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Post-Military Defeat Elections in Hybrid Regimes: Divergent Outcomes in Georgia and Armenia

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the divergent electoral outcomes that followed military defeat in two post-Soviet hybrid regimes: Georgia and Armenia. In Georgia, the incumbent government was defeated after the 2008 war with Russia, a result consistent with existing literature suggesting that hybrid regimes tend to punish leaders after military setbacks. In contrast, the government secured re-election in Armenia after the 2020 war with Azerbaijan, challenging prevailing assumptions about the political consequences of military defeat. The central research question is: *to what extent does a military defeat affect electoral dynamics in post-Soviet hybrid regimes?*

To address this, the thesis employs a multiphase, mixed-methods approach. First, it traces the evolution of public opinion surveys from before the wars through the subsequent elections, identifying shifts in voters' main concerns. Second, it analyses media coverage during the electoral campaigns, with a focus on agenda-setting, priming, and framing theories, to assess how issues were prioritised or downplayed in shaping voter perceptions. Finally, it draws on expert interviews from both countries to explore how incumbents and opposition forces responded to these concerns and instrumentalised them in the campaigns.

The findings show that the war's outcome has only a limited impact on electoral dynamics. In both cases, governments attempted to deflect responsibility by redirecting attention to other issues, highlighting achievements, blaming enemies or the opposition, and relying on loyal media outlets and state resources. The effectiveness of these strategies depended less on the defeat itself than on pre-existing factors: governmental wear and tear, support from elites, economic situation, international backing, the stance of civil society, and—above all—the strength and resources of the opposition.

Table of Contents

1. **Introduction** **7**
2. **Electoral Outcomes in Hybrid Regimes: Relevance of War, Foreign Policy, Economy, and Media** **13**
   a. *Hybrid Regimes: Political Uncertainty, Winning Coalitions and the Selectorate* 13
   b. *Foreign Policy in Post-Soviet Hybrid Regimes: International Orientation Dichotomy* 18
   c. *War in Hybrid Regimes: Outcomes and Electoral Consequences* 21
   d. *Economy in Hybrid Regimes: Voting Repercussions* 24
   e. *Media Influence in Hybrid Regimes: Electoral Effects* 26
3. **Similar Backgrounds, Divergent Outcomes: Georgia and Armenia** 32
   a. *Government's Electoral Defeat in Georgia* 32
   b. *Government's Electoral Victory in Armenia* 37
4. **Methodology** 44
5. **Post-War Electoral Dynamics in Georgia and Armenia: Issues, Media, and Political Narratives** 49
   a. *Evolution of the Main Concerns in Georgia and Armenia: Before, During and After the War* 49
   b. *Thematic Salience in the Media During the Georgian and Armenian Electoral Campaigns* 53
   c. *Political Narratives and Electoral Strategies in Georgia and Armenia* 60
6. **Discussion** 70
   a. *Georgia and Armenia as Hybrid Regimes: DRG* 71
   b. *Military Defeat: Conflict* 75
   c. *Impact of the Economy* 77
   d. *Foreign Affairs' Influence* 78
   e. *Media Influence* 80
7. **Conclusions** 83

Bibliography 86

Annex 97

List of Abbreviations

- Armenian Apostolic Church: AAC
- European Union: EU
- Georgian Dream: GD
- Georgian Orthodox Church: GOC
- Displaced Persons: DPs
- North Atlantic Treaty Organisation: NATO
- Prime Minister: PM
- Prisoners of War: POWs
- United National Movement: UNM

1. Introduction

At the end of the Cold War, regimes that were neither fully democratic nor fully autocratic proliferated (Diamond, 2002). By 2024, over 20% of the countries of the world were deemed *hybrid regimes* in The Economist Democracy Index (2025), and the number increases to almost 50% if the *Flawed democracies* are added, that is, considering the sum of the two intermediate categories between *full democracies* and *authoritarian regimes*.

Authors like Gilbert and Mohseni (2011) call this intermediate category *a hybrid regime,* which combines features of democracy and autocracy and has relatively free and relatively unfair elections, and in which incumbents tend to have more resources and bend the rules in their favour (Levitsky & Way, 2010). However, exogenous shocks may impact the election results, reducing the support for the governing party. Despite this, hybrid regimes have intrinsic unpredictability because nobody knows to what extent the formal rules will be respected (Nodia, 2016), meaning that the loss of endorsement may not be sufficient for the government to be defeated in the elections or to accept an unfavourable outcome.

Authors like Goemans (2000) have analysed how the result of a war may affect electoral outcomes in hybrid regimes and established that a military defeat will make removal of the incumbent very likely, but this depends on the characteristics of the armed conflict and the regime itself. The author, however, does not focus on the relative relevance of the defeat compared to other aspects, such as the economic situation, the role of the opposition, civil society, elites and media influence.

Assuming that the population's primary concerns and the most discussed topics during a campaign will impact the voting decisions, it is possible to check the absolute and relative relevance of a military defeat compared to other issues in explaining an electoral outcome in a hybrid regime. Therefore, in this thesis, I inquire about the election outcomes of a post-military defeat scenario in the specific context of post-Soviet hybrid regimes to answer my main research question: *to what extent does a military defeat affect electoral dynamics in post-*

Soviet hybrid regimes? The cases to be analysed are Georgia and Armenia, which have similar backgrounds but opposite outcomes: the 2012 Georgian and 2021 Armenian parliamentary elections occurred after an interstate military defeat, in the first case, the 2008 Russo-Georgian War; in the second, the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, against Azerbaijan. Both countries are neighbours, former Soviet republics, and have a similar population size. Both had recently experienced a resounding change in the internal and external policies, starting with a revolution that ousted an authoritarian government in 2003, for Georgia, and in 2018, for Armenia. By 2012 and 2021, respectively, both countries had a Parliamentary political system, were considered hybrid regimes by The Economist Democracy Index (2012, 2021), and the economy was growing (World Bank, n.d.; Livny, 2016). The idea of "defeat" may not always mean the same in every context, and even both parties might claim victory after an armed conflict. Georgia and Armenia were chosen as case studies also because the defeat was accepted.

Despite these similarities, the governing United National Movement (UNM), which had been in power for nine years, lost the elections in Georgia, while in Armenia, the governing Civil Contract, which had assumed power three years before, won. The different results of the polls constitute what Day & Koivu (2019) consider a divergence subtype of a puzzle, in which "multiple cases that look similar experience different outcomes". I follow a Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD), which "seeks to compare political systems that share a host of common features in an effort to neutralize some differences while highlighting others" (Landman, 2008: 70). Using this design, I aim to find what were the differences before and during the campaign in both countries that might explain the divergent outcomes.

As mentioned, the existing literature suggests that, in hybrid regimes, incumbents who lead a military defeat are likely to lose elections (Mansfield & Snyder, 2005: 51; Goemans, 2000: 53-71; Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003: 447-9), as happened in Georgia. However, as this did not occur in Armenia, this also constitutes a contra-expectations puzzle, "when a phenomenon occurs against the (…) theoretical expectations" (Day & Koivu, 2019).

The carried-out analysis for this thesis is multiphase, using mixed methods to check the relevance of the distinct topics and issues before and during the campaign in Georgia and Armenia and how the leading political figures instrumentalised them. Firstly, I check the evolution of general opinion surveys from before the war until after the *war elections*, meaning that “a war had either ended since the last election or was currently ongoing (Arena, 2008). Then, I research the media coverage of the electoral campaign, assuming that topics that were not main concerns for the voters in recent years might become more prominent before the elections and considering the agenda-setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), priming (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987: 63) and framing theories (Entman, 1991), which postulate that media can tell the audience what to think *about* and define evaluation criteria and provoke responses. This means that the media serves to a large extent to check each issue's absolute and relative relevance, which could ultimately provide possible explanations for the electoral outcomes.

Finally, I resort to interviews with experts from both countries to understand how incumbents and opposition instrumentalised the main concerns raised by voters, while primarily focusing on the relevance of the military defeat in the context of a hybrid regime.

Research Questions and Objectives

In a hybrid regime, the incumbents have more chances to win in elections that tend to be free but unfair (Mueller, 2014). However, a military defeat can be a traumatic event for a society, it can deeply undermine the support for the government, increase the risk of removal and even lead to the leadership suffering additional punishment, such as imprisonment, exile, or even being killed (Goemans, 2000: 59). In 2021, the Armenian government lost some support but still won the war elections; on the other hand, even though the Georgian government lost the war elections, it is worth wondering how relevant the military defeat was to explain this outcome. This research aims to analyse electoral dynamics in post-Soviet hybrid regimes after a military defeat, determine the absolute and relative relevance of the warfare failure on electoral results and

understand how the incumbents and the opposition instrumentalised the voters' main concerns and most discussed issues ahead of the war elections.

The specific objectives are to analyse the impact of a military defeat on the systemic-level electoral preferences, referring to broad and structural trends in the electoral behaviour of the population, and political decisions of the population in Georgia and Armenia while aiming at reaching generalisable results that may apply to other cases; to identify the evolution of the most relevant social and political concerns for voters in both countries before and after the war and how these concerns influence voting dynamics, and to establish whether the media and other social actors (such as political parties, pressure groups, economic elites) play a crucial role in shaping post-war political attitudes.

Besides my main research question, regarding the extent of a military defeat's influence on electoral dynamics in post-Soviet hybrid regimes, sub-questions include:

- How do leading political figures, from both the government and the opposition, act regarding a military defeat during an electoral campaign?
- What were the main topics discussed during the 2012 election campaign in Georgia and the 2021 election campaign in Armenia?
- How relevant was the difference in time in power for the incumbents in both cases?
- Which political actors influenced the construction of the post-defeat discourse in each country?
- What was the role of economic elites and other pressure groups?

Expectations

If the military defeat scenario was similar in Georgia and Armenia, but the electoral outcome was different, it means that either the results of the war were presented to the voters differently, or other issues were simply more relevant. However, both possibilities can also be true at the same time. Literature suggests

that the economy might be the most relevant influence on voting behaviours, even more than "dramatic foreign policy behaviour", including war (Williams et al., 2010). The general economic situation in Georgia and Armenia was improving during the elections (World Bank, n.d.; Livny, 2016), and corruption had been reduced (Nodia, 2013; Simonyan & Schultz, 2023). However, it is possible that the voters perceived the economic situation as bad or not good enough, and the media might have played a relevant role in that perception.

The main differences might appear within a change, or the claim for a change, in the foreign policy orientation. This is important because voters in the post-Soviet states often employ "cognitive 'heuristics' to categorise parties as pro-Western or as pro-Russia", and the vote usually is determined in this region by this dichotomous cleavage (Locoman, 2018: 127-128). UNM's government in Georgia remained pro-Western throughout its governing period (Mitchell, 2013) while the Armenian government had an "incoherent and erratic" foreign policy (Nikoghosyan & Ter-Matevosyan, 2023), but generally maintained a balance between Russia and the West. It is possible that Georgian voters preferred a rapprochement with Russia as a result of the economic consequences of almost a decade of estrangement, something that UNM rejected; while the Armenians may have sought the opposite: to move closer to the West and away from Russia after decades of dependence on Moscow, especially in matters of defence, a significant issue after a military defeat (Avetisyan, 2021).

Other differences might appear in the perceived or fundamental change in the level of democracy, justice and corruption, especially considering that the revolution that marked the beginning of both governments took place almost nine years before the war elections in Georgia and only three years before them in Armenia. The Georgian government had already experienced a series of demonstrations in 2007 that led to the president's resignation and early elections in 2008, even before the war (Aprasidze, 2016).

The role of the opposition might also be meaningful. Robert Kocharyan, a prominent political figure who served as president from 1998 to 2008 and later led the party that finished second in the 2021 war elections, generally supported the war but criticised how it was carried out. He was an ally of Serzh Sargsyan, the Armenian president between 2008 and 2018, and briefly the prime minister

until being ousted from power during the 2018 revolution. Even though they were both political rivals during the 2021 war elections (Iskandaryan, 2020), the revolution's memory could still have been fresh to support the ousted PM or his former ally.

In Georgia, the main opposition, which won the elections, was completely new. It was led by a well-known businessman and a political outsider who had financially supported the 2003 revolution and criticised the war itself, not only how it was carried out. He might have seemed clean and exempt from criticism as a new and alternative player (Hale, 2014).

The different political sectors, both incumbents and main political rivals during the analysed war elections, owned and/or controlled several media outlets (Kldiashvili, 2012; Lanskoy & Suthers, 2019), but they might not have been equally influential or had a similar coverage.

The role of powerful independent actors and popular public figures should also be considered. The respective national churches, the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) and the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC), had different approaches. Even though both incumbents promoted secularisation policies and distanced themselves from religious institutions, the GOC was more active than the AAC during the campaign, which could explain the different results (Nodia, 2020; Antonyan, 2025). Finally, in both countries, there was an increasingly polarised scenario before the elections, so it is possible that the support of public figures that were not formally part of the governing or the main opposing parties marked a difference.

2. Electoral Outcomes in Hybrid Regimes: Relevance of War, Foreign Policy, Economy, and Media

In the following chapter, I review the existing literature on the impact of different aspects on electoral outcomes in hybrid regimes. The first part focuses on the characteristics of hybrid regimes and how elections take place in such context; the second one is about the role of foreign policy in post-soviet hybrid regimes; the third one centres on the possible impacts of a military defeat in a hybrid regime; the fourth one delves into the relevance of hybrid regime's government's economic performance on the outcome of elections; finally, the fifth part is about the role of media to highlight specific topics, such as the military defeat, and the relevance of online media in hybrid regimes.

2. a. Hybrid Regimes: Political Uncertainty, Winning Coalitions and the Selectorate

Hybrid Regimes are those that are neither fully democratic nor fully autocratic. They have been defined since the 1960s as having multiparty and electoral systems, but undemocratic regimes. They proliferated in the early post–Cold War period, during the "third wave" of democratization (Diamond, 2002) and especially in the Global South and in the former Soviet area (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015: 76). It was then when authoritarian rulers adopted the forms of democracy while resisting substantive democratization (Brownlee, 2009). The main reasons for doing this were that, on the one hand, international institutions such as the United Nations and the World Bank pushed countries to adopt democratic practices, and citizens demanded the right to vote and representation. At the same time, the Soviet collapse undermined the legitimacy of non-democratic models (Levitsky & Way, 2002), while electoral participation became an easy way for strong leaders to gain legitimacy, identify their supporters and enemies, and distribute patronage (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015: 89).

Some early studies on this topic categorised *hybrid regimes* as transitional phases between autocracy and democracy (Linz, 1973). However, it is now widely accepted that these regimes can be stable enough to be considered a category on their own and not a temporary stage, a subtype of authoritarianism or democracy, or even a residual category (Mufti, 2018). The "transition" paradigm was already questioned in the early 2000s, as most countries considered to be transitioning into democracy during the third wave of democratisation did not democratise, but experienced stagnation or regression instead of progress. Some that did democratise did not follow the expected sequence of steps that a transition was supposed to require (Carothers, 2002).

The simplest definition of a *hybrid regime* is "one that combines features of democracy and autocracy, but does not fully fit into either of those two categories" (Nodia, 2016) or even "nondemocratic, non-authoritarian" (Gilbert & Mohseni, 2011). However, this is not a mere halfway category that "amounts to half of what we would see in a democracy plus half of what we would see in an autocracy" (Hale, 2010). It has its characteristics and a wide range of distinct variations and subcategories.

Numerous authors have come up with ways to categorise these variations. Diamond (2002) considers three categories between *Liberal Democracy* and *Politically Closed Authoritarian* regimes: *Electoral democracy*, *Competitive Authoritarian*, and *Hegemonic Electoral Authoritarian*, plus the residual category of *Ambiguous regimes*. Gilbert & Mohseni (2011) mention three subtypes: *Illiberal Hybrid Regime*, *Tutelary Illiberal Hybrid Regime*, and *Tutelary Liberal Hybrid Regime*. Some other terms that have been used to describe the variant ways in which regimes mix authoritarian and democratic features include *anocracy*, *semirepressive and moderately exclusionary regimes*, *mix regimes* (Goemans, 2000), *semidemocracy*, *praetorian regimes* (Laitin & Fearon, 2003), *competitive authoritarianism*, *exclusive republics* (Levitsky & Way, 2002), *defective democracy*, *electoral authoritarianism* (Bogaards, 2009), *semi-democracy*, *illiberal democracy*, *pseudo-democracy*, *incomplete democracy* (Mufti, 2018), *competitive hegemony* (Hale, 2010), and *grey zone regimes* (Schedler, 2006), among others.

However, since the objective of this research is not to analyse the particularities and the evolution of the various hybrid regime types, it will suffice to use a concept broad enough to cover diverse cases without delving into variations within the category. For this reason, I will use the term *hybrid* to refer to the regimes in question, which are neither fully democratic nor fully autocratic, as suggested by Gilbert and Mohseni (2011).

I understand a *hybrid regime* as closely aligned with Levitsky and Way's concept of "competitive authoritarianism" (2002: 52). The leaders within such regimes play by formal democratic rules, there are multi-party elections, constitutions that stipulate fundamental freedoms, a relatively free media system and civil society, formal democratic institutions that are generally viewed as the main way to obtain and exercise political power. However, in practice, there is such a level of power concentration and leaders break the democratic rules so often that it becomes virtually impossible to have a fair political competition. That means that the major political players and the citizenry cannot take basic democratic procedures for granted (Nodia, 2018: 63). Even though it is formally possible for the opposition to win, regular abuse of the state, violations and manipulation of democratic rules by the incumbents in their favour, and disparities in access to resources (including media) create an 'uneven playing field' that makes it difficult for this to occur (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

Some of the strategies used by the leaders to bend the existing formal democratic rules are the abuse of state resources, clientelism, use of informal patronal and/or personal networks, bureaucratic obstructionism, limiting adequate media access to the opposition, harassment of candidates and their supporters, espionage, arrests, threats, and physical violence. Also, routine attempts to subordinate the judiciary through impeachments, bribery or extortion (Levitsky & Way, 2002: 52; Goemans, 2000: 42; Hale, 2010).

However, the leadership cannot prevent a significant parliamentary opposition (Diamond, 2002). This is because the elections are broadly inclusive, minimally pluralistic, minimally competitive and minimally open. In other words, there is universal suffrage, the opposition is allowed to compete and to win some seats in the parliament even though victory is widely restricted, and the opposition might experience selective and bureaucratic but not massive repression (Schedler,

2006: 3). This moderate levels of repression still exclude a large proportion of the population from access to power (Goemans, 2000: 21).

As there is an active political opposition, civil society, and a relatively free media system, there is enough space to create uncertainty regarding the outcome of the elections, even if there are restrictions. This is because formal rules exist, but nobody knows how much they will be respected; thus, the opposition cannot entirely rely on such a mechanism to come to power (Nodia, 2016). At the same time, the disjunction between "the formal democratic institutional façade and the informal real-practice" power that limits them, means that it is hard to know how power may be obtained and maintained (Zedania, 2018: 22). The fairly strong administrative capacity, the usual attempts to rule in the interest of the broad mass of the population, and the fact that authorities are "accountable, formally or informally, to politically organized factions or to groups outside the unified ruling elite" adds more uncertainty to the possible outcomes (Mansfield & Snyder, 2005: 41).

The *Selectorate theory* helps understand how a hybrid regime can consolidate and retain power despite adversities and without resorting to high levels of repression. It establishes that the leaders are surrounded by three groups: the *residents* comprise the whole population of a particular country; the *selectorate* (S) is formed by residents who have some degree of potential influence in the selection of the leader because they have the "qualities or characteristics institutionally required" to do so (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003: 42), they include citizens with the right to vote in a democracy or a hybrid regime, or elites in an authoritarian regime; and the *winning coalition* (W), which is a subset of the *selectorate*, a smaller group, whose "support endows the leadership with political power over the remainder of the *selectorate* as well as over the disenfranchised members of the society" (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003: 51).

The relative size of the *winning coalition* to the *selectorate* determines the leader's incentives to provide public or private goods, which in turn affects the level of democracy: if the W is big, as it happens in democracies, leaders must satisfy many individuals to stay in power; while, if the W is small, as in autocracies, the leaders can retain support and remain in power by providing

"their small number of essential supporters with private benefits" (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003: 104).

Another way to see this is to classify regimes into three categories, "based on whether the leading state authorities are effectively accountable to the bulk of the state's adult population, to a narrow elite only, or a mix of these two" (Mansfield & Snyder, 2005: 40-41). These categories correspond to democracies, autocracies and hybrid regimes, respectively. The constituencies to whom the authorities are accountable "are those whose assent is needed for them to gain and retain power", being that what Bueno de Mesquita et al. call the *selectorate*.

Following this, a hybrid regime would have a large S and a reasonably small W. A smaller W makes it easier (and cheaper) for the leader to remain in power and makes it a more stable regime (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003: 130, 167). However, the uncertainty inherent to hybrid regimes, where the media and civil society are relatively free, can also mean that the W that constrains and supports the leader might not hold.

At the same time, hybrid regimes tend to have weak government institutions, meaning that they do not "uphold the rule of law and property rights" and whose administrative bureaucracies do not "deliver public goods and services in an efficient, impartial, and timely manner, with limited and predictable business regulations and with low levels of political and administrative corruption" (Manzetti & Wilson, 2007). Strong patron-client relationships can flourish in such countries, and voters are likely to back the corrupt government, anticipating that the leader will fulfil their interests. Even though it may not be an efficient way to gain massive support, clientelism through informal networks helps the leader satisfy certain specific sections of the *selectorate* (Choi & Woo, 2010).

