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Digital Authoritarianism and Political Settlements: A Theory-Building Framework for Understanding Regime Survival Strategies in Eastern European Hybrid Regimes

MA Thesis

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Authorship Declaration

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

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Abstract

This thesis examined how personalised political settlement types shape digital authoritarian strategies for regime survival in Eastern European hybrid regimes. Existing scholarship on regime survival, digital authoritarianism, and political settlements analysis addresses different dimensions of this problem but lacks a framework connecting the structural configuration of ruling coalitions to the organisation of digital governance tools. The thesis developed a six-layer analytical framework bridging these three literatures and conducted a plausibility probe of its first three layers through a structured, focused comparison of Georgia and Serbia across 2022–2024, combining qualitative document analysis with quantitative triangulation. The findings indicated that settlement type shaped not which digital tools regimes possessed but how overlapping repertoires were organised into distinct configurations. Serbia's personalised dominant settlement produced a knowing–behaviour operative axis, where surveillance directly generated behavioural compliance through chilling effects and institutional intimidation, with beliefs serving a complementary role. Georgia's personalised competitive settlement produced a belief–behaviour sequential linkage, where narrative construction delegitimised organised outsiders before legal-administrative instruments codified those categories into enforceable obligations. The enabling logic also diverged: Serbia's digital means were institutionally embedded through captured institutions, while Georgia's were legally constructed, application-layer, and functionally deniable. The probe found evidence consistent with three propositions and partially consistent with the fourth, which required qualification due to observational limitations on insider targeting in secondary sources. The findings also generated refinements: knowing can itself become disciplinary under dominant conditions, deniability varies by governance function rather than by settlement type, and legal construction and institutional capture operate in sequence rather than as alternatives. The framework offers a structural explanation for variation in digital authoritarian configurations and identifies directions for geographic extension, methodological deepening, and full operationalisation.

