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ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7739-7232>*Amiran Khevtsuriani, Georgian Technical University*ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1543-6988>*Keti Jijeishvili, Georgian Technical University*

## CHALLENGES OF OLIGARCHIC RULE IN GEORGIA

*This article discusses the phenomenon of oligarchic rule; examines and analyzes the causes and characteristics of oligarchic governance in Georgia, the correlation between informal governance and kleptocratic rule, the rise of billionaire businessman Bidzina Ivanishvili, founder of Georgia's ruling party "Georgian Dream," within the country's power structure, as well as the stages and priorities of his subsequent activities. It also addresses the European Parliament's resolution and Transparency International's reports, which identify Bidzina Ivanishvili as the country's sole oligarch with a destructive role in Georgia's politics and economy, the European Commission's report on the "de-oligarchization law," and the response of the ruling party and Bidzina Ivanishvili to these recommendations. In modern Georgia, the main barriers to effective governance traditionally include elite corruption and "state capture." Moreover, while informal governance was previously considered mainly a domestic issue, since 2022, it has gained an international dimension. Georgia's accession to the European Union now depends, among other factors, on overcoming oligarchic rule. Therefore, in the current political context, only the systematic and in-depth reforms based on the recommendations of the European Commission can facilitate the transformation of oligarchs into ordinary economic players, the "deoligarchization" of the state, and the stability of Georgia's European course and uninterrupted progress in the EU integration process. The implementation of these processes will only be possible through the deep involvement of the international community and the protection of the Georgian people's votes and will in the 2024 parliamentary elections. At the same time, Georgia's illegitimate government is completely isolated from the free world. Its leaders are not invited to any European countries and cannot participate in any significant international meetings. Additionally, the process of sanctioning regime officials has already begun in certain countries. However, collective EU sanctions against them are being opposed by Hungary and Slovakia, as they traditionally stand against such measures.*

**Keywords:** *Oligarchic rule, informal governance, kleptocratic rule, offshore companies, European Commission report, constitutional institutions, "de-Bidzinization".*

**Introduction. Research Objectives and Tasks.** The aim of this research is to describe and scientifically analyze the origins, development, characteristics, trends, and contemporary challenges of informal governance in Georgia, based on various sources and literature.

The research tasks include:

- Analyzing the activities of Bidzina Ivanishvili, billionaire businessman and leader of Georgia's ruling party "Georgian Dream," and assessing his deviations from the principles of democratic political order and steps taken toward the "state capture."
- Examining and analyzing the European Commission's recommendation regarding the "de-oligarchization law."

**Relevance of the Research.** One of the most pressing issues in Georgia's current political agenda is the study of the oligarchic governance system and the analysis of strategies for its neutralization. Informal governance has impacted not only the country's domestic affairs but also its foreign policy, constitution, and national interests, giving the issue significant political weight. At this stage, Georgia's accession to the European Union depends, among other factors, on dismantling the existing oligarchic governance. Therefore, it is crucial to explore what Georgian oligarchy entails and its harmful effects.

At the same time, in searching for solutions to this issue, it is essential to consider the political, legal, social, and economic context of informal governance established by Bidzina Ivanishvili in Georgia.

Additionally, the research evaluates the methods chosen by the Georgian government to implement the European Council's de-oligarchization recommendation.

**Key Research Questions.** 1. What is the essence of oligarchic governance?

2. What factors contributed to the emergence of oligarchic governance in Georgia?

3. What does the European Commission's recommendation on de-oligarchization entail, and what steps has "Georgian Dream" taken in response?

To establish correlations between variables, the study defines the following key topics:

1. Oligarchy as a form of governance

2. The formation of oligarchic rule in Georgia

3. The European Commission's recommendation on de-oligarchization

4. Conclusion.

**Research Methods.** The study employs various research methodologies, including case study analysis, comparative analysis, systemic approach, problem-chronological method, and others.

**Oligarchy as a Form of Governance.** Oligarchy is defined as the rule of a small group of people ("the rule of the few") (Shelly, 2019, 5). Discussions on oligarchy can be traced back to the works of Plato and Aristotle, who considered it one of the most undesirable forms of governance alongside tyranny. According to this concept, "rulers" are not separate from society but govern it through institutions and norms (Shelly, 2019, 5-6).