In short, elections in hybrid regimes are marked by high uncertainty. While the concentration of power in the hands of incumbents makes it difficult for challengers to win, the opposition's freedom to participate and the uncertainty surrounding the extent to which incumbents will respect formal rules mean that the electoral outcome will not necessarily be a predictable victory for the incumbent. Furthermore, combining a large S and a relatively small W implies that a leader cannot simply satisfy a particular group to remain in power. This dual

pressure can expose the incumbent to potential fragility, especially in the face of an exogenous shock, such as a military defeat.

2. b. Foreign Policy in Post-Soviet Hybrid Regimes: International Orientation Dichotomy

Hybrid regimes have specific ways to deal with their foreign affairs. The characteristic lack of strong, independent, and democratic political institutions, the weak rule of law and limits to free media lead to fewer checks, balances, and accountability to the incumbent government, which means that it might resort to reckless and imprudent foreign policies. Besides having fewer restrictions on their actions than democratic leaders, leaders in hybrid regimes are also more inclined to employ violent nationalist appeals, since portraying their opponents as enemies of the nation is both a straightforward strategy and a politically rewarding way to gain an advantage in electoral competition (Mansfield & Snyder, 2005: 2). In line with this logic, the advantages that incumbents have on the local media landscape in hybrid regimes helps them carry out these strategies.

An aggressive foreign policy might strengthen the incumbent while weakening its rivals in front of the voters, so foreign policies might be more related to domestic than international issues. For example, Hale (2010) mentions that Georgia's president Mikheil Saakashvili used the 2008 war against Russia in his favour and sought to discredit the opposition as "agents of Russian policy".

With a weaker independent press and civil freedoms in general than in fully democratic regimes, the public debate on foreign policy becomes intense but low-quality. This creates a vicious circle because incumbents might aim for more radical policies to differentiate themselves from their rivals, but rely on misleading analysis. The process tends to lead to "logrolling among elite factions, incapacity of the ruling elite to broker political bargains", "a nationalist bidding war between old elites and rising mass groups", and "contradictory and unconvincing signalling in foreign affairs" (Mansfield & Snyder, 2005: 32, 65). If there is a war, this sequence can lead to a problematic and unpredictable outcome.

From a neo-realist perspective, states need to guarantee their survival and, therefore, their security. A threat exists if other states have superior power capabilities in the present or the foreseeable future. In that case, the threatened state can adopt a *balancing* behaviour in two ways: by increasing its national power through strengthening the economy or military capacity, or by allying with external actors to offset the power of a dominant state. The alternative, *bandwagoning*, is to align with that stronger state, the source of the potential threat (Waltz, 1979: 118-126). Small states like Georgia and Armenia tend to follow this last strategy because of their "structural constraints and lack of capabilities" (Lebanidze & Kakachia, 2023).

In most post-Soviet states this decision would revolve around Russia, a great and geographically proximate power, and the preferred strategy has been, in many cases, inconsistent: at times bandwagoning with Russia, and at other times balancing against it through a rapprochement with the West (Locoman, 2018: 48). If the post-Soviet state is also a hybrid regime, this vacillation is exacerbated by the already mentioned characteristics of non-democratic and non-authoritarian leaderships: misleading analysis and foreign policies that become more closely related to domestic than to international issues.

This vacillation can lead to numerous and even constant changes in foreign policies, which might occur when new political figures come to power, or even with the same rulers in charge. This can be the consequence of an adjustment change (more or less effort in a specific policy), program change (changes in the methods or means), goal changes, or a significant change in the international orientation, in this case, between pro-Western and pro-Russian (Locoman, 2018: 60-61).

In the post-Soviet states voters often employ "cognitive 'heuristics' to categorise parties as pro-Western or as pro-Russia", and the vote usually is determined by this dichotomous cleavage (Locoman, 2018: 127-128). To some states in this region, the EU and NATO offered a credible possibility of membership and financial and political support, creating a generally pro-Western consensus among the political parties. This was the case in Georgia even before the 2008 war with Russia, where pro-European foreign policy was a consensus among the political elite (Lebanidze, 2020: 95), allowing a balancing strategy.

Other states that NATO or the EU did not offer a foreseeable membership followed either a stable pro-Russian foreign policy or, as mentioned, an ever-changing and even erratic strategy based on the possibility of benefitting from both sectors through political ambiguity. Armenian elites before the 2018 revolution followed a “complementarity” doctrine between Russia and the West (Aberg & Terzyan, 2018), but Russian interests were privileged (Lebanidze, 2020: 144), leading not to a full but to a moderate or *soft* bandwagoning strategy (Grigorescu, 2008); while Nikol Pashinyan, PM since 2018, pursued a more pro-Western strategy but without completely ruling out Moscow's role (Atanesyan et al., 2023), leading to an “incoherent and erratic” foreign policy (Nikoghosyan & Ter-Matevosyan, 2023) that aimed to change the international orientation to a foreign policy of soft balancing with the West (Grigorescu, 2008).

Electoral endorsement from Russia or the West becomes a significant asset for incumbents and contenders to attract voters (Locoman, 2018: 7-8, 127-128), while it also influences the quality of democracy and regime outcomes. Russia and the EU may influence the electoral process by manipulating “and shaping the preferences of the political elites both in the government and in the opposition” through leverage, boosting, and conditionalities, but this also depends on the elites' political identity, which may be intrinsically pro-Western or pro-Russian (Lebanidze, 2020: 7, 108).

Because of these constant debates and meddling, foreign policy issues tend to be highly politicised, used as electoral tools and directly impact everyday social life in post-Soviet countries, generating “strong public resonance” and affecting electoral outcomes. However, the political system's openness level in a hybrid regime determines how much of an impact public opinion, media, and civil society have on foreign policy-making (Lebanidze & Kakachia, 2023).

If the state has a clear stance on foreign policy and a war breaks out, it must rely on its ally to balance the threat or the actor it has chosen to bandwagon with. However, the consequences can be severe for the incumbent if that ally’s support is not as strong as expected. If, on the other hand, the state’s foreign orientation is ambiguous and the very characteristics of hybrid regimes enhance this, it will be more difficult for the incumbent to gain foreign support during the war. As we will see, Georgia followed the former pattern but did not receive the expected

Western military support, while Armenia exemplified the latter and did not receive significant assistance from Russia or any other country. In both cases, the military defeat resulted in substantial shifts in foreign policy.

2. c. War in Hybrid Regimes: Outcomes and Electoral Consequences

Following Ramsbotham et al. (2016: 31), I define *war* as an armed conflict in which the opposing parties resort to force due to an original incompatibility of objectives, resulting in a minimum of 25 battle-related annual casualties.[1] Armed conflicts can be *interstate*, as in Georgia in 2008 and Armena in 2020; *internal* ("between the government of a state and internal opposition groups without intervention from other states"), *extrastate* ("between a state and a non-state group outside its own territory") or *internationalised internal* ("between the government of a state and internal opposition groups with intervention from other states") (Gleditsch et al., 2002).

War and its outcome substantially affect the fate of the leaders: a victory will help them remain in power, and a defeat will make their removal very likely (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003: 447-9). However, this depends on the type of political regime. In democracies, autocracies and hybrid regimes, incumbent leaders are expected to remain in power after winning a war. However, the result is quite different depending on the kind of defeat. Dictators tend to lose power only if they command a disastrous defeat, while democratic and hybrid regimes' leaders tend to be ousted from power, whether they lose moderately or disastrously. However, a significant difference is that, in all three regimes, the leaders should expect additional punishments (such as being imprisoned, exiled or even killed) if they lose disastrously, while this only tends to happen after moderate defeats to hybrid regimes' leaders. As Goemans (2000: 59) says, hybrid regimes "are caught in the worst of both worlds. They have a similar likelihood of losing power as

[1] The Uppsala dataset on armed conflicts divides armed conflicts between *minor* ("at least 25 battle-related deaths per year and fewer than 1,000 battle-related deaths during the conflict"), *Intermediate* ("at last 25 battle-related deaths per year and an accumulated total of at least 1,000 deaths, but fewer than 1,000 in any given year") and *war* ("at least 1,000 battle-related deaths per year"). See Gleditsch et al., 2002.

democracies, but once they lose power, they have a similar likelihood of suffering additional punishment as dictatorships".

At the same time, the risk to the regime's political survival posed by war is mitigated by the long-standing experience of non-democratic elites: a long time in power means a lower chance of being removed from office (Bueno de Mesquita & Siverson, 1995). Leaders with a large *winning coalition* (W) face a greater risk of removal because it is difficult to satisfy all members. In contrast, if they have a small W, they would need significant support from the *selectorate* to shield themselves from personal consequences (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003: 41, 448-9). In a hybrid regime, the combination of being effectively accountable to and dependent on both the majority of voters (S) and the elites (W) could jeopardise the leader's hold on power after the military setback. The leader would have to shift the blame to part of the W to avoid personal responsibility, affecting its support; if, on the contrary, the leader takes the blame, this would undermine their reputation with the S. The selectorate's support may not be strong enough, while the W may also prove too fragile to keep the leader in power after a military defeat.

Stable hybrid regimes are not especially war-prone. However, knowing that losing a significant, lengthy, expensive and high-casualty conflict is not worse than losing a smaller-scale one, once the war has already started, leaders of these regimes might tend to push harder if they are losing and refuse to surrender, raising the stakes (Mansfield & Snyder, 2005: 58).

As mentioned, hybrid regimes allow at least some space for the opposition; therefore, it is essential to consider its role in shaping the impact of war outcomes on *war elections*, meaning those that occur during an ongoing armed conflict or that a war ended since the previous election (Arena, 2008). The opposition has two options: either support or reject the war and the government's efforts in it. This is not an easy choice, as, on the one hand, the opposition needs to differentiate itself from the government; otherwise, voters would have no reason to prefer it over the incumbents. However, a war might cause national unity for present or historical reasons, and not supporting it could be perceived as seditious and unpatriotic. For instance, the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, which

is fundamental to the Armenian modern identity, is a clear example of this (Iskandaryan, 2020: 191; Cheterian, 2022).

It is worth noting also that ethno-territorial issues, when instrumentalised politically and presented as a national question, have had negative impacts on the democratization processes and may become a more relevant issue than democracy itself, becoming a stabilising factor for hybrid regimes (Cheterian, 2008, 2010).

If the opposition supports the war, voters will likely attribute responsibility for its outcome to the government and the opposition. In that case, the voters would place their preferences on other issues because of the lack of differentiation between the government and the opposition. The impact of the war's outcome would then be reduced. If, on the other hand, the opposition is against continuing the conflict and the incumbents secure a victory, the government would be more rewarded. If the government loses a war that is not strongly opposed by the opposition, the latter will be unable to use this defeat effectively during an electoral campaign (Arena, 2008).

The very characteristics of the armed conflict itself may also impact the support towards the government and the electoral outcome. Higher casualties tend to increase disapproval of the war in both the opposition and the electorate (Gartner, Segura & Barratt, 2004). At the beginning of a war, casualties and support would be high, but after the initial 'rally-round-the-flag' effect is over, the costs and the fact that fewer people observe the events would lead to a decline in the support and the relevance of the topic. The level of original public support becomes relevant to predict the effects of the costs. The origins of the conflict are also relevant: support will be higher if the nation was invaded, if the war started as a response to an attack, or if the nation's survival was perceived as at stake. The same logic applies to the clarity of war goals (Gartner & Segura, 1998). Voters are also willing to accept more casualties based on the importance of the issue involved and the probability of achieving a successful outcome (Gelpi et al., 2005).

Finally, a war could result in the external overthrow of the government or even the collapse of the state. For a war election to occur, I assume that the incumbent

must survive the immediate aftermath of defeat, and the state must persist, albeit weakened.

In sum, the domestic effects of a military defeat will be shaped by the leader's reaction, whether they take the blame or shift responsibility to other members of the government or non-governing elites; by the role of the opposition, which may or may not support the war effort; the duration of the conflict, and by the type of war, including the origin of the dispute, the number of casualties, and the clarity of the objectives pursued by the government in the battlefield.

2. d. Economy in Hybrid Regimes: Voting Repercussions

The previous section has shown that, on the one hand, the significance of the war and its associated casualties in public opinion diminishes over time, while, on the other, its outcome is less relevant for the war elections if the opposition and government had agreed on supporting the military effort. As we will see later, this happened in both Georgia and Armenia, where both government and opposition endorsed the war, meaning that the focus should be on other topics. One of them is the economy, because, as Williams et al. (2010) claim, it tends to be a more critical issue for voters than the involvement in a war, and the extent of the punishment to incumbents for "engaging in dramatic foreign policy behaviour" depends on the general economic situation. If the economy is bad, the punishment at the polls will be more severe. However, the authors do not consider whether there could be any difference depending on the characteristics of the war, for example, if it is an interstate or an internationalised internal conflict.[2]

Choi & Woo (2010) suggest that, in hybrid regimes, issues related to the economy—particularly unemployment, inflation, and economic growth— occupy

[2] The authors focus on the impact of international conflict participation, particularly the use of force by democratic leaders in foreign policy, on electoral outcomes. This means that the analysis excludes internal armed conflicts. Also, the authors only analyse advanced democracies, and the results for hybrid regimes might differ.

voters' minds as the most important concerns.[3] At the same time, Lucardi (2019) points out that hybrid regime governments are "extremely vulnerable" to being punished for their bad economic performance in election years. However, they are also more resilient than authoritarian regimes in non-election periods. The perspective of periodical and relatively free elections in which the opposition has some chances to win explains this: the promise of a period in which the opposition can campaign against the incumbents and the voters can demand more visibly. Outside of the electoral period, such actions are less effective, and the government is thus less affected.

As a result of economic performance deterioration, military defeat and other exogenous shocks, support for the leader could drop. In that case, the incumbents have two options: they might become less repressive to maintain legitimacy, especially if there are intense diplomatic pressures from international organisations or foreign powers (Wintrobe, 2018). Conversely, the decline of popular support can make the government resort to violent coercive methods to maintain its rule (Rosenfeld, 2018). The second alternative tends to be more common in hybrid regimes (Hendrix & Wong, 2012).

At the same time, military conflicts, despite of their result, tend to harm the domestic economy, causing GDP decline, losses on infrastructure, mass migration (Shaleny et al., 2022), higher inflation (Eydam & Leupold, 2024), and, particularly in less developed countries, reduced national saving rates and capital accumulation, outweighing any positive effects through human capital formation or technological spin-offs (Grobar & Porter, 1989). These effects depend on the type of conflict, its duration, whether the hostilities occur on national soil or abroad, and the government's support to business and individuals (Khaustova et al., 2022).

If economic performance is so relevant to explaining electoral outcomes in hybrid regimes, it makes sense that, at least partly, the leader will win elections based

[3] Even though the authors focus on developing countries and their sample includes 17 cases between 2002 and 2005, 8 of them (Albania, Brazil, Kyrgyzstan, Mexico, Peru, Philippines, Romania, and Russia) were considered either *Electoral democracy* or *Electoral autocracy*, the two intermediate categories between *Liberal democracy* and *Closed autocracy* during those years' V-Dem Democracy Indices (Herre, 2021). The authors do not mention the regime type, but the level of economic development. However, the sample for hybrid regimes, for those non-democratic and non-authoritarian, is vast, diverse and representative.

on the perceptions of economic growth. Moreover, those perceptions might be heavily influenced by other factors. There is a difference between a general feeling concerning the whole country and a personal and more direct effect of economic policies, namely between individual and sociotropic-influenced perceptions. For instance, analysing Russian elections between 1996 and 2008, when Russia was regarded as a hybrid regime, Colton & Hale (2009) argue that, even without experiencing net changes in their personal economy, voters in hybrid regimes might give leaders credit simply for not making things worse and for keeping high hopes of future improvements. At the same time, a more general feeling about the leader's performance affects the economic perception, making it seem better than it is personally perceived. This is, at least partly, related to how state-controlled or government-supportive media portrays national economic developments.

Non-democratic regimes can exploit informational asymmetries to bolster popular support during economic downturns. Even though media coverage "may distort perceptions of national economic performance" (Rosenfeld, 2018), this has been proven to be limited: voters in such regimes do perceive and care about the direct impact of economic fluctuations, such as inflation and unemployment.

Incumbents who successfully manipulate economic factors ahead of the upcoming elections may be rewarded in the polls, and, at the same time, a strong regime can deflect blame for economic problems, insulating leaders and other top members of the ruling party. However, a greater concentration of power conspires against this ability, allowing voters to identify those responsible for economic hardship more directly. An increasingly apparent influence over the media may undermine the incumbent's capacity to deflect blame credibly. A free media system limits coercive capacity, but makes it easier for the regime to diffuse blame for its economic performance (Rosenfeld, 2018).

In sum, the economy is a significant factor that determines voters' decisions, and could even be more relevant than the result of a war. However, a war negatively impacts the economy despite its results, particularly in developing countries such as Georgia and Armenia. In hybrid regimes, the incumbents might resort to government resources, including the media, to shape the citizens' perceptions of the economy or to shift blame and avoid responsibility in case there are economic

difficulties. Nonetheless, this has limits, and voters may still feel the personal consequences of bad economic performance.

2. e. Media Influence in Hybrid Regimes: Electoral Effects

As mentioned, the media can influence voters' perceptions of the incumbent's economic performance, as well as their perceptions of other topics, including a military defeat. In hybrid regimes, a relatively free media system exists, albeit with limitations, and state-controlled or government-supportive outlets may have greater prevalence and fewer restrictions. The combination of democratic and authoritarian elements in hybrid regimes creates informational uncertainty that both constrains and enables journalistic agency through clientelist dependencies, economic resource constraints, and civil society alliances (Voltmer et al., 2021). The media landscape is then "fragmented in a number of spheres that are encoded from different ideological positions", and the audience, the voters, have to decode messages between pro-government and independent outlets and narratives (Toepfl, 2013). The audience must be particularly active to recognise where messages come from.

As indicated, coverage may distort perceptions of the government's performance, which, in turn, will affect the incumbent's electoral support. In a hybrid regime, the government will try to control the narrative while leaving limited space for independent and pro-opposition outlets. According to Robinson (2017), there are three ways by which "deference to political elites translates into influence on publics", three theories on how mass media influence the public by focusing on a specific topic or another. The first one, *Agenda-setting*, postulates that mass media "may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). This also means that the media can act the same way with policymakers, making them pay attention to specific issues but having little impact on how they respond to them (Robinson, 2016).

The second one, *Priming* theory (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987: 63) establishes that media can define the criteria by which public officials, institutions and public

policies are evaluated. The third, *Framing*, assumes that media can provoke different conclusions and responses in the audience depending on how information is presented (Entman, 1991). These theories feed the “dizzying array of interactions” (Baum & Potter, 2008) that impact a mutual and reciprocal influence between voters, media and decision-makers.

The Agenda-setting theory has been reanalysed and reformulated. A more complex *Agenda-building* theory postulates that public agendas are shaped through the interplay of various actors, including the media, but also policymakers, interest groups, and the public itself (Dearing & Rogers, 1988). Shaw et al. (1999) proposed the *Agenda-melding* theory, meaning that the influence of media on setting an agenda is impacted by the attachment of each individual to particular social groups.

The advent of the Internet as an increasingly important source of information, partly displacing traditional media thanks to its greater capacity for immediacy, implied the need to re-read the Agenda-setting theory. Weimann & Brosius (2017) mention five trends that mark the impact of online media and social media on the basic assumptions of the theory:

- The definition of “media agenda” is evolving due to the emergence of online platforms. Traditional media still holds significance, but they are now accompanied by numerous online sources contributing to information dissemination and public perception.
- There is an interplay and interconnection between old and new media in setting the agenda.
- Agenda-setting is no longer only a top-down process but a dynamic one. Social media can influence traditional media agendas, effectively creating a reverse flow of agenda-setting, where traditional media reports on online trends.
- The offline media requires four to eight weeks for agenda-setting to take effect. However, the immediacy of online communication leads to faster *agenda diffusion*, a concept that relies more on interactive communication combining mass media, interpersonal communication and social media. Agenda-setting effects in online settings can occur even in real time, but their decay is also much faster.

- The agenda setters, individuals who shape media agendas, become less relevant in their role of information gatekeepers because, on the one hand, information becomes more widely available while, on the other, there are more challengers to their role. Consumers become less influenced by traditional media agendas, and their media consumption becomes more diverse.

Online media and digital platforms do have agenda-setting effects. However, these are different and more complex than traditional media's: they are faster, shorter-term, fuelled by interaction and easily amplified by diffusion.

Priming theory has also evolved with the advent of online media. Stallbaumer (2017) shows that online media, particularly social media, can generate biases regarding news even before the public begins reading it, with users potentially placing more importance on the sharer than the source. The author claims that "the venue of presentation of one's news may be automatically predisposing them to biases, based not on the nature or value of the news they are consuming, but instead based solely on the manner of their consumption". Regarding the Framing theory, López-Rabadán (2021) highlights the relevance of photographs and videos for digital platforms and how that produces a more powerful framing effect than traditional media. The author also mentions that platforms like Google or Facebook work as intermediaries and can determine access to political information and its interpretation, as well as the increasingly important role of "disinformation platforms, which are disrupting the classic news ecosystem. At the same time, the evolution of this theory in an online context is marked by increased interactivity and diversity, making framing effects a more collaborative and contested process between traditional media, digital platforms and users (Güran & Özarslan, 2022; Wilk et al., 2024).