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List of Abbreviations

AI – Artificial Intelligence

BIA - Security Intelligence Agency of Serbia / Bezbednosno-informativna agencija

BIRN - Balkan Investigative Reporting Network

CEC – Central Election Commission

CIB – Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour

CPI – Corruption Perceptions Index

CRTA - Centre for Research, Transparency and Accountability

CSO - Civil Society Organisation

DFRLab - Digital Forensic Research Lab

DNS - Domain Name System

DSP - Digital Society Project

EDMO - European Digital Media Observatory

EPS - Electric Power Industry of Serbia / Elektroprivreda Srbije

EU – European Union

FH -Freedom House

FiW – Freedom in the World

FotN – Freedom on the Net

GEL – Georgian Lari

GNCC - Georgian National Communications Commission

IJAS - Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia

IP – Internet Protocol

IREX - International Research and Exchanges Board

ISFED - International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy

ISP - Internet Service Provider

KRIK - Crime and Corruption Reporting Network

LGBTIQ – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer

MIA – Ministry of Internal Affairs

MP – Member of Parliament

NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation

NiT – Nations in Transit

ODIHR - Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights

OSCE - Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe

OSINT - Open-Source Intelligence

PSA - Political Settlements Analysis

RATEL - Regulatory Authority for Electronic Communications and Postal Services

REM - Regulatory Body for Electronic Media

RTS - Radio Television of Serbia

SBB - Serbia Broadband

SIM - Subscriber Identity Module

SLAPP - Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation

SNS - Serbian Progressive Party

SORM - System for Operative Investigative Activities

SPS - Socialist Party of Serbia

SSG / SSSG - State Security Service of Georgia

TI - Transparency International

V-Dem – Varieties of Democracy

VIB - Vibrant Information Barometer

WGI - Worldwide Governance Indicators

Introduction

In 2024, among Eastern European states classified identically as electoral autocracies, government disinformation practices were uniformly high, while social media monitoring intensity varied by a factor of two and internet filtering practices diverged even more sharply (Mechkova, 2026). Serbia and Georgia shared the same regime type label, yet their digital governance operated through different configurations. In Serbia, Amnesty International (2024) documented how security services deployed the domestically developed NoviSpy spyware against journalists and activists, extracted data from seized phones through Cellebrite forensic tools during police interviews, and maintained telecommunications metadata-retention systems accessible to state agencies. In Georgia, Meta removed a coordinated inauthentic behaviour network linked to the Government Administration's Strategic Communications Department (Nimmo, Gleicher et al., 2023, p. 20), while ISFED (2024) documented 98 TikTok channels with over 30 million views spreading anti-opposition narratives through coordinated, simultaneous posting, including AI-generated voice imitations attributed to opposition leaders. One regime surveilled and disciplined through institutional channels; the other constructed layered perception-management ecosystems through proxy actors and anonymous platform operations. This variation is empirically documented across individual cases (Feldstein, 2021; Amnesty International, 2024; ISFED, 2024), cross-nationally established through comparative data showing significant within-autocracy differences in digital methods (Hellmeier, 2016; Mechkova, 2026), and theoretically unexplained.

Three bodies of scholarship address different dimensions of how non-democratic political orders function and endure, but none can explain why identically classified regimes select different digital governance strategies. Regime survival scholarship has mapped the strategic repertoire available to authoritarian rulers: repression, co-optation, and legitimation (Gerschewski, 2013), and has identified that rulers face structurally different threats from insiders and outsiders (Gandhi, 2008; Svolik, 2012). However, it lacks a structural variable that determines which threat dominates in a given regime and, therefore, which instruments are prioritised (Frantz, 2024, p. 241). Digital authoritarianism scholarship has catalogued the expanding toolkit of surveillance, censorship, and narrative manipulation that non-democratic rulers deploy (Deibert, 2010; Feldstein, 2021; Schlumberger et al., 2024). However, it documents variation without structurally explaining it: the question of which factors underlie a ruler's preference for one tactic over another remains an open research problem (Feldstein,

2021, p. 24; Schlumberger et al., 2024, p. 765). Political settlements analysis provides the vocabulary for understanding how power is distributed beneath formal institutions and how that distribution shapes governance outcomes (Khan, 2010; Levy, 2014), particularly in contexts where regimes operate under conditional relationships with supranational organisations. Yet it has never been applied to the digital domain or to Eastern European contexts (Schulz & Kelsall, 2021). Each literature reaches a boundary where the next could provide analytical support. The connection between them has not been made, and recent scholarship identifies it as a priority (Roberts & Oosterom, 2025)

This thesis addresses that gap. Its aim is to develop a conceptual framework that bridges political settlements analysis, regime survival scholarship, and digital authoritarianism into a single analytical architecture, and to conduct a plausibility probe of the framework's core layers. The framework argues that the structural configuration of the ruling coalition — specifically, its position along Levy's (2014) dominant–competitive dimension within personalised settlements — shapes which governance functions are prioritised for regime survival and through what combination of digital means those functions are pursued. The overarching research question is: how do hybrid political regimes with distinct personalised political settlement types employ digital authoritarian strategies for regime survival in Eastern Europe? This question is operationalised through four theoretical propositions, derived from the framework's causal logic in Chapter 2, which specify the expected governance-function configurations and means-assembly patterns for each settlement type.

The plausibility probe operationalises the framework's first three layers through a structured, focused comparison (George & Bennett, 2005) of Serbia and Georgia across 2022–2024. Serbia, approximating a personalised dominant settlement, and Georgia, approximating a personalised competitive settlement, are compared using the same analytical questions, indicators, and evidence criteria. The study period covers political contestation events that activated and made documentable digital governance practices: Serbia's 2022 elections and 2023 anti-violence protests, and Georgia's foreign agents law process and 2024 parliamentary elections. The probe relies on qualitative document analysis of institutional assessment reports, specialist technical reports, and legal evaluation documents, with quantitative indices from V-Dem and its Digital Society Project used for descriptive triangulation. Following Eckstein (2009), the probe does not aim to definitively confirm or falsify the framework. It assesses whether the proposed mechanisms are consistent with observable patterns and whether the comparison reveals systematic differences traceable to the settlement-type distinction, with the aim of refining the framework's elements on the basis of the empirical findings