Unlike Aristotle's perspective, in modern times, oligarchy represents an informal social, political, and economic influence within a state, without necessarily participating in its governance structures. Political processes and economic systems systematically serve the interests of a small group of wealthy individuals, regardless of whether they formally hold power (Shelly, 2019, 8). Oligarchy functions as a mechanism for accumulating and, at times, simultaneously accumulating and protecting wealth.

The issue of oligarchy in the post-Soviet space emerged in the 1990s. Its rise was facilitated by the sudden liberalization of weak state institutions, privatization of property, widespread corruption, and a political party system that, at best, was ineffective and, at worst, almost nonexistent (Shelly, 2019, 209).

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, a small group of individuals amassed vast wealth by seizing control of various industries, creating a financial sector where most of their capital was concentrated. Unlike their Western counterparts, who play a fundamental role in their countries' economies, these individuals never prioritized economic recovery. Furthermore, they lack innovation, having invented nothing, patented no new technologies, and built no companies from scratch. Instead, they primarily acquired existing assets through criminal methods and close ties to organized crime. Consequently, oligarchy does not support the development of liberal democracy, as it relies on intimidation and coercion. Oligarchic states often experience brain drain, high poverty rates, and limited opportunities for young people. For oligarchs, power represents not only uncontrolled wealth but also their social standing and informal connections, including ties to state institutions (Shelly, 2019, 208).

In political discourse within post-Soviet countries, the term "captured state" is frequently used to describe extreme forms of oligarchy (Marandici, 2021, 67). Complete state capture occurs when oligarchs exert extensive influence over society and all branches of government, as seen in Russia.

The "state capture" strategy employed by oligarchs becomes effective under conditions of weak and unstable state institutions. In the early stages—partial state capture—oligarchic influence remains somewhat constrained by coalition forces, political opposition, civil society activism, and, in some cases, a weak but still functioning judiciary. However, over time, oligarchs further weaken fragile systems and take complete control.

In Georgia, oligarchic governance is closely linked to kleptocratic rule (from the Greek words "kleptes" meaning "theft" and "kratia" meaning "rule"). Kleptocracy, often referred to as "thievocracy," describes a system where the ruling elite exploits power for personal gain, owning privileged businesses, lobbying for corporate interests, and controlling public funds. The existence of kleptocratic oligarchy in Georgia became particularly evident following the results of the country's parliamentary elections on October 26, 2024. These elections further confirmed that the oligarch's objectives go beyond merely protecting and expanding personal wealth; they aim for the maximization of power, which involves seizing local resources and, ultimately, the full exploitation of the state.

**The Establishment of Oligarchic Rule in Georgia.** In Georgia, the "oligarchic system" emerged due to the fragility of state institutions and the socio-economic and political dynamics of their formative period, leading to its development into an extreme form of oligarchy – a "captured state."

Similar to Ukraine and Moldova, the category of Georgian oligarchs (who amassed their wealth in Russia and were part of the Russian oligarchy at its peak (Konończuk, 2017, 3) was formed in the 1990s. However, until 2012, before billionaire businessman Bidzina Ivanishvili came to power, there was no discussion of oligarchic rule in Georgia. Until then, oligarchic governance had never been a systemic problem in Georgia, and the involvement of oligarchs in Georgian politics remained only a temporary characteristic, unlike in Ukraine, where the composition of ruling blocs and their supporting oligarchs changed to some extent (Pleines 2016, Yurchenko 2018). For example, a prominent minister of the previous government, Kakha Bendukidze, was referred to in certain circles as a Russian oligarch due to the origin of his capital (Wojciech et al., 2017). However, despite the controversial public attitude towards Bendukidze, discussions about his control over any specific sector never took place. In the case of Badri Patarkatsishvili, although he attempted to influence domestic politics by funding anti-government movements and running as a presidential candidate, his death prevented the establishment of oligarchic rule in the country (Zurabishvili, 2022, 5).

In reality, discussions about oligarchic rule in Georgia began in 2012, with a specific addressee in the form of the ruling party "Georgian Dream" founder, Bidzina Ivanishvili. This fact is confirmed by the European Parliament's resolution and reports from Transparency International, in which Bidzina Ivanishvili is identified as the country's sole oligarch, playing a destructive role in both politics and the economy (Transparency.org 2021).