The rise of online media and digital platforms reinforces the effects on audiences postulated by the three theories. They are becoming more short-term, and the unidirectionality of traditional media is being lost. This also impacts voters' decisions during elections. Additionally, the low cost of internet-only production enables news sites to survive significant economic constraints imposed by the government in hybrid regimes (Voltmer et al., 2021). Among other theories that explain how media might influence voting decisions is Gerbner's *Cultivation theory*, which describes how media consumption has a subtle, pervasive, long-

term and cumulative effect on shaping the public's perceptions (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Noelle-Neumann's *Spiral of Silence theory* (1974) claims that perceived minority opinions will be less likely to be expressed because of fear of social isolation, and the media amplifies this tendency. In an electoral context, it has been shown that voters are less willing to express support for candidates in a context where they feel they are less popular, including on social media (Kushin et al., 2019). The *Two-step flow of mass communication* model (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944) postulates that media influence is not direct, but flows through opinion leaders who interpret and relay it to others. This can happen with powerful elites, especially in a hybrid regime, with a reasonably small winning coalition. The *Uses and Gratifications* theory sees a more active public than other perspectives: consumers seek out media that meet their specific needs, and the influence depends on why they are consuming it and what gratifications they obtain by doing so (Katz et al., 1974). From this perspective, it would not be strange that voters choose partisan outlets to confirm their biases, reinforcing their vote choice. This aligns with Toepfl's (2013) stance on hybrid regimes, where the audience tends to be particularly active in decoding messages.

In sum, the media impacts the relevance of different topics in public opinion and may provoke specific responses, but it depends on the role of opinion leaders and interpersonal communication. Audiences could look for media that support their original ideas, but these may be enhanced by using social networks and other users' comments. After a military defeat, the relevance given by the media to this issue compared to other topics might impact the support towards the government, but this depends on how visible figures, such as opposition leaders, react to those same issues. The role of media as an agenda setter is also mediated by what the public is seeking.

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From this chapter, I can conclude that electoral dynamics in post-Soviet hybrid regimes are shaped by a complex interplay of socioeconomic conditions, elite competition, foreign policy decisions, media influence, and, in the analysed cases, war outcomes. In these regimes, it is difficult for the incumbents to lose the elections because they bend the rules in their favour and limit the opposition. However, this is not impossible, marking a high level of uncertainty, especially if

the W is not consolidated enough, and the support from the S is harmed by exogenous factors such as a military defeat. In that case, the role of the foreign powers is determinant, whether they had supported or not the state in question during and after the war. The incumbent might change its foreign policy based on the war's outcomes and ultimately affect the results of the war elections, which will also be influenced by the characteristics of the conflict and the opposition's stance on it.

Perhaps even more important than the war, the economy significantly determines voters' decisions. The incumbent might use its resources to shape the citizens' views of the economic situation, but this is limited by contending narratives in a relatively open media system. Regarding this, online media has a faster, broader and shorter-term agenda-setting effect than traditional media, so their relevance in impacting electoral outcomes increases the closer the election gets. Also, because producing news solely online is inexpensive, news outlets can survive substantial government-imposed economic constraints. Taking these two aspects into account, along with the theories on media influence—particularly regarding political decision-making—the study of online media within hybrid regimes becomes especially relevant, notably in the potentially volatile context of an electoral campaign following a military defeat.

Therefore, in the following chapters, I will examine the most relevant issues that online media highlighted during the war election campaigns in post-Soviet hybrid regimes such as Georgia and Armenia. However, firstly, I will check what topics were relevant for voters before and after the armed conflict, and examine both countries' specific context, how both governments got into power, how they carried out the war and its outcome, and the role of the main opposition and other pressure groups as opinion leaders.

3. Similar Backgrounds, Divergent Outcomes: Georgia and Armenia

3. a. Government's Electoral Defeat in Georgia

Mikheil Saakashvili rose to power after the 2003 Rose Revolution, protests against Eduard Shevardnadze, Georgia's second president (1995-2003). From the late 1990s, Shevardnadze's government was marked by high levels of corruption and economic stagnation (Cheterian, 2008). The November 2003 parliamentary elections, in which the government engaged in fraud, were the final stage of a declining process, and after three weeks of demonstrations, the president resigned (Nodia, 2013). Saakashvili achieved 96% in the early presidential election, and his party secured a landslide victory with over 67% in the repeated parliamentary election in 2004 (Berglund & Blauvelt, 2016).

The government headed significant reforms establishing a pro-Western liberal democracy (Baev, 2010). The new elite had Western connections, and Saakashvili was educated in the United States (Fairbanks & Gugushvili, 2004). The authorities successfully pushed for the closure of Russian military bases[4] (IISS, 2001; Sokov, 2005), reformed state institutions such as the police and army, established a liberal economic development, diminished the low-level corruption, cracked down on organised crime, and relaunched privatisation and investment in infrastructure (Nodia, 2013). Saakashvili also distanced himself from the ethnic nationalism that had reigned in the 1990s and promoted a more civic and secular conception of nationalism (Berglund & Blauvelt, 2016).

However, the same reforms that modernised the state did not empower civil society nor promote a more democratic system. The constitutional majority in the parliament allowed amendments to the Constitution according to the president's needs. In 2004, a constitutional reform weakened the legislative branch to strengthen the executive, meaning Saakashvili had greater formal capabilities

[4] Vaziani, near Tbilisi; Batumi, in the Autonomous Republic of Adjara; and Akhalkalaki, close to the Turkish-Armenian border, in an Armenian-populated region, were transferred to Georgian authorities. Only Gudauta, in self-proclaimed independent Abkhazia, remained under Russian control.

than Shevardnadze ever did (Hale, 2014). There was no contestation, virtually no opposition, and Saakashvili dominated the political scene (Cheterian, 2008).

The first real challenge for the president was in 2007, when thousands of people protested in front of the parliament; the government suppressed the demonstrations by force, declared a state of emergency and temporarily shut down independent and critical TV networks Imedi and Kavkasia. Saakashvili resigned soon after and called for early elections in 2008, which he won by 54% (Aprasidze, 2016). According to the EIU Democracy Index (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2008, 2010), a significant decline in scores was observed from 2007 to 2009 because the government manipulated the electoral system during the local elections to ensure “that the ruling party would dominate local legislatures”, a “crackdown on the opposition”, and “a nine-day state of emergency imposed”. The Freedom in the World report (2009) highlighted “flaws in the presidential and parliamentary election processes, including extensive reports of intimidation and the use of state administrative resources, which resulted in a marked advantage for the ruling National Movement party”.

During his second tenure, Saakashvili’s popularity decreased. As it was his constitutional final term in office, some important political figures tried to gain more autonomy or completely defected to position themselves as future candidates, including the speaker of the Parliament, Nino Burjanadze (Atilgan & Aprasidze, 2013), the former PM, Zurab Noghaideli and the diplomat Irakli Alasania (Hale, 2014). At the same time, after the Rose Revolution and until 2007, the economy had grown significantly, between 9 and 12% from 2005 to 2007; but in 2008, growth was much moderated, and in 2009, there was a recession (Livny, 2016).

In early 2008, Kosovo declared independence from Serbia unilaterally with Western support, and Russian President Vladimir Putin warned Georgian pro-NATO authorities that he was going to retaliate against the West at the expense of Georgia and concerning its breakaway regions. Since the early 1990s wars, Abkhazia and South Ossetia had been de facto independent republics with no recognition but Russian support and Russian peacekeeping forces in the area. In the months leading up to August 7th, when Georgia attacked Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia, several hybrid war tactics were employed by Russia,

including an information war, gas cuts, a wine export ban, and some provocations by Russian peacekeeping forces (Darchiashvili, 2018). Russian tanks entered Georgian territory the following day and opened a new front in Abkhazia. By August 12th, a truce was signed, the war was over, and Russia had effectively gained control of both regions. Around 850 people died, half of them were civilians. The Georgian economy was severely affected, and Saakashvili's popularity declined: he had thought there would be guaranteed Western support for his campaign, but there was not (De Waal, 2019: 211-219). The illusion of a peaceful territorial reintegration during Saakashvili's term was gone (Nodia, 2020). The war boosted national unity, and the opposition did not protest the military efforts (Darchiashvili, 2018).

Two years after the war, Saakashvili promoted a constitutional change that would move the country from a presidential to a parliamentary system. The reform was only to take effect in 2013, after the presidential term was over, so he could become PM and remain effectively in power (Hale, 2014). This process was part of increasingly illiberal and authoritarian tendencies (De Waal, 2019: 245).

In late 2011, Bidzina Ivanishvili, the world's 185th richest man that year according to Forbes, who had made his fortune in Russia and had financially supported the Rose Revolution (Hale, 2014), announced the creation of the Georgian Dream (GD) coalition to compete with the UNM at the 2012 parliamentary elections. The new parliament would have to choose a PM, the new leader of the executive. Even though Saakashvili was not a candidate, he was the most well-known leader of the political scene (Kakachia et al., 2018). Ivanishvili accused Saakashvili of authoritarian behaviour and blamed him for damaging the economy by ruining the relationship with Russia and initiating the 2008 war, which had harmed the prospects of Georgia to regain control of the breakaway regions. He was not the only one to do so: Noghaideli and Alasania also blamed Saakashvili.

The businessman promised to amend the relationship with Moscow and proposed a "pragmatic" and "realist" foreign policy (Lebanidze & Kakachia, 2023), to reduce taxes, improve healthcare and attract new investments. Saakashvili accused Ivanishvili of being an agent of Moscow (De Waal, 2019: 247) and tried to mirror some of his rival's large-scale socially oriented proposals (Nodia, 2020),

including an increase in pensions, a new health insurance and investments (Hale, 2014). Ivanishvili's economic proposals were popular in rural areas, where Saakashvili's liberal economic principles caused unemployment. At the same time, UNM's authoritarian tendencies allowed GD to gain support among young urban professionals (De Waal, 2019: 247-8).

The campaign was seriously imbalanced. Government supporters controlled all the major nationwide media outlets (Kldiashvili, 2012). Saakashvili's government revoked Ivanishvili's citizenship, but, after facing local and Western criticism, backed down and allowed him to be a candidate as a foreigner. He would only recover his Georgian citizenship in late 2012. The government then started a money laundering investigation against the businessman, seized assets from his Cartu Bank; a court fined him, his party and campaign donors over 45 million USD for breaking political party funding regulations; over 130,000 satellite dishes that GD had distributed for free so people could watch Ivanishvili's limited-coverage television network Channel 9 and the opposition-oriented Maestro TV were seized; and public officials, including teachers, were fired for supporting GD. The Western countries supported not Saakashvili but a change (Sukhiashvili, 2019). Ultimately, the competition was free but unfair, and the opposition depended on Ivanishvili's personal wealth (Mueller, 2014; De Waal, 2019: 246-9).

On September 18th, less than two weeks before the war elections, Channel 9 and Maestro TV broadcasted video footage of guards beating and sexually abusing prisoners at the Gldani prison, near Tbilisi. Saakashvili's interior minister resigned and prison officials were arrested, but UNM's credibility was affected, and many undecided voters turned to GD (Hale, 2014; Benashvili, 2015).

Nodia (2018) points out that one of the reasons for UNM's defeat was "a backlash against its reforms, which some people perceived as undermining the authenticity of the Georgian culture and identity". The Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) was among the strongest rivals to the pro-Western reforms (Boonstra, 2010; Nodia, 2020; Metreveli, 2016) and unofficially supported GD in 2012. The GOC's political position is relevant for electoral outcomes because it is the most important unifying institution in a politically polarized scenario, the only strong independent institution in the country (Nodia, 2013), the most authoritative social organisation

in Georgia, and Ilia II, the Catholicos-Patriarch, is the most trusted local public figure in the country (Khakhutaishvili, 2024).

Saakashvili had weakened strong social actors who might have worked as the Kremlin's allies and had had a higher status under the previous government or even in late Soviet times, including the GOC (Darchiashvili, 2018). However, after the 2007 protests and the 2008 war, UNM started increasingly showing gestures of rapprochement. The GOC still saw him as "too pro-Western" and disapproved of the war, and the decision led by UNM to break relations with Russia, though. In 2008 and 2009, the GOC received increased funding and transfer of real estate property, but the relationship remained strained (Boonstra, 2010).

The conjunction between "anti-Western and openly or tacitly pro-Russian attitudes of the Church hierarchy" (Nodia, 2021) and the existing link between Moscow, the GOC that had mediated during the 2008 war, the traditionalist Orthodox believers and part of the anti–Saakashvili sectors (Makarychev & Yatsyk, 2016: 112), resulted in a seemingly inevitable collision with the GOC, despite UNM's efforts (Nodia, 2020). The GOC was one of the leading sectors of the backlash against Saakashvili's reforms and the construction of a European Georgian identity (Brisku, 2018: 134).

Even before the campaign, Ivanishvili had shown himself close to the GOC by financing the construction of the country's biggest church (De Waal, 2019) and economically supporting numerous initiatives carried out by the GOC (Gorecki, 2020). During the campaign, the businessman, who had previously declared himself an atheist, appeared in interviews wearing a cross (Gold, 2018). Despite an official resolution from the Holy Synod mandating political neutrality, the GOC positioned itself as an anti-governmental force, and many priests persuaded their flocks to vote against UNM (Darchiashvili, 2018). GD won the elections with unofficial, "but poorly camouflaged" support from the GOC (Silaev & Sushentsov, 2014).

After 2012, Saakashvili lost power and received additional punishment, as Goemans says should be expected (2000): in 2014, the Georgia Prosecutor's Office issued an arrest warrant for him on charges related to abuse of power. By

then, he was already out of the country and would not go back until 2021, when he was arrested (Chkhikvadze, 2021).

Several authors have offered different explanations for UNM's defeat in the 2012 war elections, including Ivanishvili's resources and capacity to consolidate a fragmented opposition (Kldiashvili, 2012), the UNM's "structural problems in the party's top-down governing style" (Sichinava, 2017), the weak results of Saakashvili's liberal reforms to reduce unemployment and poverty, the Western support to Ivanishvili (Sukhiashvili, 2019), the Russian imposed sanctions that affected the Georgian economy (Newnham, 2015), high-level corruption, the Gldani prison scandal (Fairbanks & Gugushvili, 2013), "discontent with the government control over business", a "significant decrease in the democratic indices", a poor socio-economic situation (Kldiashvili, 2012), and a significant increase in civic activism as a "response to a violation of political rights and freedoms", which caused "higher voter turnout at elections and, by extension, political change" (Kakachia & Makarov, 2016: 85).

The 2012 elections can be summarised as, on the one hand, a pro-Western government which was losing Western support, which had come to power almost nine years before as the opposite of authoritarianism and corruption, which had achieved stability, efficiency, and some economic growth, but not greater levels of democracy; which had demonstrated an ability to use the judiciary for its benefit; which had started and lost a war, affecting the national economy and morale; which had presented itself as secular and liberal, but had benefited the GOC and conservative sectors. On the other hand, a new party, the first firm and genuine opposition to Saakashvili, that proposed turning the page on the war and pursuing more pragmatic relations with Russia, but without straying from European and Western perspectives. Moreover, led by a millionaire who had until then been outside of party politics and seemed to support worthy causes out of sheer altruism. The latter option won 55% to 40%.

3. b. Government's Electoral Victory in Armenia

Nikol Pashinyan came to power in 2018, in the wake of the Velvet Revolution, peaceful protests against Serzh Sargsyan's government, but also a system characterised by the concentration of power, pervasive corruption and a close relationship between the government and a handful of oligarchs (Delcour, 2021; Grigoryan, 2023). Under Robert Kocharyan, president from 1998 to 2008, and Serzh Sargsyan, from 2008 to 2018, Armenia grew into a competitive authoritarian and "clientelist system combining a democratic guise with authoritarian practices and informal rules" (Frappi, 2022; Levitsky & Way, 2002). Business oligarchs took over the country through corrupt practices that characterised a crony capitalism scenario. Both Kocharyan and Sargsyan were part of the group of veterans known as the "Karabakh clan", who had fought and achieved victory against Azerbaijan in the First Nagorno-Karabakh War, between 1988 and 1994. This group was, however, quite diverse in terms of social and geographical background (Iskandaryan, 2020).

In the 2008 elections, Sargsyan was proclaimed the winner, but the former president and candidate Levon Ter-Petrosyan's supporters claimed fraud. Kocharyan resorted to violence to suppress the protests, and eight civilians and two police officers died (Lanskoy & Suthers, 2019). Seven years later, as the end of Sargsyan's second term as president approached, he promoted a constitutional amendment and shifted power from the president to the PM. According to the Economist's Democracy Index (2015, 2016), that year and the next were the least democratic in the country since the measurement began in 2006.

The protests started in 2018 when Sargsyan tried to be appointed the new PM, perpetuating his rule, even though he had promised not to do so (Lanskoy & Suthers, 2019). During the Velvet Revolution, Pashinyan, a member of parliament and leader of the Civil Contract party, which had been founded only three years before, emerged as a leader. After three weeks, Sargsyan resigned. Soon, Pashinyan became PM, and his new alliance, My Step, won the snap elections held in December, securing 70% of the vote (Frappi, 2023). This means a single political force had a constitutional majority in the parliament before and after the revolution, and there was no relevant opposition (Iskandaryan, 2020).

From his first months in power, Pashinyan prosecuted corrupt officials, particularly those who had participated in the 2008 repression, including Kocharyan. The former president was arrested two months after Pashinyan's inauguration. Promoting this arrest constituted a risk not only because it could be seen as politically expedient, but also because it could anger the still-powerful Karabakh clan and its allies in the Russian government. This was also a way for Pashinyan to point to Kocharyan as his main rival, to the detriment of Sargsyan (Lanskoy & Suthers, 2019).

Pashinyan introduced democratic reforms to public institutions, dismissed key figures of the former elite, removed some monopolies that formed a pillar of the previous regime, and worked to dismantle Armenia's oligarchic system (Delcour, 2021). According to the Economist's Democracy Index, Armenia's score increased from 4.11 in 2017 to 5.54 in 2019; while, according to Freedom House, Armenia's democracy score increased from 2.57 in 2018 to 3.00 in 2020; perceptions of corruption showed the best improvement worldwide for 2018 and 2019; trust towards the government and the president increased sharply (Simonyan & Schultz, 2023); the GDP grew in 2018, 2019 and 2021, but not in 2020, when the local economy was affected by the COVID pandemic and the war (World Bank, n.d.; Stefes & Paturyan, 2021). The revolution and the elections did not change the foreign policy outlook, and Russia remained the leading strategic partner (Zolyan, 2023).

This process was interrupted by the 2020 six-week Nagorno-Karabakh War, which ended with a military defeat against Azerbaijan, loss of territorial control and almost 4,000 Armenian casualties. The Nagorno-Karabakh region, internationally recognised as part of Azerbaijan, was a de facto independent republic since the previous war, inhabited and governed by ethnic Armenians and supported politically, militarily and economically by Armenia. Outside the Soviet-times Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast territory, seven surrounding districts were also under Armenian control. Since at least 2018, Azerbaijan had acquired new cutting-edge weaponry, particularly from Russia and Israel, and, in September 2020, with Turkish and Pakistani support, it attacked (Zolyan, 2023; Paronyan & Elamiryan, 2021). Pashinyan's foreign policy had failed, and the military defeat devastated national morale (Nikoghosyan & Ter-Matevosyan,

2023). As a result of the war, about 90,000 of Nagorno-Karabakh's 150,000 inhabitants fled to Armenia (Majnoonian et al., 2024).

The Karabakh issue had been highly relevant to Armenian identity, at least since its modern independence (Cheterian, 2022), so Pashinyan was accused of betraying the national cause and criticised by the opposition for the disadvantageous ceasefire agreement (Frappi, 2022). Anger was followed by protests encouraged by sectors close to Kocharyan, who was released in June 2020 on a $4 million bail bond (Shirinian, 2021), while charges against him were declared unconstitutional in April 2021 (Mejlumyan, 2021). Even though he supported the war efforts, Kocharyan blamed the defeat on the PM (News.am, 2021). In response to the public pressure, Pashinyan called for snap elections for June 2021, and Kocharyan became his main rival (Atanesyan et al., 2023).

Onik Gasparyan, Chief of the Armenian Armed Forces General Staff, demanded Pashinyan's resignation, which the PM cast as a coup attempt and fired the army man. This was not the former elite's first attempt to destabilise his government: even before 2020, Pashinyan was thwarted by internal governmental sabotage by those who remained loyal to the old guard (Shirinian, 2021). The 2021 war elections were the opportunity for them to confront a defeated Pashinyan and his struggle for reforms with Kocharyan, the hard-liner strongman from Karabakh, identified with the Armed Forces, who had risen to power during the war's victory in the 1990s and had promised to reverse those reforms (Cheterian, 2022). Gasparyan endorsed the former president (Saribekian, 2021).

Despite the protests and criticisms,[5] Pashinyan retained a significant consensus and won the war elections with almost 54%. Some factors to be considered include the primary challenger: Kocharyan had faced a trial for the 2008 violent repression, he was a symbol of the corrupt and centralized previous government and, considering the military defeat and consequent vulnerabilities, it was likely that a new government led by the Karabakh Clan would have been more authoritarian and highly militarized (Shirinian, 2021).