Several delimitations define the study's scope. The framework is assessed only for personalised settlements in Eastern European hybrid regimes; extension to impersonalised settlements or other regions would require additional probing. The plausibility probe is limited to the framework's first three layers: settlement type, governance functions, and digital means. These constitute the framework's core causal chain, connecting structural conditions to observable governance configurations. Layers 4 through 6 are theorised but not empirically assessed, as they require primary data not available in the secondary sources this study analyses. Interview-based inquiry, while valuable for future research, is deferred as methodologically premature before the framework's plausibility is established through documentary evidence (Eckstein, 2009). The value of the framework and directions for its future application, including geographic extension, methodological deepening, and full operationalisation of the remaining layers, are addressed in Chapter 5.

The thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 1 reviews the literature on hybrid regimes, regime survival, political settlements, and digital authoritarianism, identifying the gap that motivates the study. Chapter 2 presents the six-layer conceptual framework and its causal logic, deriving the four theoretical propositions. Chapter 3 details the methodology, including the comparative design, operationalisation, data sources, and analysis strategy. Chapter 4 presents the within-case analyses for Georgia and Serbia across the three probed layers. Chapter 5 discusses the cross-case comparison, assesses the four propositions, presents the main findings and framework refinements, evaluates rival explanations, and outlines directions for future research. The conclusion synthesises the configurational answer to the research question and reflects on the framework's broader significance.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

1.1 Hybrid Regimes and the Limits of Classifications

Democratic erosion in Eastern Europe is empirically established. The V-Dem Institute (2026) documents 92 autocracies globally, while Freedom House's Nations in Transit (2024) classifies only 10 of 29 post-communist countries as democracies. Academic literature identifies a third wave of autocratization characterised by gradual, legalistic erosion led by elected incumbents (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019, pp. 1102–1110). Eastern Europe concentrates these dynamics: V-Dem data show that 11 of 16 post-communist states experienced declines on the electoral democracy index between 2018 and 2024. This post-communist transformation created conditions fundamentally different from earlier transitions (Carothers, 2002, pp. 9, 16; Kopecký & Mudde, 2000, p. 518), though the wider regional picture may be better characterised as a stable democratic malaise rather than a uniform slide toward authoritarianism (Cianetti et al., 2018, p. 247). The fact that many post-communist polities sustain a durable intermediate position is precisely the pattern that motivated hybrid regime scholarship. Acceptance of the idea that political systems were stabilising in such intermediate positions enabled a reorientation in comparative politics. Carothers (2002, pp. 9-10) demonstrated that the "transition paradigm" was empirically exhausted (the idea that departure from dictatorship constitutes movement towards democracy) because many systems had settled into durable "grey zones". To that argument, Levitsky and Way (2002, pp. 51-54) respond with their formal institutional-focused framework and concept of competitive authoritarianism – a distinct regime type in which democratic institutions are formally maintained but systematically subverted through an uneven playing field. They showed that competition in these regimes is real but structurally rigged, which makes the coexistence of democratic institutions with authoritarian practices a stalemate rather than a transitional anomaly. Later works broadly confirmed the influence of that concept and work. For example, Cassani and Carbone (2024, pp. 25-28) demonstrate that electoral authoritarianism has become the most common regime type globally, which means that the hybrid form is no longer just a case. It is recognised as the dominant mode of contemporary non-democratic governance. However, the proliferation of hybrid regime subtypes blurred the boundaries between categories (Collier & Levitsky, 1997, p. 451; Kailitz, 2024, p. 11,20). The descriptive achievement is important, but the question is whether classification can also explain how these regimes function internally.

