georgian oligarch whose relations with Saakashvili's government deteriorated because of his friendship with Irakli Okruashvili, who had formerly served as defense minister.

This polarization is accentuated by the fact that the whole Georgian media ecosystem shows "political parallelism": that is, it parallels, reinforces, and amplifies political divisions.⁶⁷ The television channel Post TV supports the current Georgian Dream government and openly attacks the opposition channels by broadcasting cynical and insulting media content. This same parallelism can be seen on the opposition side: The television channel Mtavari Arkhi demonstrates political affinity towards Saakashvili and frames its media content according to the preferences of his political party; the director of Mtavari Arkhi is a former justice minister and deputy prosecutor general who justified the attacks of 2007 on TV Imedi as its owner, Arkadi Patarkatsishvili, used this opposition media to undermine Saakashvili's leadership; a former defense minister, Davit Kezerashvili, owns Formula TV and favors the political party European Georgia;⁶⁸ the Tsereteli family owns TV Pirveli and has close business ties with two oligarchs, Mamuka Khazaradze and Badri Japaridze; and so on.

The 2020 new electoral law introduced a proportional system and a lower electoral threshold, thus incentivizing political actors to compete separately for parliamentary seats instead of pooling resources against the ruling party. Different factions within the Georgian Dream have seen this electoral legislation as an opportunity and defected from the party. Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia resigned over his disagreement with the party regarding the detention of Nika Melia, the chair of the United National Movement. Melia refused to post bail following his arrest on charges of participation

67 Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 21, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511790867>.

68 Simona Weinglass, "State Prosecutor Announces Likely Indictment of Gal Hirsch, Would-Be Police Head," *The Times of Israel*, July 7, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/state-prosecutor-announces-likely-indictment-of-gal-hirsch-would-be-police-head/?fbclid=IwARoVFKNvQql6IH3YQU3G177LvMISyONfux3KAWZBore-nAFIqUBnUngoTfWU>.

in the violence that took place during the June 20, 2019 demonstrations.⁶⁹ After the 2020 parliamentary elections, political parties could not reconcile their positions and the country's fragile equilibrium was threatened by parliamentary boycott and fragmentation of the political order. The personalization of political parties disables political actors from winning an overwhelming majority.

To avoid a deeper fragmentation, Christian Danielson, a personal envoy of President of the European Council Charles Michel, with the help of the US and EU ambassadors and the President of Georgia, Salome Zurbishvili, achieved the agreement, "A Way ahead for Georgia," brokered on April 19, 2021 with all opposition parties except for the United National Movement.⁷⁰ This agreement addresses perceptions of politicized justice, stresses the importance of ambitious electoral and judicial reforms, and sets the rules for power-sharing in the Parliament by allowing the opposition to chair key parliamentary committees. Finally, the agreement outlines the circumstances for a snap parliamentary election.⁷¹ But the Georgian Dream government withdrew from the April 19 Agreement and its leaders explained this decision by fulfilling several conditions of the agreement (for instance, releasing the so-called political prisoners, implementing electoral reforms, and expressing readiness for the snap parliamentary election). After the Georgian Dream left the agreement, the leadership of the United National Movement signed it. This agreement is the first attempted democratic transition pact aimed at reducing the effects of polarization in Georgia. So far, only the opposition subscribes to it.

Former President Mikheil Saakashvili arrived in Georgia several days before the local elections and was arrested and imprisoned on October 1, 2021. His arrival was an unpleasant surprise leading to the mobilization of voters from both sides. His harsh electoral rhetoric seeded fear among Georgian Dream activists, a mobilizing effect that resulted in increased political polarization. The Georgian Dream received 46.74 % of the proportional vote. In all major cities, including the capital, the run-off elections for mayors were announced between the United National Movement and Georgian Dream candidates.⁷² In the meantime, Saakashvili went on a hunger strike that led the United National Movement to organize protests to request his transfer to a hospital in a non-penitentiary clinic, in order to prevent Saakashvili from life-threatening complications. Some politicians and journalists joined the hunger strike in solidarity. The Public Defenders of Georgia and Ukraine visited the former president at the penitentiary institution. But the Ministry of Justice decided to leave Saakashvili in the prison clinic and to hold trial hearings there, citing security concerns.⁷³ This latest episode in Georgia's hectic political life accelerated the country's polarization and the entrenchment of politicians into divisive and

69 On June 20, 2019, the Parliament of Georgia hosted the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy. A member of the Russian State Duma, Sergey Gavrilov, sat in the chair of the speaker of the Georgian Parliament. This incident sparked anti-occupation protests. The police used disproportionate force against the protestors: a total of 275 people were wounded (187 civilians, 15 journalists, and 73 policemen). "Victims of 20–21 June without Status," Open Society Foundation, November 2019, <https://osgf.ge/20-21-ivnisis-dazaralebulebi-statusis-gareshe/>.

70 Elene Panchulidze and Richard Youngs, "Defusing Georgia's Political Crisis: An EU Foreign Policy Success?" May 10, 2021, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/05/10/defusing-georgia-s-political-crisis-eu-foreign-policy-success-pub-84494>.

71 "A Way ahead for Georgia," April 19, 2021, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/210418_mediation_way_ahead_for_publication_0.pdf.

72 Central Election Commission of Georgia, "The 2021 Municipal Elections," https://archiveresults.cec.gov.ge/results/20211030/#/ka-ge/election_45/dashboard.

73 *Night Courier*, "Interview with Rati Bregadze, the Justice Minister of Georgia," TV Rustavi 2, November 5, 2021, <https://rustavi2.ge/ka/news/214065>.

personalized rhetoric that, in the long run, serves the interests of illiberal groups arguing that Western-inspired liberalism brings only chaos and instability.⁷⁴

Conclusion

Illiberal forces gather strength from political fragmentation. Far-right movements rise and strengthen their capacities during democratic setbacks, serving the short-term interest of those in power, or of central institutions such as the Church. Illiberal groups also gain visibility by politicizing salient issues such as gender and sexuality and polarizing the political space. One can conclude that they are a byproduct of the process of democratization. However, the political price of engaging with the far right is high and ruling parties need to also attract the electoral support of the more liberal voters, especially in multi-party systems, irrespective of their degree of institutionalization. Russia uses these domestic conditions to supply local illiberal groups with demanded assistance. Disregarding the democratic rules of the game by the domestic political elites thus enables the Kremlin to delay Georgia's Western-driven democratization.

Democratic institutions matter. This is not to say that democratic regimes do not have illiberal groups; however, they can be fought against and limited to smaller constituencies. An independent judiciary and media, and an undivided opposition that can attract different groups of voters, are the best tools to prevent illiberal forces from destabilizing the polity. Conversely, when political fragmentation occurs, coupled with personalized political parties, the emergence of illiberal groups is facilitated. In conclusion, the institutional framework provides political opportunities for the emergence of illiberal groups; however, whether they successfully mobilize against democracy depends on the political actions of domestic and external political actors. Thus, political polarization is a pathway to illiberalism.

⁷⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 231.