[5] Protests were not only because of the military defeat, but also because of the restrictions implemented during the COVID pandemic. This and the martial law led to decreased civil space and liberties, plus restrictions on media operations in Armenia. See Terzyan, 2024.

During his presidency, Kocharyan had maintained the traditional "complementarity" doctrine between Russia and the West (Aberg & Terzyan, 2018), while privileging Russian interests (Lebanidze, 2020: 144), and he presented himself as the pro-Moscow candidate in 2021, even though the Kremlin usually backs the incumbent candidates in Armenia (Lebanidze, 2020: 140). Moscow had already taken some measures to affect Pashinyan (such as increasing the price of natural gas), and Kocharyan proposed to deepen the alliance with Russia, its leading strategic partner, especially in terms of security and defence, considering its military base in Gyumri (Avetisyan, 2021). Pashinyan, on the other hand, sought to balance Armenia's dependence on Russia (Lanskoy & Suthers, 2019). As the war proved that Armenia could not rely militarily on Moscow, which did not support Yerevan (Remler, 2020), Pashinyan's position was more popular. At the same time, the Armenia-EU Comprehensive Extended Partnership Agreement (CEPA) entered into force only three months before the elections. Pashinyan could then rely more on the EU and was freer to question Russia (Frappi, 2023).

As around 90% of Armenians belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) (IRI, February 2021), Pashinyan tried to be close to the Church at the beginning of his tenure. However, the government soon limited or eliminated the role of the AAC in state institutions, including schools, and the Catholicos Karekin II accused him of disrespect. Immediately after the war, the head of the institution called for the PM to resign (OC Media, 2020). At the same time, the AAC lost some informal privileges and strong material support from oligarchs, part of the old guard that was ousted from power in 2018.[6] Kocharyan's alliance was the only political force in 2021 whose program explicitly mentioned support for the AAC.[7] Despite this, the religious leaders did not express formal or informal support for any candidate (Antonyan, 2025).

By the time of the 2021 war elections, Armenia was considered a hybrid regime (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2022). The main concerns were the martial law

[6] In 2024, Bagrat Galstanyan, archbishop of the Apostolic Church, led an important anti-government movement. This might be the most obvious proof of the harmed relationship between the Church and the government. See Antonyan, 2025.

[7] "The Armenian Apostolic Church will be granted opportunities based on its exceptional status to accomplish its vital mission of building our spiritual life and preserving the nation". See EVN Report (2021).

imposed during the war, the fact that it continued after the fighting was over and that it was “used as a pretext to disperse anti-government protests and detain opposition leaders” (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021), the judicial institutions' lack of independence and transparency and the “criminal cases against local opposition figures”, including the trial against Kocharyan (Freedom House, 2022).

The Armenian media system was largely polarised during the campaign between pro-government (that also tended to be more pro-Western) and pro-opposition (more pro-Russian) media (Internews, 2024). Kocharyan still had direct or indirect control over several major media outlets (Lanskoy & Suthers, 2019; Mejlumyan, 2019). The first group included all public and some private outlets; the second, those that belonged to oligarchs and/or previous leaders. Independent media were small and generally supported by Western institutions. This means there was a plurality in the media system, but no independence because “news media were not economically self-sustainable” (Izquierdo-Iranzo & Sayadyan, 2024).

Some of the explanations for Pashinyan’s victory are that the opposition was seen as corrupt and their victory would bring a new war, that Russia supported his proposal of freezing the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, the fact that the PM had created a more pro-government media landscape (Matsuzato, 2025), Kocharyan’s promise to reverse the domestic reforms and establish a less democratic regime with a stronger leader (Cheterian, 2023), and support for the democratization process headed by Pashinyan since 2018 (Frappi, 2023).

The general scenario can, therefore, be summarized as a polarizing one between, on the one hand, the old guard, representative of a system of power based on patronage and clientelism, a close relationship with a handful of oligarchs, high levels of corruption, identified with the Armed Forces and the 1990s military victory, good relationship with the Church, a more conservative social approach and a more pro-Russian geopolitical perspective; and, on the other, a government that had come to power only three years earlier, which had significantly lowered the levels of corruption and had improved democratic standards, whose social perspective was more liberal and its geopolitical perspective, more pro-Western, which was identified with the 2020 war defeat that was interpreted as a betrayal to the national cause, and which had interfered

with the judiciary to harm a political rival. The second alternative won 53.95% against 21.11%.

Pashinyan remained in power and did not suffer any punishment, contradicting Goeman’s (2020) predictions on what hybrid regime leaders should expect after losing a war. This means that the military defeat is insufficient to predict the incumbent’s electoral defeat, and other topics should be considered. The following section will focus on these different topics and their relative relevance compared to the military defeat.

4. Methodology

I follow a multiphase analysis using mixed methods to check and study the relevance of the distinct topics before and during the campaign in Georgia and Armenia. The first phase consists of aggregating opinion surveys from before the war until after the war elections to understand the evolution of the citizens' main concerns in both countries. In the case of Georgia, the aggregation includes the *Most important issue* category in the Caucasus Barometer report, carried out by the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC), from its first report in 2008 until 2013, a year after the war election; in the National Democratic Institute's (NDI) Public attitudes in Georgia report, the checked category is *Most important national issues* in the 12 available reports: two for 2009, 2010, and 2011; 4 for 2012, and two for 2013; from the International Republican Institute's (IRI) Georgian National Study, I consider the question *"What is the most important issue Georgia is facing?"* (all answers mentioned). IRI's reports to be checked are one for 2007, 2008 and 2009, and two for 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2013. In total, 29 results are available to be aggregated for Georgia.

In the case of Armenia, I consider the *Most important issue* category in the Caucasus Barometer reports for 2019, 2021 and 2024; in the IRI's Public Opinion Survey, the question is "*What are the main problems Armenia is currently facing?*" (all mentions), and the reports available are two for 2019, four for 2021, one for 2022, two for 2023 and one for 2024. Finally, the EU's Neighbours East survey report on Armenia, for 2019 and 2020, the question is "*What do you consider to be the most pressing problems facing your country?*", while for 2023 and 2024, the question is "*What do you consider to be the most pressing problems facing Armenia?*". In total, there are 17 results to be aggregated for Armenia.

The mentioned issues across the surveys are to be grouped into thematic, inclusive, and inductively developed categories, by year and country. The sum of the percentages for each category will be divided by the number of issues considered in that category for that specific year. The responses "don't know" and "others" are excluded in all cases, meaning the total number will not reach 100%. In the case that one report does not include a category or in the case that there

is a missing year, a simple average will be done. This will provide the evolution of the relative relevance of each issue from before the war until after the war elections.

The second phase consists of a quantitative content analysis of online media in the local language during the campaign. Because of the lack of Armenian and/or Georgian language knowledge, AI tools will be used for translations and coding in the Georgian and Armenian languages. The coding and results will be cross-checked to tackle this issue using AI tools like ChatGPT, Grok, DeepSeek and Gemini. R, a software programming language for statistical computing and data analysis, will be used.

Because of the practical difficulties of checking the archive, this research will not include TV or radio, which would have made sense, particularly for Georgia, where TV was the primary source of information by 2012 (NDI, November 2012). Limiting the analysis to online media might reduce the public's representability. However, this is chosen for practical reasons: searching the news archive without knowing the Georgian and/or Armenian language is more feasible. On the other hand, by the 2021 elections, online media and digital platforms had become “the most frequently used sources of information in Armenia”, with 67% of daily users of the internet and social networks as the primary sources of news (Media Initiative Center, 2021). In the case of Georgia, by 2012, the Internet was the second most popular source of information (18%), but far from TV, the first one (96%) (NDI, November 2012). However, its relevance had almost doubled in only two years and more than quadrupled in five years, from 4% in 2007 (IRI, July 2012). The Internet was also the primary source of information for 50% of the population of Tbilisi, the Georgian capital and largest city, for the 2012 parliamentary election campaigns (IRI, November 2012). By 2021, when the war elections took place in Armenia, TV was still the primary source of information for local news in Georgia, but only for 53% of the population, while the Internet had risen to almost 40% (Media Initiative Center, 2021).

I am assuming that the media will cover the campaign activities of the leaders of the major parties. Therefore, checking what is published is a way to see which issues are relevant in the social debate and for the candidates. The official campaign started in Armenia on June 7th, 13 days before the elections. In

Georgia, it began on May 27th, 127 days before the elections. As the agenda-setting effects in online settings are faster than in traditional media, but their decay is also much quicker (Weimann & Brosius, 2017), the analysis will only last one month, more than Armenia's official campaign period but less than Georgia's.

Three online media outlets have been chosen for each country, considering diversity, popularity and online availability. In the case of Georgia, *Civil Georgia*, a multi-language online newspaper launched in 2001; *Net Gazeti*, an independent online media founded in 2010 in Tbilisi; and *Kviris Palitra*, an independent weekly magazine and website founded in 1995 and "generally oriented towards the centre of the political spectrum" (Mikashavidze, 2023). For Armenia, *Aravot*, a multi-language independent newspaper founded in 1994; *Tert*, one of Armenia's most popular news websites, founded in 2008; and the Armenian version of *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)*, a USA government-funded media organisation founded in 1949 (Baghiyan, 2024).

The most relevant items from the previous phase will be counted in every article that mentions the leading political figures: Saakashvili and Ivanishvili, Pashinyan and Kocharyan. The issues will be grouped in the original categories, and a general aggregation of the three media's results will show the relevance of each category for each country. Only articles in the Georgian and Armenian languages are to be considered, and online updates of the same article are excluded. The results will be compared with those from the previous phase for that specific period to provide greater validity. Additionally, the evolution of this prominence will be analysed over the month in question, divided into three ten-day periods, to check whether there is a significant change during the campaign.

The third and final phase will consist of eight semi-structured interviews with experts on local politics, elections, and/or media from Armenia or Georgia. The objective is to provide an additional qualitative perspective. Half of these meetings are in person, while the other half, those from Armenia, are conducted online; in all cases, they will last from forty minutes to an hour, and are structured and then analysed around the categories established in the first phase of the analysis, but following the interviewees' proposed main reasons that explain the electoral results. The interviewees will discuss the role of critical political actors in the electoral contest, the instrumentalisation of the issues mentioned in the

previous phases, and the symbolic or strategic weight of the military defeat in both countries. Even though the eight experts often express their opinions publicly, anonymity will be preserved to safeguard their security and freedom of expression, given the political sensitivity of the issues under discussion and the hybrid contexts of Armenia and Georgia.

Limits and Challenges

Social networks are relevant sources of information, particularly in the case of Armenia,[8] but they were not widely popular in Georgia in 2012, so they are excluded. In the case of Georgia, some relevant media, like *Resonance* and *Asavali*, have no online material available from 2012. Popular Armenian news sites, such as *Armenian Times*, *Armen Press*, *Fourth Power*, or *Tabula*, have deficient archives, even when using web scraping codes, web archives, or fetching data from an API. Considering that their editorial and political positioning differ, using six news sites, three per country, that were among the most visited by time, will help tackle these difficulties (Mikashavidze, 2023; Baghiyan, 2024).

It is possible that the content analysis would be limited, and the number of times a particular word is mentioned would not be enough to understand the context and how that word was used. Despite this, the vast number of articles analysed will still give a broad perspective on the topic's relevance, no matter what is discussed *about* the subject. Additionally, the third phase of the analysis, which consists of eight interviews, will provide a qualitative perspective that the first two phases lack.

It is worth noting that the interviews in Georgia will be carried out in the particular political context following the 2024 parliamentary election, the result of which was not recognised by the Georgian opposition. This sparked protests. GD, the party that won the 2012 elections, analysed in this dissertation, remains in power as of

[8] Social media was relevant during the 2018 Velvet Revolution in Armenia to organise the protests. Pashinyan, who would later become prime minister, used it to appeal directly to the Armenian people. See Lanskoy & Suthers (2019).

2025, and the ongoing demonstrations against the government may influence the interviewees' responses. Anonymity might help to tackle these nuances.

5. Post-War Electoral Dynamics in Georgia and Armenia: Issues, Media, and Political Narratives

5. a. Evolution of the Main Concerns in Georgia and Armenia: Before, During and After the War

The first phase of my analysis consists of aggregating opinion surveys from before the war until after the war elections to understand the evolution of the main concerns, issues and priorities in both countries. As detailed in the methodology section, in total, 29 surveys were aggregated for Georgia between 2007, the year before the war, and 2013, the year after the war elections, while 17 surveys were aggregated for Armenia from 2019, after the revolution that brought Pashinyan into power, and until 2024, the most recent results after the war.

The mentioned issues across the different surveys were grouped into five thematic, inclusive, and inductively developed categories:

- *Economy*: includes the issues of *economy*, *inflation, poverty, unemployment, low wages/income, pensions, industry,* and *agriculture*.
- *Conflict*: includes *war, peace, security, territorial conflict, borders, DPs, POWs, attacks, territorial integrity,* and *enemy* (*Russia*, in the case of Georgia, or *Azerbaijan*, in the case of Armenia).
- *Social*: includes *social*, *healthcare, migration* and *education.*
- *Foreign Affairs*: *NATO, European Union (EU),* and *neighbouring countries* (excluding the *enemy*).
- *Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG)*:[9] includes *corruption, justice, political tensions/instability, government, democracy, human rights, elections, free speech/media independence, crime,* and *property rights*.

[9] The category is based on the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) program and thematic office of the same name.

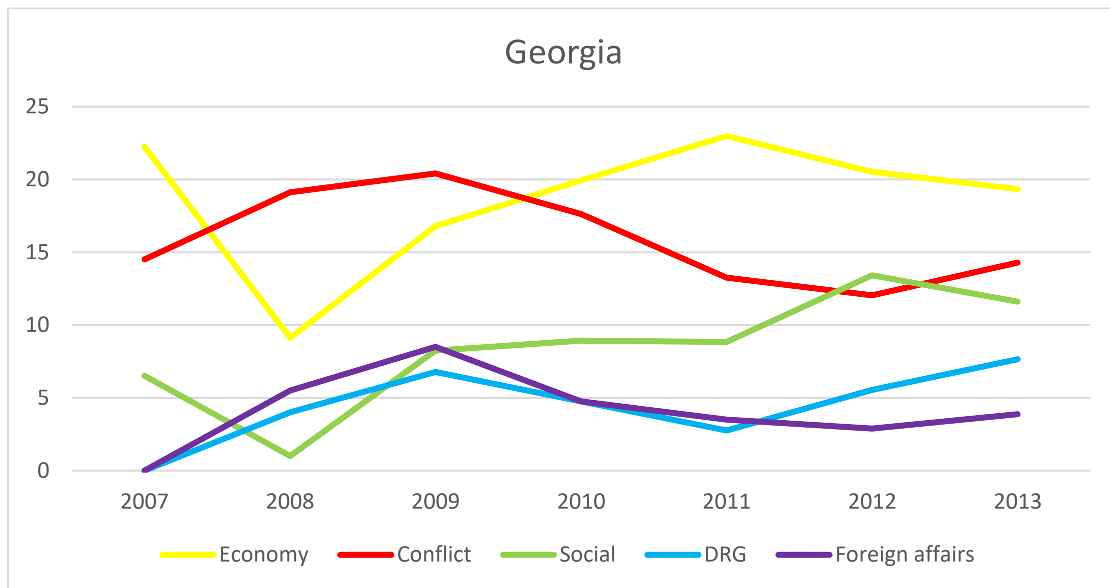

Figure 1. Chronological evolution of Georgia's population's primary concerns. Own elaboration based on the aggregation of 29 surveys conducted between 2007 and 2013: six of them carried out by the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC); eleven by the International Republican Institute's (IRI); and twelve by the National Democratic Institute (NDI).

In the case of Georgia, and in line with Choi & Woo (2010), the *economy* was the main issue every year except for 2008, the year of the war, and 2009, when *conflict* became the most relevant concern. *Economy* became once again the most important topic by 2010 and remained as such until the end of the analysis. The relevance of the *conflict* decreased during the next three years after 2009. This is in line with Gartner & Segura (1998), who point out that the public's support for the war will start declining even from the early days of the armed conflict. Items such as *war*, *DPs* and *peace* disappeared almost completely as concerns from October 2010 on, while the relevance of *territorial integrity* decreased by over 40% between September 2007 and November 2012, its lowest point, one month after the war elections.

Unemployment was the main issue in almost every survey aggregated, including all categories, except the 2008 Caucasus Barometer, in which *Russia* and *territorial conflict* surpassed it; and the September 2008 IRI survey, in which *territorial integrity* was higher. In both surveys, *conflict* became the most relevant category during the year of the war. *DRG* increased during and after the electoral year, but also had a high point after the war. In February, June and August 2012,

fair elections reached its peak among the main concerns for Georgians in the NDI's report, while *political instability* was mentioned as an issue by 16% of the respondents in the IRI's study from February 2013. That is the highest number for any issue in this category within the analysed period.

Healthcare and *education*, part of the *social* category, became particularly relevant topics in 2012, even surpassing any issue within the *conflict* category in June, August and November's NDI surveys. This means that, for 2012, *social* became the second most relevant category. Meanwhile, *foreign affairs*, including NATO and EU membership, peaked after the war and decreased continuously until the elections. This category's evolution follows a similar trajectory to that of *conflict.*

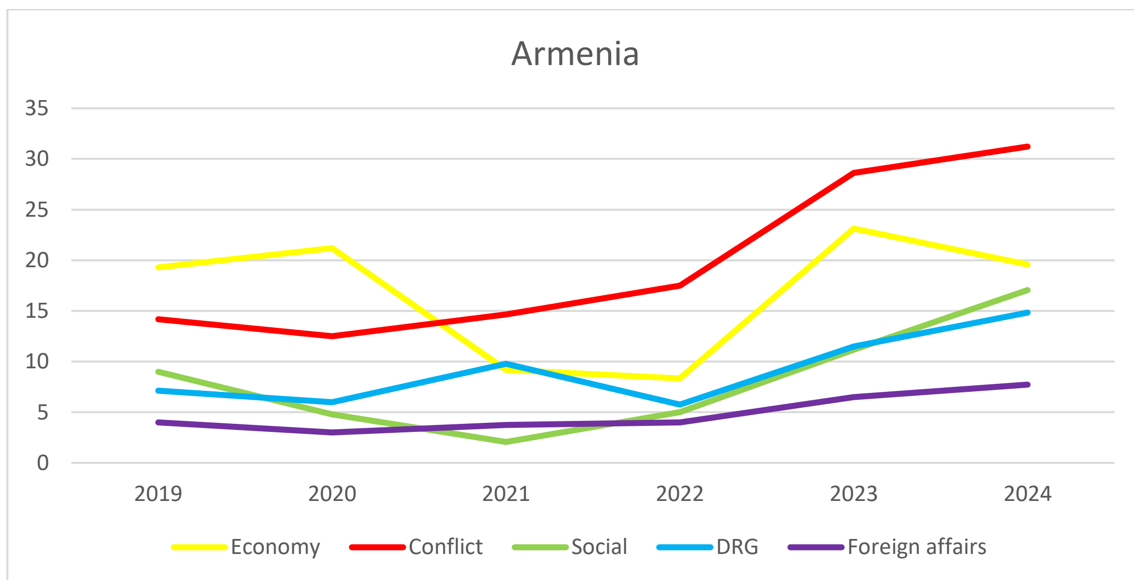

Figure 2. Chronological evolution of Armenia's population's primary concerns. Own elaboration based on the aggregation of 17 surveys conducted between 2019 and 2024: three carried out by the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC); ten by the International Republican Institute's (IRI); and four by the EU.

In the case of Armenia, the *economy* was the main issue until 2021, the year after the war. It is interesting to notice the decline in the relevance of the *economy* and *social* issues between 2020 and 2021, while *conflict* kept increasing after the war, mainly the item *borders*, which was considered a central issue by 62% in the July 2021 IRI survey. The higher relevance of the *conflict* compared to Georgia, even as years passed, shows that the topic had a different significance. A possible

explanation, as we will see during the third phase, is that while Georgia saw no significant territorial changes, because Abkhazia and South Ossetia were not under Tbilisi's authority before the 2008 war, Armenia lost the territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh that it had controlled since 1994.

Social had an important rise after 2021, which could mean that Pashinyan's administration was more questioned for its local work only after the war, as if voters had given him two years of grace. However, it could also be explained by the large number of displaced people from Nagorno-Karabakh entering Armenia, with their corresponding social needs. In the EU's surveys for 2023 and 2024, the item *DPs* was mentioned as an issue by 14% and 34% respectively. In any case, items within the *social* category were the least relevant during the elections.

The importance of the *economy* was also particularly low in 2021. In May, *unemployment* was mentioned as an issue by 9% of the respondents, while in May 2019, it had been considered as such by 37%, according to IRI's survey. *Education* went from 8% to no consideration in the same period and survey. However, as in Georgia, *DRG* became a more relevant issue in the electoral year: between May 2019 and May 2021, *political tensions/instability* mentions in the same survey rose from 4% to 18%. *Foreign affairs* remained the least relevant category except in the electoral year, meaning that *Russia*, the *EU*, *NATO* or *neighbouring countries* besides Azerbaijan were not a significant concern for Armenians.

This section shows that the *economy* tends to be the most relevant category, but the conflict can surpass it. However, issues related to the latter category decreased their relevance with time in Georgia, in line with Gartner & Segura (1998); however, this was not the case in Armenia, where the issue's importance kept increasing even after the war elections. This means that there were different interpretations of the defeat in both countries. A possible explanation is the large number of Armenians that remained in a volatile region that, despite its victory, was not controlled by Azerbaijan until 2023.[10] This did not happen with Georgians in Abkhazia or South Ossetia.