Bidzina Ivanishvili amassed his vast wealth through the privatization of Soviet-era state assets in Russia during the 1990s. His business dealings were linked to many well-known Russian oligarchs of that time, many of whom are currently sanctioned. Two of his four children, Uta and Bera Ivanishvili, still hold dual Russian citizenship. Before returning to Georgia in the early 2000s, Bidzina Ivanishvili lived in Russia, where he controlled several billion in assets. By the time he came to power in 2012, his fortune was estimated at \$5.5 billion, equivalent to approximately 20% of Georgia's GDP at the time.

Despite announcing his intention to sell all his businesses and assets in Russia upon entering politics to prevent unnecessary questions in Georgian society, Transparency International Georgia discovered that between 2012 and 2019, he continued to own at least 10 companies through offshore-registered entities, which in turn created an even broader network of subsidiaries.

Ivanishvili invested his enormous resources into Georgian politics in 2012. He founded the coalition "Georgian Dream," united the opposition, and won the parliamentary elections. For several months following his victory, he served as Prime Minister but resigned in 2013, making his first announcement about leaving politics. Despite stepping down, over time, it became increasingly widely accepted that Ivanishvili remained the most influential political figure in Georgia, even though he did not officially hold public or party positions for extended periods (Konończuk, Cenuşa & Kakachia, 2017, 4).

Over the following years, the coalition gradually disintegrated, and its core party, "Georgian Dream," won a constitutional majority in the 2016 parliamentary elections, further increasing Ivanishvili's influence. This period marked the beginning of the rapid decline of democratic institutions and state functionality, which soon led to a severe political crisis.

Despite declaring his permanent departure from politics in both 2015 and 2020, Ivanishvili returned on both occasions and resumed his role as chairman of "Georgian Dream." In 2023, he appointed himself as the party's "honorary chairman" and amended the party's statutes to secure the authority to nominate the Prime Minister, ultimately changing the Prime Minister in the spring of 2024.

At present, both locally and internationally, discussions about informal one-man rule in Georgia—referred to as "Bidzina-ization"—are increasingly frequent. Without holding any official position, Bidzina Ivanishvili maintains full control over Georgia's political and economic levers through his party, the government, and the judiciary loyal to him (Transparency.org 2019, Transparency.org 2021).

Ivanishvili preserves his control over the state by appointing individuals personally loyal to him to the highest state positions, with a particular focus on law enforcement and security agencies. Specifically, the Minister of Internal Affairs, Vakhtang Gomelauri, was formerly his personal bodyguard. His former company executive, Grigol Liluashvili, became the head of the State Security Service. Another former company employee, Irakli Karseladze, was appointed Minister of Infrastructure. Former Prime Ministers Irakli Garibashvili and Giorgi Kvirikashvili were employees of Ivanishvili's "Cartu" foundation. His personal lawyer, Shalva Tadumadze, first became the Chief Prosecutor and later a Supreme Court judge. Additionally, family-affiliated doctors Ekaterine Tikaradze and Davit Sergeenko held the Health Minister's position at different times.

This scheme allows Ivanishvili to exert nearly absolute control over the state without any formal

accountability. His specific benefits include not only his and his family's guaranteed physical security but also financial security, which Ivanishvili maintains through a complex network of offshore companies and trusts. Transparency International Georgia has identified over 20 offshore companies controlled by the Ivanishvili family. In Georgia alone, these offshore companies own vast amounts of real estate and over 125 locally registered companies operating in various economic sectors. Ivanishvili has also made significant investments in cryptocurrency mining.

Outside Georgia, Bidzina Ivanishvili's family assets include luxurious real estate in New York and Paris. Investigative journalism has revealed that Ivanishvili owns two properties in Paris: a mansion surrounded by forests at 29 Rue de la Princesse and an apartment on Boulevard Saint-Germain, registered under his son Uta Ivanishvili. Additionally, he owns an 8,300,000 USD 1,100 sq. m. mansion in Brooklyn, New York, located at Dover St. 2.

His most profitable business projects are concentrated under the umbrella of the Georgian Co-Investment Fund, a Luxembourg-registered private investment fund that operates around 25 projects in Georgia, including shopping centers, cement factories, hotels, and more.

Anticipating possible sanctions, in April 2024, the Georgian Parliament amended the tax code to exempt property transfers from offshore zones to Georgia from taxation.