No, it cannot, because the limitation is structural. Firstly, hybrid regime classification cannot account for the internal distribution of power that drives governance outcomes (Kopecký & Mudde, 2000, pp. 517, 528). Timm (2012, p. 169) argues that the analytical category of political regime does not explain what rulers do with the power, and that requires moving beyond the regime level to examine how decision-making power is actually produced. Moreover, when static typological categories treat regimes as time-invariant labels, they are unable to capture how the shifting balance of power between a leader and their support group reshapes incentives and capacities during the leader's tenure (Van Den Bosch, 2024, p. 276). V-Dem's neopatrimonialism index (2026) is a perfect example of how to see that issue in practice. Among Eastern European states classified as electoral autocracies, scores on this index in 2024 ranged from moderate (0.45) to high (0.72). In other words, fundamentally different configurations of clientelistic resource distribution, presidential power, and regime corruption within the same typological box were mixed (Coppedge et al., 2026). Neopatrimonialism scholarship has documented the primacy of informal power patterns in post-communist systems (Erdmann & Engel, 2007, p. 45), and Knott (2018, pp. 362, 369) showed that post-Soviet hybrid regimes maintained their intermediate position through informal elite-business symbiosis — precisely the dynamics that existing classification schemes do not systematically address (Escribà-Folch & Timoneda, 2024, p. 77; Stewart et al., 2016, pp. 44, 63). Yet this work remains descriptive: it identifies informal logics without specifying what structural conditions produce different forms of them.

Secondly, the literature treats personalism as a descriptive attribute rather than a variable process. Personalism is globally ascendant, with rising power concentration documented across all regions (Escribà-Folch & Timoneda, p. 78, 2024; Kendall-Taylor et al., 2017) and its results, such as higher repression, greater internal conflict risk, poorer economic outcomes and others, are well seen and documented (Frantz, Kendall-Taylor, Wright, et al., 2020; Geddes et al., 2014). Still, as said, personalism is treated primarily as a coding criterion rather than deeply examined for how different elite power configurations produce distinct forms of personalised rule. Simply put, a ruler who controls both the military and the ruling party operates in a fundamentally different political context than one who controls only the government apparatus, because the sequencing of loyalty appointments, party control, and security shapes different structures (Escribà-Folch & Timoneda, 2024, p. 268; Van Den Bosch, 2024, p. 66). Seeing it as a fixed concept can hide how a regime's power structure shapes the leader's decisions, including strategic choices.

If the theory cannot capture internal power structures or the variable nature of personalism, it cannot explain why similarly classified regimes choose different governance strategies. To justify that, data from the Digital Society Project shows that among Eastern European states classified as electoral autocracies in 2024, government disinformation practices are uniformly high when social media monitoring intensity varies by a factor of two and internet filtering practices diverge even more sharply (Mechkova, 2026). Additionally, Schlumberger and colleagues (Schlumberger et al., 2024, pp. 762, 778) suggest that regimes with the same label deploy different digital configurations and add that this pattern is not random and cannot be explained by existing regime typologies.

The identification and documentation of a durable political form between democracy and autocracy has been accomplished, but its analytical reach ends where explanation begins in some cases. Moving from classification to explanation requires an inquiry that starts with how power is distributed, treats personalism as a variable rather than a label, and accounts for why structurally different configurations produce different strategic choices. If hybrid regime scholarship can tell us what these political orders look like, the question must be what rulers in these systems actually do to maintain power, and whether existing scholarship on authoritarian survival can explain the strategic variation that regime classification cannot. That is what the following parts examine.