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[10] In September 2023, Azerbaijan conducted a military offensive against the Armenian-controlled area of Nagorno-Karabakh. This completed Azerbaijan's objective from the 2020 war and meant

DRG followed a similar path in both countries, gaining relevance during the electoral year, and there are commonalities also with *foreign affairs*, an item that was not relevant in either country by the time of the elections. *Social* issues became relevant in Georgia by 2012, but were the least important in Armenia by 2021. One possible explanation is the time passed between the war and the elections in both countries: as it had been four years since the defeat for Georgia, social issues were more relevant than the conflict. However, this also depends on the campaign promises by the candidates, and Ivanishvili made promises on the topic, which was not the case for Pashinyan and Kocharyan, who focused more on *conflict* and *DLG* issues. However, in the next section, I will look at the relevance of these topics in the media during the period immediately preceding the war elections, and the results might differ.

5. b. Thematic Salience in the Media During the Georgian and Armenian Electoral Campaigns

As detailed in the Methodology section, I conducted a content analysis for the month before the elections in both countries and six online media, three for Georgia and three for Armenia. I chose the top fifteen most relevant items from the previous phase to be checked in the media, as this is the number at which data saturation is reached, and it is also sufficient to provide a comprehensive view of the main concerns of citizens in each country. I added one extra category to the original five, *enemy*, as the role of Russia and Azerbaijan for Georgia and Armenia, respectively, was so prominent in the analysis. Considering the campaign period, I also checked how often the leading political figures were mentioned: Saakashvili and Ivanishvili for Georgia, and Pashinyan and Kocharyan for Armenia. In total, I checked 18 items for Georgia and 19 for Armenia, because the item *Azerbaijan* became irrelevant for the former:

- *Economy*: includes *inflation, poverty, unemployment, pensions, economy,* and *salary*.

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the restoration of this country's territorial integrity. Around 100,000 ethnic Armenians left the region. See Hedenskog, 2023.

- *Conflict*: *territorial conflict, territorial integrity* (only Georgia), *borders* (only Armenia), *war*, *peace*.
- *Social*: *healthcare*.
- *Foreign Affairs*: *NATO*, EU, *Russia* (only for Armenia)
- *Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG)*: *corruption*, *justice*.
- *Enemy*: *Russia* (for Georgia) or *Azerbaijan* (for Armenia).

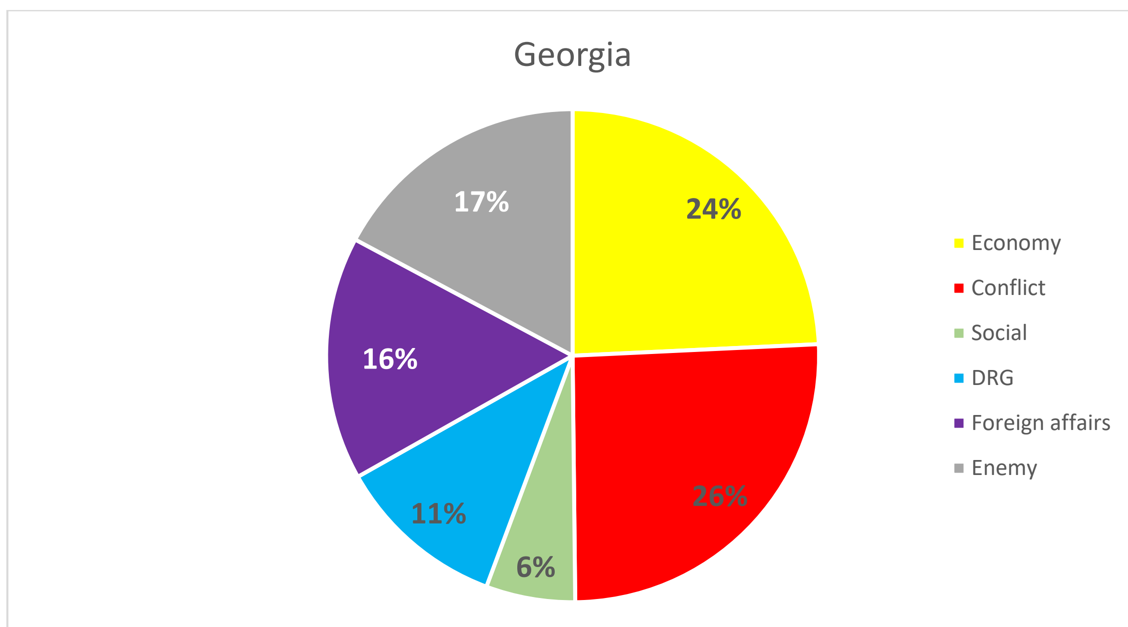

Figure 3. Predominance of media appearance of words associated with Georgians' main concerns, grouped into six categories and measured as a percentage of the total number of these words. Own elaboration based on the content analysis of 123 articles published by Net Gazeti, 58 by Civil Georgia and 97 by Kviris Palitra.

Regarding Georgia, Net Gazeti published 123 articles during this period; Civil Georgia, 58; and Kviris Palitra, 97. During the month before the elections, from September 1st to October 1st, 2012, *conflict* became the most mentioned category in the Georgian media, while the *economy* followed closely. This is curious considering that four years had passed since the military defeat, and the *economy* factor had become more prominent in people's concerns, according to the surveys, while conflict-related issues were at their lowest point during this period. The higher relevance of the *conflict* at this stage indicates that the candidates gave it a particular relevance during the campaign: Ivanishvili blamed Saakashvili for the war and the subsequent defeat. The relevance of Russia as

enemy can also be explained from this perspective, as one of Ivanishvili's strong campaign arguments was to restore relations with it. At the same time, Saakashvili prioritised ties with the EU and NATO, something reflected in the importance of *foreign affairs*, reaching a level close to that of *enemy*. In the previous phase, these issues were not a priority for voters. As in the surveys, *DRG* became a relevant issue during the electoral year. Finally, the *social* category is surprisingly low, considering that it was the second most relevant by this time, according to the surveys.

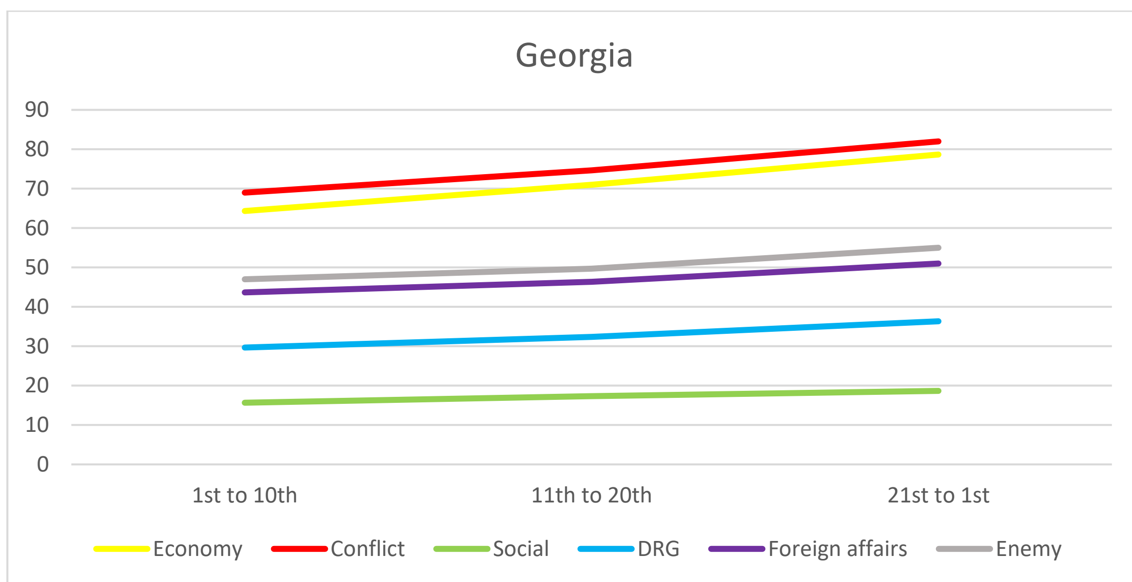

Figure 4. Chronological evolution of the prevalence of media appearances of words associated with Georgians' main concerns, grouped into six categories, during the month before the elections and divided into three periods of ten days each. Own elaboration based on the content analysis of 123 articles published by Net Gazeti, 58 by Civil Georgia and 97 by Kviris Palitra.

If the temporal evolution is analysed by dividing the month into three ten-day periods, all topics show an increase, something expected during an electoral campaign in which political discussion naturally intensifies. It is worth highlighting the growth in *DRG*, probably linked to the scandal at Gldani prison, which was made public on September 18th, less than two weeks before the elections.

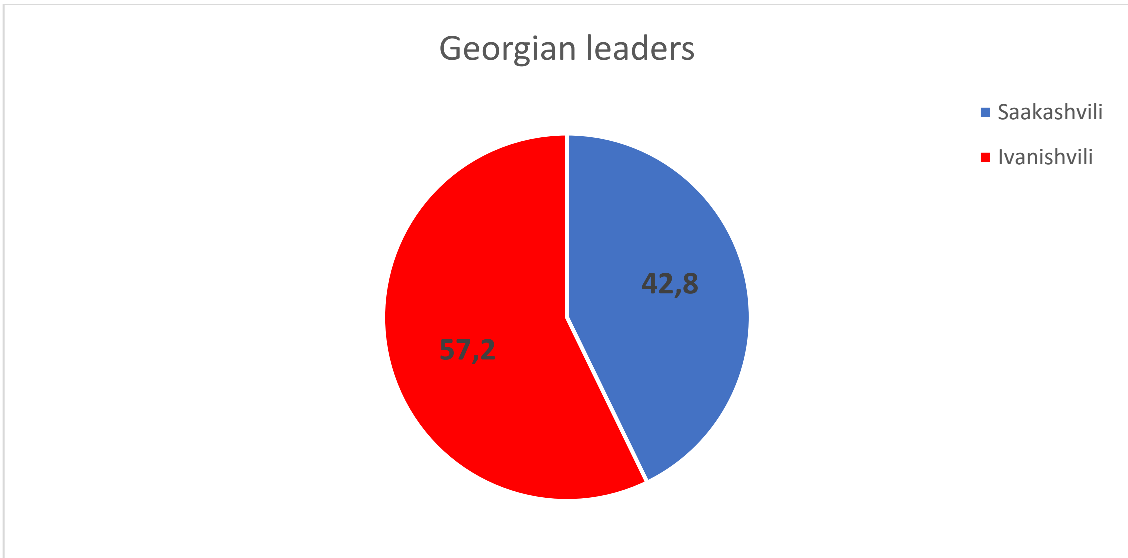

Figure 5. Predominance of media appearances of the names of the leaders of the main political parties in Georgia ahead of the 2012 elections, measured as a percentage of the total number of these names. Own elaboration based on the content analysis of 123 articles published by Net Gazeti, 58 by Civil Georgia and 97 by Kviris Palitra.

As for the leadership, Ivanishvili received more attention than Saakashvili in total and each media.

In sum, *conflict* became a very discussed topic during the campaign, even though it was not among the main priorities for the voters, as indicated in the previous phase; *economy*, as expected, was also relevant; while *enemy* and *foreign affairs* seem to be closely related, as if the leading political figures discussed both topics together.

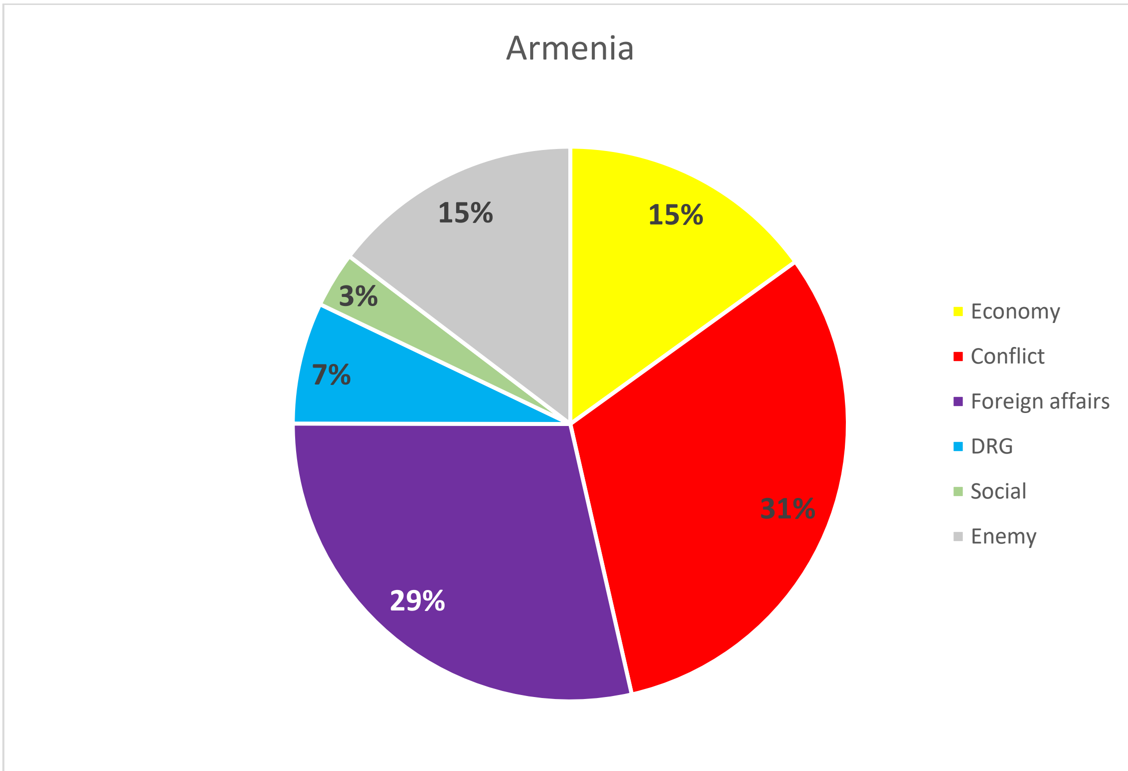

Figure 6. Predominance of media appearance of words associated with Armenians' main concerns, grouped into six categories and measured as a percentage of the total number of these words. Own elaboration based on the content analysis of 413 articles by Aravot, 327 by RFE/RL, and 239 by Tert.

The content analysis carried out one month before the elections in Armenia, May 20th to June 20th, included 413 articles published by Aravot, 327 published by RFE/RL, and 239 by Tert. As said, 19 items were checked instead of 18.

Economy accounted for barely 15% of the mentioned items, much less than the nearly 25% in Georgia, but in line with the results shown in the previous phase, which presented its low relevance by 2021. What stands out in Armenia are the *conflict* and the *foreign* factors, the latter being nearly twice as significant as in Georgia. This might be explained by Armenia's high dependence on Russia regarding politics and trade, especially in defence. The dichotomy between moving closer to or further away from Russia was a key topic of debate during the campaign, as it was in Georgia. The difference is that, for Armenia, as the war was against Azerbaijan, the item *Russia* did not fall into the *enemy* category but into the *foreign affairs* category, which became notably more important than for Georgia in this phase. The percentages for *enemy* are very similar in both countries, and there are no truly significant differences in the *DRG* and *social*

factors, even though the former seems much less relevant than in the previous phase. According to the previous phase, the *foreign affairs* category was not very important in 2021, but it became a significant topic during the campaign.

Conflict remains the primary issue compared to the surveys, but the *foreign* aspect is more relevant here than the *economy*. This shows that the candidates did not pay much attention to economic issues during the campaign, either because the situation was stable or because other issues seemed more pressing, as seen in the previous phase.

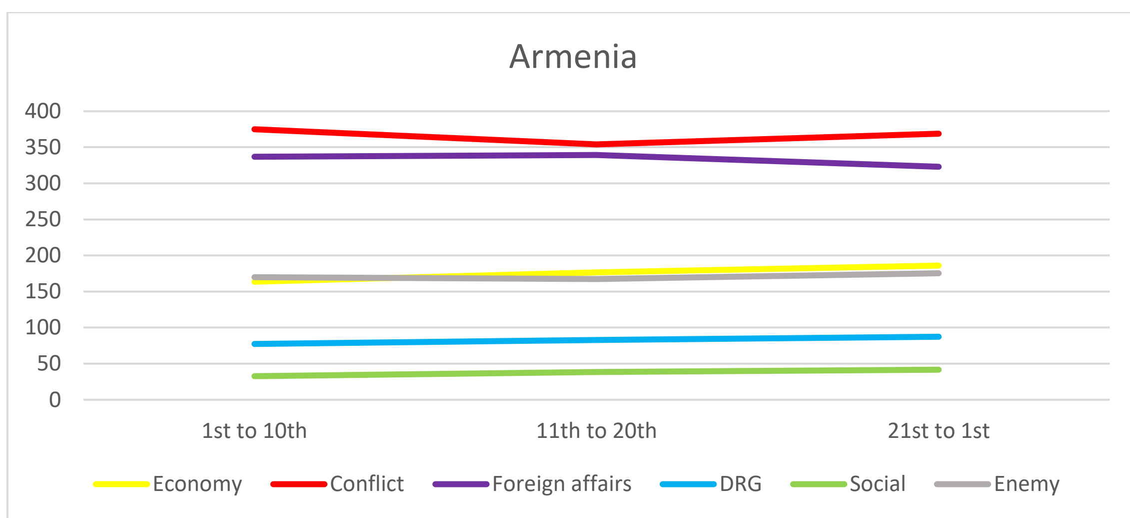

Figure 7. Chronological evolution of the prevalence of media appearances of words associated with Armenians' main concerns, grouped into six categories, during the month before the elections and divided into three periods of ten days each. Own elaboration based on the content analysis of 413 articles by Aravot, 327 by RFE/RL, and 239 by Tert.

During the analysed month, there appears to be greater thematic stability in Armenia than in Georgia, aside from the slight decrease in the *foreign* factor. This may be due to the absence in Armenia of a destabilising event on the scale of the prison scandal in Georgia.

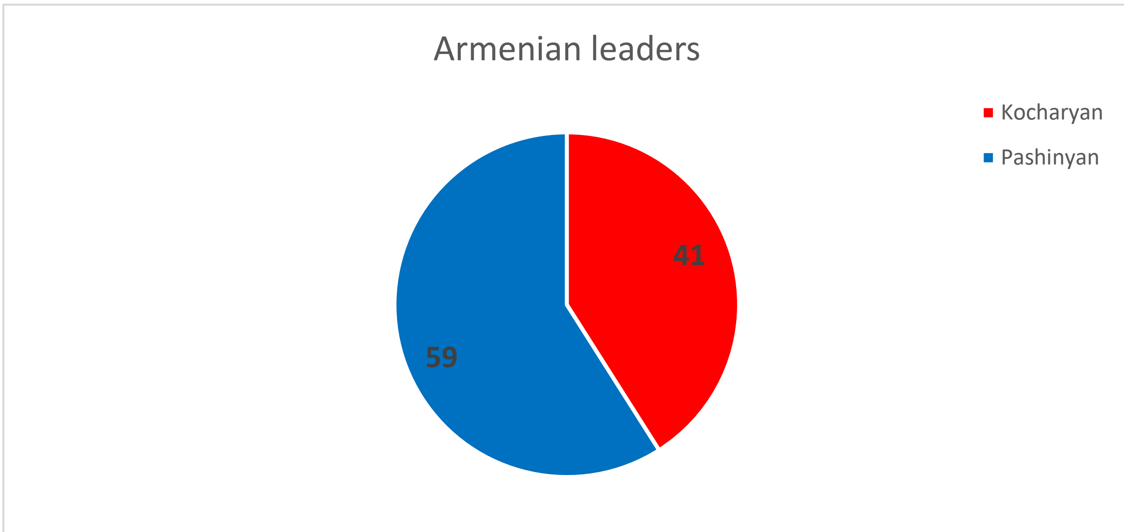

Figure 8. Predominance of media appearances of the names of the leaders of the main political parties in Armenia ahead of the 2021 elections, measured as a percentage of the total number of these names. Own elaboration based on the content analysis of 123 articles published by Net Gazeti, 58 by Civil Georgia and 97 by Kviris Palitra.

As in Georgia, the winning party's leader also received more media coverage than his rival. A significant difference is that Saakashvili was not a candidate, while Pashinyan was, and he received media coverage as PM, party leader, and candidate.

To sum up, *economy* was much more important during the Georgian electoral campaign than during the Armenian, while *conflict* and *foreign affairs* were much more important in Armenia than in Georgia. These significant differences might be related to the time passed since the military defeat in both countries. Despite this, the notably high relevance of *conflict* in Georgia compared to the previous phase’s results marks that four years, from the war in 2008 until the elections in 2012, were not enough time for the political leaders not to instrumentalise this issue during the campaign. Also, the fact that both winning parties’ leaders receive more attention from media outlets can be one possible explanation for the results.

In the next section, interviews with experts will provide a qualitative perspective to better understand the results presented in the first two phases of the analysis.