The last quarter of 2024, particularly the post-election period, turned out to be disastrous for Bidzina Ivanishvili and his regime. The most severe blows came from the outgoing U.S. administration, primarily in the form of personal sanctions against Ivanishvili. On December 27, 2024, the U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned billionaire ex-Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, founder and honorary chairman of "Georgian Dream." The sanctions also extended to his dispute with Credit Suisse. The U.S. Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) added Ivanishvili to the SDN (Specially Designated Nationals) list, which effectively freezes his U.S.-based assets and transactions. Several key figures of his regime, particularly security officials, were also sanctioned by the U.K. (<https://bm.ge/news/magnitskis-sia-ras-nishnavs-ashsh-is-es-sanqtsia-da-vin-khvdeba-iq>).

**European Commission's Recommendation on "Deoligarchization".** As of today, foreign publications (Ipn Press Agency, 2022), academic discussions (Konończuk, Cenuşa & Kakachia, 2017, Ion, 2021, 63-89), and political statements made at the international level (<https://bit.ly/3RwEG2M>) indicate that Georgia may in fact be a "state captured by an oligarch" (Ipn Press Agency, 2022), similar to Moldova before 2019, during the period of oligarch Plahotniuc ([https://socialjustice.org.ge/uploads/products/pdf/დეოლიგარქიზაცია\\_1668068720.pdf](https://socialjustice.org.ge/uploads/products/pdf/დეოლიგარქიზაცია_1668068720.pdf)).

A few days before the decision on granting Georgia the status of a "candidate for EU membership," a resolution adopted by the European Parliament stated that "European lawmakers express concern over the destructive role of Georgia's sole oligarch, Bidzina Ivanishvili, in the country's political and economic life, as well as the influence he holds over the government and its various branches, including politically motivated decisions against political opponents and journalists" (<https://bit.ly/3SS9e0c>). The European Parliament urged the European Commission to "consider the issue of sanctioning Ivanishvili for his role in damaging political processes in Georgia" (<https://bit.ly/3SS9e0c>).

According to the "European Commission's" report, besides the fact that individuals with past professional ties to Bidzina Ivanishvili or those openly expressing loyalty to him are appointed to key positions in executive and law enforcement agencies, undeniable signs of Ivanishvili's "state capture" include: major political decisions being made with the informal approval of a shadow ruler and the disregard for constitutional institutions (JAM news, 2022); the absence of democratic mechanisms for checks and balances on the executive branch; the lack of parliamentary oversight (<https://bit.ly/3rryi2o>); the complete control of the judiciary through an influential group of judges directly linked to the government (<https://bit.ly/3CurEPI>).

Also noteworthy is the implementation of total surveillance by the State Security Service against opposition-minded elements, which has been publicly exposed multiple times through the release of secret recordings (<https://bit.ly/3CtqcfW>). Additionally, there is a trend of abolishing/weakening independent institutions (<https://bit.ly/3SJQhNi>); precedents of violence and legal actions against critical media, civil activists, and political opponents (<https://bit.ly/3ydlyQN>); potential cases of high-level corruption, including within the judicial system, which remain unaddressed (<https://bit.ly/3edydfM>); and an unfair, unfree electoral environment (<https://bit.ly/3rorrGT>).

In 2022, among the 12-point recommendations issued by the European Commission for Georgia, "deoligarchization" was listed as one of the key points. According to the "European Commission's

recommendation," to receive candidate status, Georgia had to implement a genuine, not superficial, "deoligarchization and eliminate the excessive influence of private interests in political, economic, and social life" (European Commission 2022a).

Regarding the implementation of this significant recommendation, Georgia's ruling political team stated that the mention of deoligarchization did not apply to the party's founder, Bidzina Ivanishvili. However, according to their own interpretation, it unequivocally applied to opposition political party leaders and their financiers (Interpresnews.ge 2022a).

To comply with this recommendation, the ruling party "Georgian Dream" presented a "deoligarchization" bill in the Georgian Parliament (Parliament of Georgia 2022a), which was modeled after Ukraine's deoligarchization law (President of Ukraine 2021). As a result, specific Members of the European Parliament were later forced to clarify and explicitly state that in Georgia's case, the demand for "deoligarchization" specifically meant "de-Bidzinization" and "de-Ivanishvilization" (GeorgiaToday.ge 2021).

For his part, Bidzina Ivanishvili, contrary to the unanimous advice of Western partners, declared the West an enemy during a pro-government rally in Tbilisi on April 29, 2024, and, in opposition to Georgia's constitutional requirements and the country's recognized foreign policy course, announced a shift away from the Euro-Atlantic path.