1.2 Regime Survival and Authoritarian Stability

Authoritarian survival requires managing two fundamentally different challenges simultaneously, each operating through its own institutional logic. The first is the elite challenge. Svolik (2012) uses formal game-theory models to demonstrate that ruling coalition members, who can coordinate a coup, are statistically more dangerous than the mass public (pp. 4–5). Dictators are most frequently removed by government insiders (Svolik, 2009, p. 478), and the central problem becomes power-sharing: rulers and their allies cannot fully commit to agreements on the distribution of spoils, thereby creating a permanent coup risk (Frantz & Ezrow, 2011, p. 4). Ruling parties and their inner councils manage this by making powerholders' actions transparent to allies and raising the cost of defection through sunk political investment (Cassani & Carbone, 2024, pp. 28–30).

The second is the mass challenge. Gandhi (2008, p. 181) argues that rulers face a distinct governance problem regarding outsiders: soliciting cooperation from society through nominally democratic institutions such as legislatures and parties. Legislatures serve as controlled bargaining forums where potential opponents reveal demands without appearing

resistant, enabling the ruler to make targeted policy concessions (Gandhi & Przeworski, 2007, p. 1281). The need for these institutions varies with resource endowments. Rulers dependent on taxation and industrial production must institutionalise, as they need societal cooperation; rulers with access to external rents do not (De Mesquita & Smith, 2010, pp. 936–938). De Mesquita and Smith (2010, p. 937) formalise this through selectorate theory, adding that coordination goods such as free press, transparency, and ease of communication are productive but dangerous to rulers because they enable citizens to organise. Suppressing them protects the regime but damages the tax base, which explains why the available strategic combinations vary systematically.

Gerschewski (2013) synthesised the overall repertoire into three functional pillars of autocratic stability: repression raises the cost of dissent, co-optation distributes incentives for compliance, and legitimation constructs normative justification. These pillars are interdependent. Institutions that co-opt by bringing opponents into legislative arenas simultaneously enable more targeted repression by making those opponents identifiable (Frantz, 2024, p. 237). Maerz (2018, pp. 17–19), applying fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis to 62 authoritarian regimes, identified five distinct pillar combinations that all produce durable rule, demonstrating equifinality. The most relevant for Eastern Europe's hybrid regimes is the adaptive configuration, which combines legitimation with simulated pluralism while avoiding harsh physical repression (Maerz, 2018, pp. 17-19). Multiple paths lead to survival, but what determines which path a regime takes is the question the survival literature raises but does not answer.

Three unresolved tensions reveal why. First, the insider-outsider debate. Svolik's (2012) emphasis on elite monitoring and Gandhi's (2008) on societal co-optation are empirically supported across different types of regimes. Still, the literature never makes explicit the structural condition that determines which threat predominates. The disagreement arises because they theorise different audiences within the same regime: Gandhi's legislatures solve the outsider problem, and Svolik's ruling parties solve the insider one (Gandhi, 2008; Svolik, 2012). Personalist rulers face lower annual insider-ouster risk because they have eliminated elite coordination mechanisms, yet remain vulnerable when conditions change (Escribà-Folch & Wright, 2010, p. 350). It lacks a vocabulary for differentiating between power configurations. Second, the same institution produces opposite effects depending on context. Elections in their first three cycles substantially increase regime-change risk, but survival beyond this threshold stabilises the regime by reducing uncertainty (Bernhard et al., 2020a, pp. 580–582). This tension is sharpest in limited multiparty regimes, which are the most common

but also the most fragile contemporary form of authoritarianism (Hadenius & Teorell, 2007, p. 151). Yet what determines that context remains unspecified. Third, technology enters as a structurally flat variable. Dragu and Lupu (2021, pp. 9–10, 19) demonstrate that technological innovation increases preventive repression through a chilling effect, in which opposition groups reduce mobilisation in anticipation of enhanced monitoring. Still, their model predicts the same outcome across all regimes. It cannot explain why one regime uses surveillance while another uses disinformation. Mauk (2024, pp. 141, 147) adds that in distorted information environments, citizen perceptions of regime performance can be entirely decoupled from objective reality, but does not specify when or where this decoupling is more likely.