5. c. Political Narratives and Electoral Strategies in Georgia and Armenia

To understand how a military defeat affects electoral dynamics in post-Soviet hybrid regimes, it is necessary to understand the relative relevance of the military defeat compared to other issues, how the leading political figures acted regarding those issues during the campaign, and how political narratives were constructed. Therefore, I have conducted eight semi-structured interviews with experts from Armenia and Georgia on local politics. Six of them were conducted in English, the other two, in Spanish. Besides the issues grouped in the categories *conflict, economy, foreign affairs, DRG* and *social*, the interviewees were asked about the role of specific groups before and during the campaign: the opposition, the army, the respective national churches, economic elites and the media. They are numbered N1 to N4 for Georgia, and N5 to N8 for Armenia.

Saakashvili's Defeat in Georgia

Foreign Affairs and Conflict in Georgia

According to N1, after the 2008 military defeat, Saakashvili's policy was energetic and partially successful in overcoming the crisis by showing new chances of approximation with NATO and the EU, thanks to the negotiations on the Association Agreement that started in 2010, and substantial financial aid received immediately after the war. The Georgian diplomatic corps and informational outlets were very active in promoting the idea that it was not Georgia but Russia that was to blame for the war. Even though these efforts could not completely mitigate the frustration of society, many Georgians did not feel comfortable blaming their own government for the defeat against a foreign power while trying to regain control over territories that are Georgian under international law. However, according to N1, N2 and N4, Ivanishvili instrumentalised these feelings and the idea that Saakashvili had provoked Russia with his pro-Western policy.

N1 also mentioned that the military defeat did not mark a loss of territory, as Georgia did not control Abkhazia and South Ossetia before 2008.

The four interviewees agreed that the defeat itself played a secondary role during the campaign because of Saakashvili's actions after 2008 and the time that had passed since the war. However, the political consequences of the war were more relevant. The four experts highlighted the debate regarding Russia, but, once again, not as the most decisive factor to explain Ivanishvili's victory. All of them mentioned that Ivanishvili proposed improving the relationships with Moscow. For N2, this was to avoid another war and perhaps help find a solution for losing territory. The businessman's campaign promoted that "since he made his fortune in Russia, he knows Russians well and therefore he will normalise relations" (N4). N3 pointed out that older adults thought Western countries would drag Georgia into another war.

However, improving relationships with Russia could be a difficult card to play because it might seem pro-Kremlin, in favour of the recently fought enemy. Saakashvili's answer to Ivanishvili's proposal was to accuse him of being "Moscow's man" (N4) and a "Russian project" (N1). According to N2, Ivanishvili was cautious with this issue and insisted on continuing Western integration.

Economy in Georgia

For N4, vast parts of the population, including economic elites, still depended heavily on trade relations with Russia ("despite all political incompatibility between the countries"), and highlighted "the illusion of getting rich" under Ivanishvili, of improving economic conditions because it was more economically profitable than meeting the EU's conditions and standards. N2 said that these economic elites did not like Saakashvili.

The economy was mentioned as a relevant issue in two ways. On the one hand, because of a general exhaustion of Saakashvili's promises: "under him, the economy grew, but ordinary citizens did not feel this" (N1). Even though it became easier to start a business during the UNM's leader's tenure, most citizens did not

have enough resources or knowledge, and few people could use that opportunity: “the rich kept getting richer and the poor kept getting poorer” (N4). GD promoted the motto “so what (with economic growth), should we eat asphalt?” (N1).

The second way economic arguments were used was Ivanishvili’s personal resources. N2 mentioned his “unrealistic” promises, and N1 said that “the logic was ‘he is so rich he could give us money’” (N1). GD promoted this idea by promising “free money” (N3), utility bills being halved, new factories in every village (N2), and giving five million Laris to every rural village (N1, N4). “The illusion of getting rich under Ivanishvili was decisive in the campaign” (N4).

Ivanishvili’s promises were amplified by artists and other popular personalities he financed through his Cartu Bank (N1, N3, N4). N4 calls this “red intelligentsia”, which includes famous personalities from Soviet times who had supported Eduard Shevardnadze and lost privileges under Saakashvili (N3).

DRG in Georgia

Saakashvili’s answer to these promises was to offer similar proposals and attempt to limit Ivanishvili’s abilities to promote his message. This was done by creating administrative difficulties, such as prohibiting the distribution of satellite dishes, stripping his citizenship, and limiting his money for political purposes. N3 and N4 considered that these judicial cases were politically motivated. N1 and N2 said that it did not matter if they were or not politically motivated because, in the end, they were perceived as such by the voters anyway. Ivanishvili was seen as unjustly discriminated against, which played in his favour. According to N1, Saakashvili’s justification was that his rival was a Russian project and that “everything is possible if it is about the defence of the country from a foreign threat such as Ivanishvili”. However, local civil society organisations and Western countries were on the side of Ivanishvili, and Saakashvili stopped doing such things (N1) because “the West was a red line” for him (N3). To counteract this, some civil society actors, with Western countries' support, campaigned to introduce the “must carry law”, which came into force two months before the

elections, and required cable networks to carry all television news stations, including Channel 9, which belonged to Ivanishvili (N3).[11] Saakashvili's actions backfired.

For N2, since the 2007 protests, the harassment of opposition figures by Saakashvili became more conspicuous because, until that point, the opposition did not play any role at all. N3 mentioned "power abuse" and N4, "power concentration" by Saakashvili. This situation led to more voters heading to the polls than in previous elections (N1). According to N1 and N3, the collective West was critical of these tendencies and supported a political change.

The four experts mentioned the Gldani prison scandal. For N2, the release of this material helped Ivanishvili gain support from urban and young voters; for N3, from public servants. N1 also mentioned that Ivanishvili knew about this issue months in advance and showed it at the right moment, and N4, that the videos might not even have been authentic, but that it did not matter because voters believed in them.

Some other topics that were mentioned as relevant factors by the four experts include the GOC, which was against Saakashvili's "pro-Western reforms" (N1); the fact that the part of the society used to the former system lost its jobs during Saakashvili's anti-low-level-corruption campaign, including policemen and teachers; internal resistance to reforms and a general fatigue with the then government (N3); Saakashvili's loss of support from political figures, such as Irakli Alasania, who joined the GD coalition for the elections (N4). Corruption was not mentioned as a relevant factor, while immigration (particularly the arrival of rich non-Georgians, such as Turks in Batumi) was only mentioned by N2. N1 and N2 also noted that it was clear that the dispute was between Ivanishvili and Saakashvili, even though the latter was not a candidate: "whether Misha (Saakashvili) was on the list or not, it didn't matter" (N2).

In sum, the military defeat itself was not particularly relevant, even though Ivanishvili blamed his rival for the war and Saakashvili could not do the same;

[11] In November 2012, only 22% of the Georgian citizens said they had benefited from the law, 45% said they had not, and 33% did not know. See The International Republican Institute (IRI) (November 2012) "Georgian National Study".

instead, the war's consequences mattered. The *conflict* and *foreign affairs* categories seem closely related. While Saakashvili pursued an exclusively pro-Western foreign policy, Ivanishvili sought to improve relations with Russia while maintaining ties with the West. This stance was also linked to the *economy*, as Russia was an important market for many Georgians. Therefore, economic factors — including Ivanishvili's "unrealistic" promises — were the main reasons for UNM's electoral defeat. Other key factors included Saakashvili's abuse of power, the erosion of his domestic and Western support after almost nine years in office, and Ivanishvili's financial resources. *Social* issues were not considered relevant at all; this is a significant difference compared with the previous phases of the analysis. Regarding the previous phases, *economy* and *conflict* remain highly central and interconnected with each other and with *foreign affairs*, a category that was the least relevant in the first phase. *DRG*'s increasing relevance in the first phase aligns with the results here.

Pashinyan's Victory in Armenia

Foreign Affairs and Conflict in Armenia

In the case of Armenia, the four experts considered the military defeat to be a relevant but limited factor in explaining the results of the war elections due to the very characteristics of the conflict itself. N5 points out that it was not an attack against Armenia proper, nor a military attack against the Nagorno-Karabakh former Autonomous Oblast territory, but an offensive campaign with a limited objective of taking back Armenian-occupied territories outside Nagorno-Karabakh: the seven surrounding districts. It was not a direct threat to the Armenian society, and this was important in shifting blame politically away from the government. Armenia was not ready for another war and for "taking revenge" (N7), which was the hardliner opposition's stance (N6). The incumbent gave hope about resolving the Karabakh issue by gaining support from the international community and using principles of international law to seek compensation for the

war's losses (N6). N5 and N8 pointed out that Nagorno-Karabakh was presented by Pashinyan, though not very explicitly, as a burden for Armenian politics and economy, and getting rid of it as a relief.

The role of the opposition was a relevant point. Coming from and identified with Nagorno-Karabakh, former president Kocharyan was Pashinyan’s main opposition. He blamed Pashinyan for the defeat, led some of the protests that followed it and wanted the conflict to continue, but did not propose much more than that: “he had no plan on social or economic matters. It was only about reinforcing national security and having a clearer foreign policy” (N8). As Armenian security was not directly affected by the war, his security-based stance was not effective (N5).

Kocharyan was a former army man, so his links to a defeated military sphere also affected by corruption made his blame on Pashinyan ineffective. The PM also blamed the high-ranking officers for the defeat, claiming that they answered to the opposition. He shifted the government’s responsibility onto the commanders, saying they abandoned their posts to affect him (N8). Before the immediate pre-election period, “the army looked like a force that was against Pashinyan” (N7), with even some senior officers coming out in public threatening a coup (N5). However, by the time of the elections, Pashinyan managed to make some changes in the army's leadership; those who were against him were removed, and the armed forces remained neutral in the election period. However, N5 and N6 pointed out that the Armenian military does not usually play a significant political role. Other power structures, like the police, were on Pashinyan’s side thanks to salary increases (N7). N7 also pointed out that it is likely that the PM managed to convince the Russian leadership, which was influential in the army, that he was a good partner: by the time of the elections, “all generals looked very loyal to him, and this could not happen without certain signals from Moscow”.

All experts highlighted the role of Russia in Armenian politics, but from different perspectives. For N5 and N8, the military defeat revealed that it was a mistake to rely exclusively on Russia as a security partner because it did not support Armenia during the war. This led to a general frustration and blame on Kocharyan and Sargsyan, who had strong ties with the Kremlin, for giving away too much to it and getting little in return. For N7, Russia remained a respected ally for much

of the Armenian society, and Kocharyan tried to appeal to Russian support, hoping it would be critical towards Pashinyan. However, this did not happen. N5 and N6 said that Moscow did not play any role in the elections, and it remained neutral because “their structural leverage over the Armenian economy was so strong that it really didn't matter if Mickey Mouse was president” (N5). N6 pointed out that Pashinyan was more acceptable to Russia because, unlike his rivals, he was not seeking to continue the conflict but to follow a more predictable negotiation strategy.

All the respondents agreed that the role of Western countries was relatively neutral during the elections and that debates around NATO or the EU were minor topics. Only N7 mentioned that the Armenia-EU Comprehensive Extended Partnership Agreement (CEPA), which entered into force three months before the elections, was used by Pashinyan: “as he relied on the international community's support to resolve the Karabakh conflict, Pashinyan presented as if he had some support from the collective West in general”.

DRG in Armenia

The incumbent’s way to tackle being blamed for the defeat was to call for early elections, a “smart way to accept and respond to popular demands” (N5). Pashinyan then shifted the discussion to other issues. The four experts said that Kocharyan and Sargsyan were associated with an accumulation of corruption and authoritarian governance. At the same time, both former leaders, despite sharing backgrounds and acting in coordination during the street protests and in the parliament (N8), were against each other since 2008 (N6). Pashinyan’s tactic was to show them as if they were the same, “two faces, but one result” (N7). This discredited and marginalised them, while Pashinyan represented a new leadership that had nothing to do with the nationalist or Karabakh discourse, a generation that grew up in independent Armenia (N5), that “broke away from the old political order” (N8).

A relevant event regarding this break with the past was the trial against Kocharyan. All experts considered it politically motivated. “It was vendetta politics (…) that tainted the integrity of the trial” (N5). For N6, this was also a way in which Pashinyan pointed at Kocharyan as his main rival in the eyes of society. N5 and N7 considered that this affected the incumbent more, not because it gave an impression of abuse of power, but because of the opposite: as Kocharyan was eventually released, Pashinyan seemed weak and “more moderate than many in public society who wanted revenge”. This also led to his stance on becoming more consistent and more decisive in punishing previous authorities after the elections (N7).

Corruption was one of the main issues during the 2018 revolution and remained as such during the 2021 campaign. Pashinyan’s message was that now he would be more consistent and stricter towards all those responsible for corruption in the country, referring to the previous governments (N7). Armenia’s corruption was mainly limited to the top spheres, particularly defence-related fraud corruption: “there was great resentment and hatred that these big officials were gaining millions of US dollars, which made anti-corruption even more of a political issue” (N5).

Economy in Armenia

The economy was not a major topic during the campaign. This is because Pashinyan had made significant progress in this field by giving more opportunities to small and medium businesses, and weakening “oligarchs and local tycoons” (N7); by increases in pensions, and in public sector salaries (N8); and paying attention to the regions in terms of delivering gas, electricity, and running water (N5).

From 2018 to 2021, Pashinyan lost close to 16% of support, around 200,000 votes. Experts attributed this decline to the “unreasonably high” expectations after the 2018 revolution (N5, N6, N8), the military defeat (N7, N8) and the inconsistent implementation of reforms (N7). N8 pointed out that these voters

probably did not support Kocharyan in 2021, but they were people who did not participate in the elections.

Regarding other topics, all experts considered that, despite its cultural relevance, the AAC did not play a role in the elections, even though it was unhappy with Pashinyan (N7, N8). N7 was the only one to mention how Pashinyan had changed the media landscape in his favour from 2018, when most of the leading traditional media were in the hands of the previous authorities. N8 also said that "media outlets in Armenia are almost always political weapons used by the parties". The four respondents commented that the elections were largely free and fair and that there had been a demonstrable improvement in democratic standards since 2018.

To sum up, the war was a relevant factor in explaining the results, but Pashinyan could use the very characteristics of the conflict in his favour, as it did not affect the Republic of Armenia's security. Also, as his main rivals were related to the army and from Nagorno-Karabakh, he could partially shift the responsibility. The PM managed to weaken his rival, highlighting his economic achievements, focusing on corruption, and blaming Kocharyan and Sargsyan for most of the issues within the country. He gave voters hope for a diplomatic solution to the conflict, which earned him some support from Russia and the West, albeit limited. Kocharyan tried to gain Russian support, but failed. Issues within the *DRG* category were the most relevant, according to the experts, as the two former presidents were seen as corrupt and Pashinyan, as the leader of an anti-corruption campaign. Once again, *social* issues appeared to be irrelevant.

Compared to the previous phases, we can see the high relevance of the categories *conflict* and *economy*, while *foreign affairs'*, very connected with *conflict*, is in line with the second phase, but not the first one. The main difference appears regarding *DRG*, which importance was much higher for the interviewed experts than shown in the media during the campaign, and as in Georgia, *social* issues, that seem important for the voters but not for the political leaders.

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Having established the relevance of different topics through surveys and media content analysis, as well as the way these topics were instrumentalised and

framed through interviews with experts, in the next chapter, I will discuss the results based on the theories outlined in the theoretical framework.

6. Discussion

After carrying out a three-phase analysis, comparing the two considered cases is possible through the five original established categories and their respective backgrounds. Saakashvili's and Pashinyan's governments originated from revolutions; both leaders positioned themselves as the opposite of the previous corrupt regimes. Their strong original support and achieving a constitutional majority led to both limiting the opposition and concentrating power. They both tried to use the media and their leverage over the courts to weaken their rivals' support. Both implemented reforms that reduced levels of corruption and strengthened the economy, but did not improve democratic levels consistently after the original boost, in 2003 and 2018, respectively, remaining as hybrid regimes. However, Armenia's standards remained relatively stable from the post-revolution period, through the war, and until the elections, three years, while Georgia's democratic decline was significant, especially between 2007 and 2009. The nine years passed from the revolution and Saakashvili's popularity peak until the electoral loss also highlight any government's natural wear and tear, which created a general fatigue, as mentioned in the interviews.

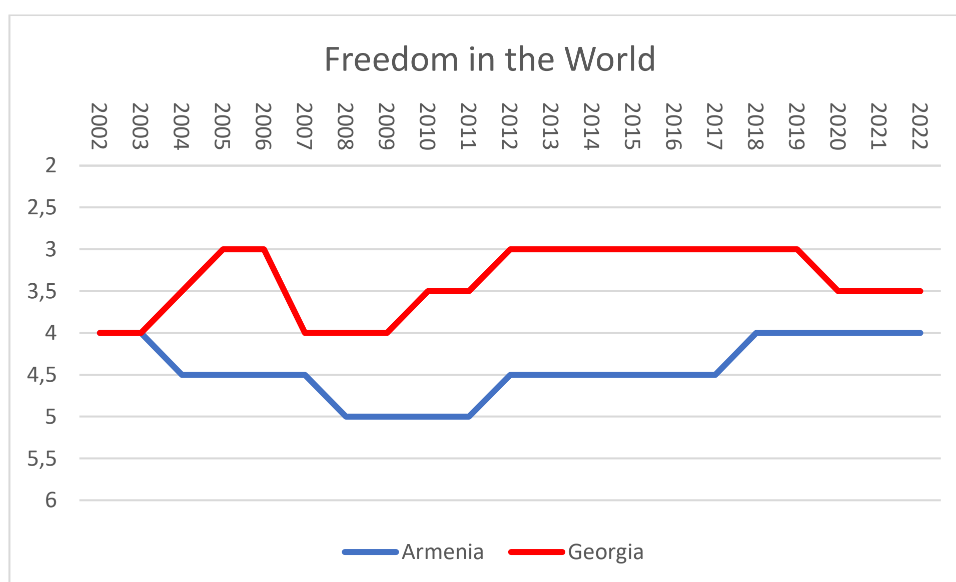

Figure 9. Own elaboration based on Individual Country Ratings and Status, Freedom in the World, 2003 to 2023. It measures political rights and civil liberties levels on a scale from 1 (most free) to 7 (least free). In this case, I have made an average of both categories. Note that the reports' titles refer to the publishing year, while the year analysed is the

previous one, which is included in this graphic. Available at <https://freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-world> (accessed on 24 March 2025)

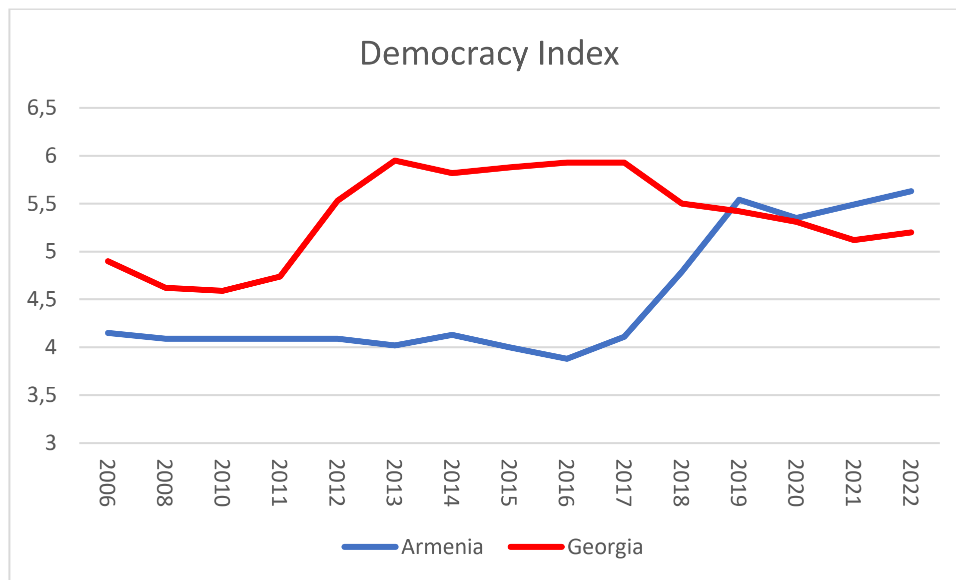

Figure 10. Own elaboration based on each country's overall score from the first published report, in 2006, The Economist Intelligence Unit, Democracy Index, 2006 to 2022. This index measures the levels of electoral process and pluralism; functioning of government; political participation; political culture; and civil liberties, and an overall score, ranging from 0 for the most authoritarian and 10 for the most democratic.

6. a. Georgia and Armenia as Hybrid Regimes: DRG

Hybrid regimes allow formal competition and multiparty elections that are relatively free and fair. However, the level of power concentration by the incumbents affects the chances for the opposition to win. As Levitsky & Way (2010) mention, regular abuse of the state and manipulation of democratic rules by the incumbents in their favour, and disparities in access to resources (including media) create an 'uneven playing field' that makes it difficult for this to occur.

Kocharyan and Ivanishvili, the main opposition in Armenia and Georgia, respectively, faced legal and administrative challenges during the campaign that all interviewees agreed were, or at least were seen by the general population as, politically motivated. The local and foreign reactions to this strategy were mixed and marked the consequences of the incumbent's actions. In the case of Georgia, Ivanishvili, a new player in local party politics, was seen as unjustly discriminated

against, and local civil society organisations and Western countries were on his side. The passing of the must carry law, which affected the government by giving more space to opposition-leaning media, shows that Saakashvili's power concentration was not absolute but limited by Western support, a "red line", according to N3. At the same time, as Schedler (2006: 3) states, in hybrid regimes the opposition usually wins some seats in the parliament even though victory is widely restricted. This means that UNM did not completely dominate the Georgian legislative branch. Saakashvili had to back down and allow Ivanishvili to compete as a foreigner after revoking his citizenship. The then-president's actions ended up backfiring, harming his support, and leading to a higher voter turnout (Kakachia & Makarov, 2016: 85), as mentioned by N1.