During the rally, where thousands of active public officials were systematically transported from the regions, he also announced repressive measures against pro-Western actors, thereby effectively enforcing the "Foreign Influence Transparency" law even before its official adoption. This law later became known as the "Russian Law," as it echoed the spirit of a law passed in the Russian Federation in 2012 (Gogolashvili, 2024).

Such actions by Bidzina Ivanishvili could, to some extent, provoke Western countries to distance themselves from Georgia, which could later be used as justification for deviating from the Euro-Atlantic path.

**Conclusion.** In modern Georgia, the main barriers to effective governance traditionally include elite corruption and "state capture." Moreover, while informal governance was previously considered mainly a domestic issue, since 2022, it has gained an international dimension. Georgia's accession to the European Union now depends, among other factors, on overcoming oligarchic rule. Therefore, in the current political context, only the systematic and in-depth reforms based on the recommendations of the European Commission can facilitate the transformation of oligarchs into ordinary economic players, the "deoligarchization" of the state, and the stability of Georgia's European course and uninterrupted progress in the EU integration process. The implementation of these processes will only be possible through the deep involvement of the international community and the protection of the Georgian people's votes and will in the 2024 parliamentary elections.

Another significant factor is the actions taken by Georgian society against the regime: for over 100 days, Georgians have been persistently protesting against the prevailing injustice in the country, undeterred by the repressions declared against them by the regime. Alongside the security forces, various paramilitary groups operate in the country, brutally attacking peaceful protesters and causing severe physical injuries. Furthermore, political prisoners have emerged—individuals who have been unjustly arrested based on fabricated charges. Meanwhile, the illegitimate parliament is passing various draconian laws that restrict freedom of expression and speech. Fines have been drastically increased, and the accounts of funds providing financial assistance to citizens harmed by the regime have been frozen.

At the same time, Georgia's illegitimate government is completely isolated from the free world. Its leaders are not invited to any European countries and cannot participate in any significant international meetings. Additionally, the process of sanctioning regime officials has already begun in certain countries. However, collective EU sanctions against them are being opposed by Hungary and Slovakia, as they traditionally stand against such measures.

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**Аміран Хевцуріані, Кеті Джіджеішвілі. Виклики олігархічного правління в Грузії**

У статті розглядається феномен олігархічного правління; розглядаються та аналізуються причини та характеристики олігархічного правління в Грузії, співвідношення між неформальним управлінням і клептократичним правлінням, піднесення бізнесмена-мільярдера Бідзіні Іванішвілі, засновника правлячої партії Грузії «Грузинська мрія», у структурі влади країни, а також етапи та пріоритети його подальшої діяльності. У ньому також йдеться про резолюцію Європейського парламенту та звіти Transparency International, які визначають Бідзіні Іванішвілі як єдиного олігарха країни з деструктивною роллю в політиці та економіці Грузії, звіт Європейської комісії про «закон про деолігархізацію» та відповідь правлячої партії та Бідзіні Іванішвілі на ці рекомендації. У сучасній Грузії основними перешкодами для ефективного управління традиційно є корупція еліт і «захоплення держави». Крім того, якщо раніше неформальне врядування вважалося переважно внутрішньою проблемою, з 2022 року воно набуло міжнародного виміру. Вступ Грузії до Європейського Союзу зараз залежить, крім інших факторів, від подолання олігархічного правління. Тому в нинішньому політичному контексті лише системні та глибокі реформи, що базуються на рекомендаціях Єврокомісії, можуть сприяти перетворенню олігархів на звичайних економічних гравців, «деолігархізації» держави, а також стабільності європейського курсу Грузії до безперервного прогресу в процесі інтеграції до ЄС. Реалізація цих процесів стане можливою лише за умови глибокого залучення міжнародної спільноти та захисту голосів і волі грузинського народу на парламентських виборах 2024 року. Водночас, нелегітимна влада Грузії повністю ізольована від вільного світу. Її лідери не запрошуються до жодної європейської країни і не можуть брати участь у жодних значущих міжнародних зустрічах. Крім того, в деяких країнах вже розпочався процес застосування санкцій до посадових осіб режиму. Проте проти колективних санкцій ЄС виступають Угорщина та Словаччина, які традиційно виступають проти таких заходів.

**Ключові слова:** олігархічне правління, неформальне врядування, клептократичне правління, офшорні компанії, звіт Єврокомісії, конституційні інституції, «дебідзинізація».