For Kocharyan and Pashinyan, it was the opposite. The former president was, unlike Ivanishvili, not a new player. He was one of the pre-Revolution leaders, generally associated with corruption and power concentration. Even though the trial against him was promoted by Pashinyan and seen as politically motivated, a significant portion of the electorate was more interested in revenge against Kocharyan than justice. Pashinyan, as shown in the third phase of the analysis, was then perceived as too moderate. This gave him an argument for his campaign: he would redouble efforts against corruption during his next term. In other words, while Saakashvili was punished for abusing power, Pashinyan was pushed to strengthen his domain. As we have seen during the first phase of the analysis, issues within the *DRG* category, including *corruption*, were particularly high among the main concerns for Armenians in 2021, even surpassing those in the *economy* category, which were the most relevant in the country before the 2020 war.

Saakashvili's support had started decreasing before the 2008 war, and the previous year, there had already been protests against him that, for the first time since the 2003 revolution, had given the opposition a certain level of protagonism. From then until 2012, numerous political figures defected to position themselves as future candidates, including Nino Burjanadze, Irakli Alasania and Zurab Noghaideli. Popular figures vocally supported Ivanishvili; the powerful and politically relevant GOC, the only strong independent institution in the country (Nodia, 2013), was against the president's pro-Western and secular approach;

economic elites did not like him, especially since he had harmed trade relations with Russia (Newnham, 2015), on which they depended heavily, and even though most had benefited by the liberal economic reforms; and civil society organisations confronted him.

Following Bueno de Mesquita's Selectorate theory, those whose effective loyalty was critical to sustaining the regime, the Winning Coalition (W), gradually became fewer, and their support weakened. If the W is small, as in autocracies, the leaders can retain support and remain in power by providing "their small number of essential supporters with private benefits" (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003: 104). However, despite the higher level of power concentration and abuse, which included amending the constitution and changing to a parliamentary system to remain in power, Saakashvili did not try to impose an autocratic regime by cancelling the elections or ignoring the results, and he could not hold on to power with such a weakened W. Not being fully democratic, with a big W, or fully autocratic, with a small and strong W, Saakashvili's hybrid regime's structure became one of the reasons for his defeat. It is even likely that, without the state's resources at his disposal, the 2012 electoral defeat would have been tougher.

Such a reduced and weakened W was not enough to counterbalance a growing animosity within the general Selectorate (S), those citizens with the right to vote. However, Saakashvili had governed the country for the past nine years; he managed the state resources in his favour and had numerous loyal supporters. This means that, despite losing so much support, from close to 60% in the 2008 elections, his UNM still got over 40% in 2012. Not enough to remain in power, but enough to place itself as the main opposition for years to come.

For Pashinyan, the scenario was different. He relied more on a wide support from a large W than on a strong and consolidated smaller one. According to Bueno de Mesquita, this is a characteristic of democracies, where leaders must satisfy many individuals to stay in power. Pashinyan was, in that sense, a more democratic leader. During his first three years as PM, he benefited small businesses and the armed forces, and changed the media landscape in his favour. Despite this, he lost significant support, from over 70% of the votes in 2018 to almost 54% in 2021.

Nodia (2016) states that hybrid regimes are also characterised by their uncertainty: as there is an active political opposition and civil society, and a largely free media system, there is enough space for unpredictability regarding the outcome of the elections. Even if there are restrictions on participation and issues that can be raised, formal rules exist, but nobody knows to what extent they will be respected. Electoral rules were generally respected in Georgia, and the results were accepted.

At the same time, as stated by Wintrobe (2018) and Rosenfeld (2018), loyalty to the incumbent may drop because of economic performance deterioration, military defeat, and other exogenous shocks. The leaders can then resort to violent coercive methods to maintain their rule, an alternative that tends to be more common in hybrid regimes (Hendrix & Wong, 2012). The other option is to become less repressive to maintain legitimacy, especially if there are intense diplomatic pressures from international organisations. That is what Saakashvili chose because the Western support was a clear limit for him.

By the time of the analysed war elections, both countries had just moved from a presidential to a parliamentary system, and, in the case of Georgia, the transition was incomplete. Even though this precariousness might have helped the opposition, no interviewee mentioned it. A probable explanation is, as N1 and N2 noted, that the campaigns were seen as very personalistic, led by the parties' leaders as the main referents, meaning that in the end, it did not matter if it was a presidential or parliamentary election.

In 2021, Pashinyan was still the face of reforms and democratisation against the old guard, his main opposition, the authoritarian past against which the 2018 revolution had been organised. In 2012, Saakashvili was the face of power concentration against an entirely new political leader, who had even supported financially the 2003 revolution and who, unlike all previous opposition figures, had enough resources to confront the incumbent controlled state assets and win despite the hybrid regimes' characteristic 'uneven playing field' that makes it difficult for this to occur. From that point of view, the 2021 war election in Armenia might be more comparable to the 2008 than the 2012 election in Georgia, with an incumbent that loses support and raises criticism, but a weak and marginalised opposition that is no real challenge. Actually, the results for Georgia 2008 and

Armenia 2021 were similar: around 54% for the incumbent, and over 20% for the opposition.

6. b. Military Defeat: Conflict

The military defeat becomes a relevant topic to understand the decreased support for both incumbents. According to Goemans (2000), hybrid regimes' leaders tend to be ousted after losing a war and should also expect additional punishments. This result can be affected by the size of the regime's W, as leaders with large winning coalitions face a greater risk of removal, while a small W would make them need considerable support from the selectorate to avoid personal consequences for the defeat (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003: 41, 448-9). This would contrast with Pashinyan's victory, as his large W did not result in losing power. However, it is also possible to think that his less established and consolidated W, as he had ruled for only three years, allowed him to blame the former elites for the defeat. As seen in the first two analysis phases, the issues within the conflict category were the most relevant in Armenia by 2021, especially during the campaign. This means that Pashinyan could not simply skip the topic: he had to instrumentalise the defeat, even present it positively, and shift the blame.

Saakashvili's nine years as president were a long enough period to have built a strong and consolidated power enough not to be ousted. Nevertheless, his reduced W and weakening support within the S did not help him diffuse the personal blame for the military defeat and its consequences on foreign affairs and the economy.

During a war, the opposition can either support or reject it and the government's efforts in it. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict had been fundamental for the national modern identity of Armenia (Iskandaryan, 2020: 191; Cheterian, 2022), meaning that Kocharyan could not oppose the war itself without being perceived as seditious and unpatriotic. At the same time, the fact that he was part of the

“Karabakh clan”, related to the 1990s victory, and a former army man, made him a good scapegoat for Pashinyan.

Cheterian (2008, 2010) mentions that ethno-territorial issues, when instrumentalised politically and presented as a national question, negatively impact the democratisation processes and may become a stabilising factor for hybrid regime leaders. That is what happened with Kocharyan and Sargsyan after 1994: an instrumentalised victory that allowed them to concentrate their power. As Kocharyan aimed to continue the conflict after the 2020 defeat, his potential new government would probably have been more authoritarian and highly militarised (Shirinian, 2021).

The situation was different for Saakashvili: Armenian and Georgian opposition supported the war, although Kocharyan criticised how it was carried out; however, once Ivanishvili got into politics, he criticised the war and blamed the results on the government. Following Arena (2008), the Armenian opposition did not have many chances to use the defeat effectively during the electoral campaign because it had supported the military efforts, and this was not the case for GD.

Even though both incumbents experienced an armed conflict related to a long-unresolved territorial issue, the context and the dispute were different. While Georgia saw no major territorial changes, because Abkhazia and South Ossetia were not under Tbilisi's authority before the 2008 war, Armenia lost the territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh that it had controlled since 1994. However, as N5 mentioned, the war was not a direct threat to Armenian society, and that was important for shifting the blame away from the government.

Gartner & Segura (1998) say that the public’s support for a military campaign vary according to the origins of the conflict: support will be higher and a change of power would be more unlikely if the nation was invaded, if the war started as a response to an attack, or if the survival of the nation was perceived as at stake. Even though Saakashvili’s government tried to regain control over Georgian territories under international law, it was he who initiated the confrontation by ordering the attack on Tskhinvali. At the same time, Armenians were attacked by Azerbaijan, which was trying to regain control over territories which are Azerbaijani under international law. It was easier for Pashinyan to diffuse the

responsibility, while Saakashvili could not escape from it, so he had to change the focus to other topics.

Before 2012, Saakashvili was quite successful at diffusing the blame. This was shown in the first part of the analysis, as the relevance of the *conflict* diminished after 2009. He carried out an active policy to blame Russia for the war, while becoming more explicit in his approach to the West, including the start of negotiations for the Association Agreement with the EU. This was, however, a double-edged sword: while it partially lessened the burden of responsibility for the defeat, it also led to Saakashvili being seen as the culprit for the negative economic consequences of breaking relations with Russia.

6. c. Impact of the Economy

Choi & Woo (2010) say the economy “occupies voters’ minds as the most important issue”. This was seen during the first phase of the analysis: the survey aggregation showed that the economic factors were the primary concern for citizens in both countries every year except in 2008 and 2009 for Georgia, the year of the war and the following year, and from 2021 on in Armenia, after the war. The relevance of the *conflict* decreased with time until after the elections, in the case of Georgia, and by 2012, it was far from being the main concern, even surpassed by *social* issues. On the other hand, it was the most relevant issue in Armenia, and the government managed to shift its responsibility.

Ivanishvili not only blamed Saakashvili for the defeat but also for the economic difficulties. The economy grew under his administration, as did disparity and general expectations. As Lucardi (2019) points out, hybrid regime governments are “extremely vulnerable” to being punished for their bad economic performance in election years. GD’s leader promised economic growth based on his personal wealth and to mend the relationship with Russia, which was advantageous for both elites and small entrepreneurs. On the other hand, Saakashvili could not promise anything new and counterattacking Ivanishvili by accusing him of being

a Russian project was ineffective, and so was copying some of his rival's socially oriented proposals (Nodia, 2020).

Pashinyan's economic policies, on the other hand, were innovative: paying attention to the neglected regions, rural areas, and small and medium businesses, while weakening local tycoons and promoting commerce with the EU instead of relying predominantly on Russia. The Armenia-EU Comprehensive Extended Partnership Agreement (CEPA), which entered into force only three months before the elections, is a good example (Frappi, 2023).

The perceptions of economic growth in hybrid regimes might be influenced by factors such as a general feeling about the leader's performance (Colton & Hale, 2009). Even though the war negatively affected both leaders' support, Saakashvili's had declined since at least 2007, so the general feelings towards him were increasingly negative, affecting the opinions regarding already implemented economic reforms and frustrated expectations. Pashinyan had been in power for only three years, and all interviewees agreed that economic issues were not a main concern during the campaign, marking a general satisfaction and/or a higher relevance for other topics. As seen in the first phase of the analysis, 2021 marked one of the lowest points of significance for economic issues in Armenia during the analysed period. Pashinyan also presented Nagorno-Karabakh as a burden for Armenian politics and economy, and getting rid of it as a relief, meaning that the economic situation could get better and that the defeat was not that important.

6. d. Foreign Affairs' influence

As seen in the analysis, all issues within the *conflict* category were directly related to and inseparable from *foreign affairs* during the campaign in Armenia, as well as the *economy* in Georgia. From the beginning of his tenure, Saakashvili changed Georgia's foreign policy towards an almost exclusively pro-Western approach, a position that was initially supported by the majority of the political elite (Lebanidze, 2020: 95). Pashinyan maintained the Armenian traditional

“complementarity” (Aberg & Terzyan, 2018) until after the war. This is important because the vote in the post-Soviet states is usually determined by the dichotomous cleavage between pro-Western and pro-Russia (Locoman, 2018: 127-128). However, his foreign policy did not aim to prioritise Russian interests.

After the military defeat, Saakashvili’s confrontative attitude was less popular, considering the economic consequences and that blaming Russia was an already used strategy, but also because the Western allies he had chosen to balance Russia had not assisted Georgia militarily during the war. Ivanishvili originally proposed a significant change in the international orientation: from balancing with the West to a soft bandwagoning with Russia (Grigorescu, 2008). This would ultimately evolve into *bandwagoning by stealth*, “a de facto and partial bandwagoning with Russia without formally changing the country’s declared pro-Western foreign policy” (Lebanidze & Kakachia, 2023).

In Armenia, the opposition promoted a bandwagoning strategy, a closer relationship with an already questioned Russia, which, even though its interests had always been privileged by the Armenian governments (Lebanidze, 2020: 144), had not supported militarily during the war. Therefore, Pashinyan’s plan was new and popular: a Western approach, but without completely ruling out Moscow's role (Atanesyan et al., 2023), changing from a foreign policy of soft bandwagoning with Russia to one of soft balancing with the West (Grigorescu, 2008).

Locoman (2018, 127-8) mentions that electoral endorsement from Russia or the West is a significant asset to attract voters in post-Soviet countries. The collective West, supposed to be Saakashvili’s ally, generally favoured a change in Georgia, and Russia was against him. Pashinyan, on the other hand, presented it as if he had Western backing, and Russia did not support the opposition and even preferred the incumbent’s proposed halting of the conflict with Azerbaijan. The West and Russia had a much more active role in Georgia than in Armenia. In the former, they shaped “the preferences of the political elites both in the government and in the opposition” through leverage, boosting, and conditionalities (Lebanidze, 2020: 7, 108). This was a relevant boost for GD’s campaign.

In hybrid regimes, it is easy and politically rewarding for leaders to tar their opponents as enemies of the nation to prevail in electoral competition (Mansfield & Snyder, 2005: 2). That is what Saakashvili tried, accusing Ivanishvili of being an “agent of Russian policy” (Hale, 2010). However, lacking support from the West, this was not effective.

6. e. Media Influence

The media can shape the public’s perceptions (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), and can particularly distort the views of national economic performance, especially in hybrid regimes where state-controlled or government-supportive media may prevail (Rosenfeld, 2018).

In only three years running Armenia, Pashinyan had changed the media landscape in his favour: from most of the leading traditional media being in the hands of the previous authorities, to a polarised system between pro-government and pro-opposition media (Internews, 2024). It could be assumed that he had not yet had enough time to establish a more monolithic pro-government media system. In any case, the opposition had fewer resources than when in power.

In Georgia, the government tried to limit the availability of opposition-leaning media, a common strategy used by hybrid regime leaders (Levitsky & Way, 2002: 52). However, Ivanishvili’s resources allowed him to distribute over 130,000 satellite dishes for free so people could watch his limited-coverage Channel 9. When Saakashvili tried to stop this, civil society organisations and Western countries were against him, and he had to back down and accept the must carry law. Therefore, he could not impose a unique or even a predominant narrative. The Uses and Gratifications theory claims that consumers seek out media that meet their specific needs, and the influence depends on why they are consuming it (Katz et al., 1974). Following this, it is likely that Saakashvili’s attempts to limit opposition-led media could have caused sympathy towards the opposition among the voters and a greater desire to consume these media.

The Agenda-setting theory postulates that mass media may not tell people what to think, but what to think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), while the Priming theory (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987: 63) establishes that media can define the criteria by which public officials are evaluated, and the Framing theory, that media can provoke different responses depending on how information is presented. Through the online media content analysis, I did not pretend to show how perceptions in the general public were constructed, nor did I try to find explanations for that narrative construction based on the ideological differences between media outlets. Instead, I aimed to find the most relevant issues during the campaign, as shown by the online media, assuming, based on these theories, that this would impact the voters' decisions.

The *conflict* became the most mentioned topic in the media in Georgia, while the *economy* followed closely behind. This is curious considering the relevance of the former was significantly higher in the media than for regular citizens, according to the surveys, indicating that the candidates gave it a particular relevance during the campaign: Ivanishvili blamed Saakashvili for the war and defeat. This could be interpreted as GD's leadership pushing into the agenda a topic that was not among the voters' main concerns, proving Saakashvili's incapacity to impose a unique narrative. This strategy was ultimately effective for Ivanishvili.

Russia was the third most mentioned topic, and *foreign affairs* was the fourth one, showing how relevant the dispute was between Ivanishvili's proposal to restore relations with Moscow and Saakashvili prioritising ties with the West. Despite being one of Saakashvili's original main issues, *corruption* was not relevant here.

In Armenia, *economy* was a much less relevant topic, while *conflict* and *foreign affairs* were the most important. The dichotomy between moving closer to or further away from Russia was a key topic during the campaign, with Kocharyan promoting the former and Pashinyan the latter. Like in the survey aggregation phase, the war and everything around it were the main issues during the campaign and a much-discussed topic that both leaders tried to instrumentalise. Even though *DRG* was not mentioned much, anti-corruption was Pashinyan's main argument during the campaign, according to the interviewees. This might mark a limit in the Agenda-setting theory or deficiencies in the media coverage.

Based on the Two-step flow of mass communication model, which postulates that media influence is not direct but flows through opinion leaders (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944), it is relevant to point out the role of popular artists and the GOC, which helped spread Ivanishvili's promises. In Armenia, the AAC was not a political factor, and Kocharyan lacked relevant opinion leaders to promote his messages. With Pashinyan, the old guard was delegitimised, but in Georgia, relevant elites who had benefited during Shevardnadze's time supported Ivanishvili. Also, Pashinyan did not face such a complex challenge as the Gldani prison scandal was for Saakashvili.

In both countries, the winning leaders attracted greater media attention than their opponents, which may partly explain the electoral outcomes. In Armenia, this was likely due to Pashinyan simultaneously serving as candidate, party leader, and PM, while in Georgia, Ivanishvili's visibility stemmed from his vast resources, his novelty as a political figure, and the fact that he was a clear target of the government and its aligned media.

7. Conclusions

The starting point for this thesis was that authors like Goemans (2000), Bueno de Mesquita (2003), and Mansfield & Snyder (2005) had analysed how the result of war affects electoral outcomes in hybrid regimes. They agree that a military defeat will make the incumbents' removal very likely. However, this is not always the case. The authors do not focus on the relative relevance of the loss compared to other aspects and the interplay between the war and them, including the support to the incumbent before the war, the economic situation, the role of the opposition, civil society, and media influence. They do not focus on post-Soviet countries either.

I chose Georgia and Armenia as comparable cases because they share similar backgrounds: both were hybrid regimes, had a government that got into power after a pro-democratic revolution, a growing economy, and had recently experienced a military defeat, but the outcomes were different: in Georgia, in line with the authors, the government lost the war elections, while in Armenia, the incumbent won.

I checked the evolution of the relative relevance of different issues from before the war until after the elections that followed it through opinion survey aggregation. Then, based on the Agenda-setting theory, I checked the relative relevance of these issues in the media during the electoral campaign. Finally, I interviewed experts to understand how both governments and oppositions instrumentalised these main issues, constructed political narratives during the campaign and how they influenced the results.

I found that the economic factor is usually the most relevant concern for voters in post-Soviet hybrid regimes, except during the war period and immediately after it, when the armed conflict becomes the main issue. This goes in line with my initial expectations. Social issues were the least concerning issues in both countries. The conflict and its consequences were the most discussed topics during the campaign in both countries, in line with the high relevance the topic had during that year in Armenia, but it was more predominant in Georgian media before the elections than for Georgian citizens during the electoral year and since

2009. This shows that GD pushed into the agenda a topic that was not among the voters' main concerns before the campaign. This was ultimately effective for Ivanishvili.

I expected that the change in the foreign policy orientation, getting closer to Russia or the EU, would explain the divergent electoral outcomes. However, this was not very relevant in Armenia and mostly mattered for Georgians because of economic perspectives. The level of democratic standards was also not a main factor, even though it influenced the loss of domestic and foreign support for Saakashvili. The role of the churches and popular public figures was more important in Georgia than in Armenia.

The military defeat was an important factor in the candidates' narrative. The effectiveness of that narrative was marked by the parties' resources and circumscribed by the candidates' backgrounds and support, as well as their role regarding the conflict. Considering the role of the opposition, the 2021 election in Armenia might be more comparable to the 2008 election in Georgia, when the opposition was marginalised. It is worth wondering if the 2026 elections will be for Pashinyan what 2021 was for Saakashvili: a different scenario, with new political players that win against the incumbent and their controlled state resources. However, there are no Armenians as wealthy as Ivanishvili.

I started this research by posing a main research question: to what extent does a military defeat affect electoral dynamics in post-Soviet hybrid regimes? Based on the results, I can establish that a war's outcome has a limited impact. After a military defeat, both Georgian and Armenian governments tried to dodge responsibility and shift attention to other issues, something that may or may not have been truly effective, as some of those other matters were even more damaging. Both sought support from their foreign allies, highlighted their achievements, and blamed other actors, the enemy and the opposition. They relied on imposing a narrative through their loyal media outlets and the state's resources. The effectiveness of this messaging depended on the level of wear and tear the governments had already accumulated before the war; on the level of support by elites, by foreign governments and civil society; and above all, on the opposition, its role during the war and the resources at its disposal.

This is partly in line with my original expectations: the war's outcome was not the most relevant issue for the voters, and the incumbents and the opposition presented the military defeat differently. The main differences between both countries were related to economic issues, which were very relevant for Georgia (including a proposed rapprochement with Russia as a result of the economic consequences of almost a decade of estrangement) and not much for Armenia; the role of relevant non-governing actors, such as the GOC; and particularly, to the opposition: a new actor with extensive resources in Georgia that could effectively impose its own narrative, and an old and questioned opposition in Armenia, whose resources were limited.

Even though each post-military defeat scenario may be particular, I have tried to reduce context dependence by systematising similarities and differences, and by choosing two highly comparable cases, limiting the study to only post-Soviet states and post-interstate armed conflicts. To achieve more generalisable conclusions, it will be necessary to include more and more diverse cases in further research.

Through this analysis, I did not pretend to show how media shapes the perceptions of the war and other issues during a campaign, nor did I try to find possible explanations for that narrative construction based on the ideological differences between media outlets. Instead, I aimed to find the most relevant issues before the elections, what topics were discussed in the campaign, how the leading political figures instrumentalised them, and how they interplayed with the military defeat. I did not focus on social media either, even though it was particularly relevant during the 2018 revolution in Armenia. So, further research should be conducted to understand the role of media and social networks in a post-military defeat hybrid regime.

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Annex

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Media content analysis in Georgia

GEORGIA	ტერიტორიული კონფლიქტი	ტერიტორიული მ	ომი	მშვიდობა	რუსეთი	ინფლაცია	უმუშევრობა	სიღარიბე	პენსიები	ეკონომიკა	ხელფასები	ჯანდაცვა	სამართლიანობა	კორუფცია	ნატო	ევროკავშირი	სააკაშვილი	ივანიშვილმა
Netgazeti	Territorial conflicts	Territorial in	War	Peace	Russia	Inflation	Unemployme	Poverty	Pensions	Economy	Salaries	Healthcare	Justice	Corruption	NATO	EU	Saakashvili	Ivanishvili
Total	63	57	97	78	191	44	29	38	22	127	35	69	52	75	87	94	111	156
1 al 10	19	17	29	23	58	13	9	11	6	38	10	20	15	22	26	28	34	47
11 al 20	21	19	32	26	63	15	10	13	8	42	12	23	17	25	29	31	37	52
21 al 1°	23	21	36	29	70	16	10	14	8	47	13	26	20	28	32	35	40	57
Civil.ge	Territorial conflicts	ritorial integ	War	Peace	Russia	Inflation	Inemploymer	Poverty	Pensions	Economy	Salaries	Healthcare	Justice	Corruption	NATO	EU	Saakashvili	Ivanishvili
Total	35	31	52	42	110	15	13	19	10	69	17	35	27	40	47	55	63	89
1 al 10	11	10	16	13	35	4	4	6	3	22	5	11	8	13	15	18	20	28
11 al 20	12	10	17	14	36	5	4	6	3	22	6	12	9	13	15	18	20	29
21 al 1°	12	11	19	15	39	6	5	7	4	25	6	12	10	14	17	19	23	32
Kviris Palitra	Territorial conflicts	ritorial integ	War	Peace	Russia	Inflation	Inemploymer	Poverty	Pensions	Economy	Salaries	Healthcare	Justice	Corruption	NATO	EU	Saakashvili	Ivanishvili
Total	48	42	73	59	154	22	19	27	14	98	24	51	39	62	67	73	135	168
1 al 10	15	13	23	18	48	7	6	8	4	30	7	16	12	19	21	23	42	52
11 al 20	16	14	24	19	50	7	6	9	5	32	8	17	13	20	22	24	44	55
21 al 1°	17	15	26	22	56	8	7	10	5	36	9	18	14	23	24	26	49	61
ALL	Territorial conflicts	ritorial integ	War	Peace	Russia	Inflation	Inemploymer	Poverty	Pensions	Economy	Salaries	Healthcare	Justice	Corruption	NATO	EU	Saakashvili	Ivanishvili
Total	48,66666667	43,3333333	74	59,6666667	151,666667	27	20,3333333	28	15,3333333	98	25,3333333	51,6666667	39,3333333	59	67	74	103	137,666667
1 al 10	15	13,3333333	22,6666667	18	47	8	6,33333333	8,33333333	4,33333333	30	7,33333333	15,6666667	11,6666667	18	20,6666667	23	32	42,3333333
11 al 20	16,33333333	14,3333333	24,3333333	19,6666667	49,6666667	9	6,66666667	9,33333333	5,33333333	32	8,66666667	17,3333333	13	19,3333333	22	24,3333333	33,6666667	45,3333333
21 al 1°	17,33333333	15,6666667	27	22	55	10	7,33333333	10,3333333	5,66666667	36	9,33333333	18,6666667	14,6666667	21,6666667	24,3333333	26,6666667	37,3333333	50

	Economy	Conflict	Social	DRG	Foreign affa	Enemy
Total	214	225,666667	51,6666667	98,3333333	141	151,666667
1st to 10th	64,33333333	69	15,6666667	29,6666667	43,6666667	47
11th to 20th	71	74,6666667	17,3333333	32,3333333	46,3333333	49,6666667
21st to 1st	78,66666667	82	18,6666667	36,3333333	51	55

Media content analysis in Armenia

Armenia	Տարածքային հակամարտություն	Սահմաններ	Պատերազմ	Խաղաղություն	Ադրբեջան	գնաճ	Գործազրկություն	Աղքատություն	Կենսաթոշակներ	Տնտեսություն	Աշխատավարձեր	Առողջապահություն	Արդարադատություն	Կոռուպցիա	Քոչարյանին	Փաշինյան	ՆԱՏՕ	Եվրամիություն	Ռուսաստան
Aravot	Territorial conflict	Borders	War	Peace	Azerbaijan	Inflation	Unemployment	Poverty	Pensions	Economy	Salaries	Healthcare	Justice	Corruption	Kocharyan	Pashinyan	NATO	European Union	Russia
Total	192	401	463	336	695	95	86	115	69	302	105	180	152	208	421	603	135	172	1287
1st to 10th	54	114	129	94	196	27	24	32	19	84	29	50	43	58	117	169	38	48	329
11th to 20th	67	141	162	117	243	33	30	40	24	106	37	63	53	73	148	212	47	60	496
21st to 1st	71	146	172	125	256	35	32	43	26	112	39	67	56	77	156	222	50	64	462
RFE	Territorial conflict	Borders	War	Peace	Azerbaijan	Inflation	Unemployment	Poverty	Pensions	Economy	Salaries	Healthcare	Justice	Corruption	Kocharyan	Pashinyan	NATO	European Union	Russia
Total	152	317	366	265	548	75	68	91	54	239	83	142	120	164	333	477	107	136	1004
1st to 10th	42	88	102	74	152	21	19	25	15	66	23	39	33	45	92	132	30	38	412
11th to 20th	52	109	125	91	188	26	23	31	18	82	28	49	41	56	114	164	36	46	305
21st to 1st	58	120	139	100	208	28	26	35	21	91	32	54	46	63	127	181	41	52	287
Tert	Territorial conflict	Borders	War	Peace	Azerbaijan	Inflation	Unemployment	Poverty	Pensions	Economy	Salaries	Healthcare	Justice	Corruption	Kocharyan	Pashinyan	NATO	European Union	Russia
Total	41	391	211	158	295	18	22	30	15	85	27	17	38	61	409	593	8	12	457
1st to 10th	23	208	119	78	162	10	12	16	8	46	15	9	20	33	215	312	4	6	198
11th to 20th	10	96	52	40	71	5	6	8	4	22	7	4	10	16	104	149	2	3	132
21st to 1st	8	87	40	40	62	3	4	6	3	17	5	4	8	12	90	132	2	3	127
ALL	Territorial conflict	Borders	War	Peace	Azerbaijan	Inflation	Unemployment	Poverty	Pensions	Economy	Salaries	Healthcare	Justice	Corruption	Kocharyan	Pashinyan	NATO	European Union	Russia
Total	128,3333333	369,6666667	346,6666667	253	512,6666667	62,6666667	58,66666667	78,66666667	46	208,6666667	71,66666667	113	103,3333333	144,3333333	387,6666667	557,666667	83,3333333	106,6666667	916
1st to 10th	39,66666667	136,6666667	116,6666667	82	170	19,3333333	18,33333333	24,33333333	14	65,33333333	22,33333333	32,66666667	32	45,33333333	141,3333333	204,333333	24	30,66666667	313
11th to 20th	43	115,3333333	113	82,66666667	167,3333333	21,3333333	19,66666667	26,33333333	15,33333333	70	24	38,66666667	34,66666667	48,33333333	122	175	28,3333333	36,33333333	311
21st to 1st	45,66666667	117,6666667	117	88,33333333	175,3333333	22	20,66666667	28	16,66666667	73,33333333	25,33333333	41,66666667	36,66666667	50,66666667	124,3333333	178,333333	31	39,66666667	292

Surveys aggregation: main issues in Georgia

Barometer Georgia	Unaffordability of healthcare	Unsolved territorial conflicts	Problematic relations with Russia	Rising prices / Inflation	Unemployment	Poverty	Low pensions	Other	DK/RA
2008	2	20	16	1	15	12	6	26	2
2009	5	15	5	1	33	12	3	26	1
2010	7	12	2	2	52	9	3	11	0
2011	4	12	2	5	55	10	4	9	1
2012	7	7	4	2	51	10	4	14	1
2013	3	10	5	1	54	10	3	12	0

Most important is	Economy	Conflict	Social
2008	8,5	18	2
2009	12,25	10	5
2010	16,5	7	7
2011	18,5	7	4
2012	16,75	5,5	7
2013	17	7,5	3

TOTAL	Economy	Conflict	Social	DRG	Foreign affairs
2007	22,25	14,5	6,5	0	0
2008	9,125	19,125	1	4	5,5
2009	16,783333	20,416667	8,25	6,7833333	8,5
2010	19,945833	17,625	8,9166667	4,75	4,75
2011	22,991667	13,25	8,8333333	2,75	3,5
2012	20,533333	12,041667	13,416667	5,55	2,875
2013	19,341667	14,291667	11,611111	7,65	3,875

IRI Georgia	Economy	Taxes/fees	Inflation	Agriculture	Unemployme	Pensions	Poverty	Income	Territorial int	Russia	Peace/IDPs	Threat of wa	Social	Healthcare	Education	Internal affai	Instability	Illegal acts	Injustice	Government	Foreign
sep-07	51	3	11	0	99	6	4	4	54	4	0	0	13	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
sep-08	31	0	4	0	39	0	4	0	42	14	4	21	0	0	0	5	7	0	0	0	5
mar-09	41	0	0	0	52	0	3	0	35	12	5	15	9	0	0	2	3	0	0	6	2
mar-10	29	8	0	0	61	0	0	0	45	9	4	3	8	9	0	4	4	0	0	0	0
oct-10	28	6	13	0	69	4	5	0	41	6	0	3	8	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0
may-11	27	0	15	5	74	0	14	5	35	6	0	0	8	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
nov-11	24	3	5	3	75	3	6	3	38	4	1	0	7	9	2	0	0	0	0	0	2
jul-12	26	6	8	6	72	4	5	0	36	5	0	0	7	13	0	0	2	1	0	0	0
nov-12	35	8	11	6	65	4	0	0	31	5	0	0	11	18	4	4	6	0	5	0	0
feb-13	32	6	0	7	64	0	0	0	37	5	0	0	9	14	0	0	16	0	0	2	0
jun-13	32	3	0	4	67	3	0	0	38	3	0	0	9	13	4	0	8	0	4	0	2

National issu	Economy	Conflict	Social	DRG	Foreign
sep-07	22,25	14,5	13	0	0
sep-08	9,75	20,25	0	4	5
mar-09	12	16,75	9	3,66666667	2
mar-10	12,25	15,25	8,5	4	0
oct-10	15,625	12,5	6	0	0
may-11	17,5	10,25	6,5	0	0
nov-11	15,25	10,75	6	0	2
jul-12	15,875	10,25	10	1,5	0
nov-12	16,125	9	11	5	0
feb-13	13,625	10,5	11,5	9	0
jun-13	13,625	10,25	8,66666667	6	2

IRI	Economy	Conflict	Social	DRG	Foreign
2007	22,25	14,5	6,5	0	0
2008	9,75	20,25	0	4	5
2009	12	16,75	9	3,66666667	2
2010	13,9375	13,875	7,25	2	0
2011	16,375	10,5	6,25	0	1
2012	16	9,625	10,5	3,25	0
2013	13,625	10,375	10,0833333	7,5	1

NDI GEORGIA	Inflation	Jobs	Poverty	Pensions	Wages	Territorial int	Russia	Healthcare	Education	Human Right	Court system	Property righ	Corruption	Fair elections	Freedom of s	Media indep	Prisons	Crime	NATO memb	EU membership
may-09	7	57	23	19	15	49	18	23	0	11	12	6	5	21	0	0	0	0	21	0
dec-09	10	57	30	30	13	49	22	20	0	7	6	5	5	14	7	0	0	0	16	2
apr-10	16	59	28	25	12	47	23	23	0	7	6	4	4	15	7	0	0	0	16	3
jul-10	18	65	33	29	9	45	13	27	0	9	4	3	3	8	5	0	0	0	16	3
mar-11	39	61	36	26	12	38	10	21	10	7	3	3	3	6	3	1	0	0	10	3
sep-11	42	62	31	20	12	31	10	25	9	8	4	2	1	9	4	1	0	0	9	2
feb-12	26	63	26	21	15	36	7	31	10	10	4	2	1	10	4	2	0	0	10	3
jun-12	19	58	27	21	15	33	9	33	11	11	4	3	1	16	4	1	0	0	8	3
aug-12	22	57	26	23	14	34	8	35	12	9	4	3	2	14	6	1	0	0	8	4
nov-12	19	56	28	26	15	29	12	35	15	13	7	4	2	4	5	2	6	2	6	4
mar-13	14	61	25	24	14	34	18	32	12	12	7	3	2	4	4	1	1	2	10	4
jun-13	12	61	26	21	16	34	14	30	13	13	4	4	3	6	5	2	2	3	10	3

National issu	Economy	Conflict	Social	DRG	Foreign
may-09	24,2	33,5	11,5	11	21
dec-09	28	35,5	10	8,8	9
apr-10	28	35	11,5	8,6	9,5
jul-10	30,8	29	13,5	6,4	9,5
mar-11	34,8	24	15,5	5,2	6,5
sep-11	33,4	20,5	17	5,8	5,5
feb-12	30,2	21,5	20,5	6,6	6,5
jun-12	28	21	22	8	5,5
aug-12	28,4	21	23,5	7,8	6
nov-12	28,8	20,5	25	9	5
mar-13	27,6	26	22	7,2	7
jun-13	27,2	24	21,5	8,4	6,5

NDI	Economy	Conflict	Social	DRG	Foreign
2009	26,1	34,5	10,75	9,9	15
2010	29,4	32	12,5	7,5	9,5
2011	34,1	22,25	16,25	5,5	6
2012	28,85	21	22,75	7,85	5,75
2013	27,4	25	21,75	7,8	6,75

Surveys aggregation: main issues in Armenia

Barometer	Poverty	Unemployment	Inflation	Low wages	Pensions	State borders, demarcation, delimation	Unsolved territorial conflicts	Healthcare	Education	Justice	Human rights	Political instability in the country	Corruption
2019	13	29	1	4	4	0	11	5	3	2	2	3	3
2021	4	3	1	0	0	18	8	0	1	1	1	44	1
2024	2	2	0	1	1	0	9	1	1	0	0	46	1

Barometer	Economy	Conflict	Social	Foreign	DRG
2019	12,75	11	4	0	2,5
2021	8	13	1	0	11,75
2024	1,5	9	1	0	11,75

IRI Armenia	Economy	Inflation	Economy oth	Agriculture	Industry	Unemployme	Poverty	Low wages	Pensions	NK conflict	Borders/secu	External atta	POWs	War	Emigration	Education	Healthcare/s	Corruption	Political tensi	Government,	Infrastructur	Justice	Foreign polic	Regional
may-19	22	0	0	0	0	37	19	12	9	17	16	0	0	0	12	8	6	6	4	10	3	0	7	0
oct-19	30	10	7	3	4	31	11	11	9	25	18	0	0	0	14	7	5	7	13	10	0	0	12	5
feb-21	18	8	0	0	0	10	3	3	0	12	7	14	9	3	4	5	0	2	19	22	0	0	0	0
may-21	22	15	0	0	0	9	0	0	0	4	14	12	19	0	0	0	0	0	18	3	0	0	0	3
jul-21	11	0	0	2	0	13	17	0	0	0	62	0	6	2	0	4	0	0	0	14	0	3	4	0
dec-21	4	11	6	0	0	13	3	5	0	0	34	23	5	0	0	4	0	0	7	15	0	0	4	4
jun-22	11	16	7	0	0	5	8	3	0	0	65	0	5	0	4	0	6	0	19	4	0	0	0	4
mar-23	8	14	6	0	0	19	17	11	0	0	60	0	0	0	0	0	6	0	0	25	0	0	0	0
dec-23	18	14	11	3	0	5	6	16	7	0	47	0	3	0	10	4	7	4	19	9	9	6	0	13
Setp-24		10	6			14		7	4	7	41					10	3	4	8	8		4	8	7

Main probler	Economy	Conflict	Social	DRG	Foreign affairs
may-19	19,8	16,5	8,66666667	4,6	7
oct-19	12,8888889	21,5	8,66666667	6	8,5
feb-21	8,4	9	4,5	10,75	0
may-21	15,3333333	12,25	0	10,5	3
jul-21	10,75	23,3333333	4	8,5	4
dec-21	7	20,6666667	4	11	8
jun-22	8,33333333	35	5	11,5	4
mar-23	12,5	60	6	12,5	0
dec-23	10	25	7	9,4	13
sep-24	8,2	24	6,5	6	7,5

IRI	Economy	Conflict	Social	DRG	Foreign affairs
2019	16,3444444	19	8,66666667	5,3	7,75
2021	10,3708333	16,3125	3,125	10,1875	3,75
2022	8,33333	35	5	11,5	4
2023	11,25	42,5	6,5	10,95	6,5
2024	8,2	24	6,5	6	7,5

UE Armenia	Economy	Inflation/Tax	Unemployme	Poverty	Salaries/Pens	War/Security	Territorial co	IDPs	Education	Healthcare	Migration	Corruption	Rule of law
2019	25	13	50	34	25	19	6		15	18	10	16	9
2020	23	5	35	26	17	17	8		24	16	9	15	9
2021													
2022													
2023	26	34	36	33	46	65	51	14	34	32	15	24	0
2024	40	53	44	50	58	75	73	34	56	49	26	38	39

TOTAL	Economy	Conflict	Social	DRG	Foreign affairs
2019	19,2833333	14,1666667	9	7,13333333	4
2020	21,2	12,5	4,77777767	6	3
2021	9,18541667	14,65625	2,0625	9,79375	3,75
2022	8,3333	17,5	5	5,75	4
2023	23,125	28,6111111	11,1666667	11,475	6,5
2024	19,5666667	31,2222222	17,0555556	14,8333333	7,72222222

UE	Economy	Conflict	Social	DRG	Foreign affairs
2019	29,4	12,5	14,3333333	12,5	
2020	21,2	12,5	16,3333333	12	
2023	35	43,3333333	27	12	
2024	49	60,6666667	43,6666667	38,5	

Themes and topics that the interviewees in Georgia were asked about:

- What do you think were the main reasons behind UNM's defeat in the 2012 elections in Georgia?
- Four years before the 2012 elections, Georgia, under the presidency of UNM's Mikheil Saakashvili, went through a military defeat in the 2008 Russo-Georgian war. How much do you think this event affected the results of the 2012 elections?
- During the campaign, Bidzina Ivanishvili said he wanted to normalise relations with Russia. How do you think that impacted on his and Saakashvili's UNM support?
- UNM and Saakashvili had been in power for nine years by the time of the 2012 elections. How would you describe the general support towards the government back then?
- During the electoral campaign, various court rulings affected Bidzina Ivanishvili's party and companies, such as Bank Kartu, and media outlets close to the then-candidate, such as Maestro TV. Do you think that those rulings implied a decrease in support for Ivanishvili? Why? Do you think these rulings might have been politically motivated?
- How relevant was the economic situation in explaining the results of the elections?
- Was corruption a significant factor?
- After UNM came to power in 2003, there was an important increase in the democracy level of democracy. Would you say that 9 years later, Saakashvili's government was more, less or equally democratic than in 2003? Why?

Themes and topics that the interviewees in Armenia were asked about:

- What do you think were the main reasons behind Nikol Pashinyan's Civil Contract victory in the 2021 elections in Armenia?
- One year before the 2021 elections, Armenia, under the government of Pashinyan, went through a military defeat in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. How much do you think this event affected the results of the 2021 elections?
- Unlike Robert Kocharyan, Pashinyan said during the election campaign that he would not necessarily strengthen relations with Russia if he won. How do you think that impacted on his and Kocharyan's support?
- Pashinyan had been in power for one year by the time of the 2021 elections. How would you describe the general support towards the government back then?

- During the 2021 election campaign, Kocharyan faced a trial related to accusations of his alleged responsibility in suppressing post-election protests in 2008. Do you think that the trial implied a decrease in support for Kocharyan? Why? Do you think this trial might have been politically motivated?
- How relevant was the economic situation in explaining the results of the elections?
- Was corruption a significant factor? Why?
- After Pashinyan got into power in 2018, there was an important increase in the level of democracy. Would you say that 3 years later his government was more, less or equally democratic than in 2018? Why?