These tensions reduce to a single analytical absence. The insider-outsider debate persists because the structural configuration of the ruling coalition is not treated as a variable when it determines which audience matters most. Elections produce opposite effects because the power gap between incumbents and challengers shapes the context, but that power gap is unmeasured. Technology produces undifferentiated predictions because the model lacks a structural input. Frantz (2024, p. 241) acknowledges this directly, identifying the question of which factors underlie a ruler's preference for one tactic over another as an open research problem. What is missing is a framework that makes these structural conditions do explicit analytical work, linking the configuration of power to the selection of instruments, including the digital instruments that now dominate the toolkit. The following section examines the scholarship on those digital instruments and the governance functions they serve.

1.3 Political Settlements

The structural vocabulary that the survival literature lacks exists in a body of scholarship that examines how power is actually distributed beneath formal institutions. A political settlement describes the underlying configuration of central power that shapes how formal and informal institutions function in a given society (Kelsall et al., 2022; M. H. Khan, 2013; Levy, 2014). Institutions do not operate anonymously: their enforcement and survival depend on whether the benefits they generate are compatible with the distribution of power among the groups capable of supporting or overthrowing them (M. H. Khan, 2010, p. 4). When that compatibility holds, the settlement reproduces itself; when it does not, institutions are distorted or overthrown (Di John & Putzel, 2009, pp. 8, 9, 15). The same formal institutions produce different outcomes across settings because they are embedded in different power configurations (Whaites, 2008, pp. 4, 13). Where standard institutional analysis asks whether rules align with best-practice templates, political settlement analysis asks who has the power

to enforce, resist, or shape existing rules, and through what combination of formal authority and informal leverage (Di John & Putzel, 2009, p. 18). Informality is a functional requirement: patron-client arrangements align benefit distributions with power distributions, where formal institutions alone cannot (Behuria et al., 2017, pp. 3, 13). Governance strategies operating through formal and semi-formal channels are therefore expressions of the settlement, not deviations from it.

What does "power" mean in this context? Khan (2010, p. 14) defines it as "holding power", meaning the capability to impose costs on competitors and the capacity to mobilise supporters. Holding power encompasses informal organisational capabilities relevant to groups with and without formal office, exercised through the patron-client networks in which they are embedded. The growth-stability trade-off connects this to governance: the more a ruling coalition enforces institutions against powerful groups, the more instability it generates, and a vulnerable coalition can barely push at all (Khan, 2010, pp. 18–21). In personalised settlements, where power is concentrated around individual leaders and their networks rather than impersonal institutions (2014, pp. 12, 16), the mechanism that holds coalitions together is rent allocation: discretionary benefits distributed through patron-client networks that constitute the state's constitutive logic. Any governance strategy in a personalised settlement operates through rent logic: control over resources and access secures compliance and maintains loyalty.

The survival literature shows that rulers face different threats depending on whether the primary danger comes from insiders or outsiders. Still, it cannot specify which structural condition determines which threat prevails. Khan's (2010, pp. 93-94) framework addresses this by differentiating settlements according to the power of excluded and subordinate factions, creating configurations with distinct enforcement capacities and time horizons. Applied comparatively, this can reveal that two regimes classified identically on a democracy index may show entirely different threat environments (Pospisil & Rocha Menocal, 2017, pp. 214–216). However, Khan's framework has limitations for this study. It relies on a zero-sum understanding of power that leaves little room for ideology, persuasion, or legitimation as independent forces (Kelsall et al., 2022, pp. 17–19). In practice, identifying holding power configurations requires detailed historical knowledge of each case, and since holding power varies issue by issue, the approach's generalisability remains unclear (Kelsall, 2018, pp. 4–6). These constitute methodological constraints for comparative research requiring consistent cross-case classification.

For comparative purposes, Levy (2014) simplifies this coalition logic along two dimensions: dominance versus competitiveness (the power gap between rulers and challengers)

and personalisation versus impersonalisation (whether governance operates through codified rules or personalised networks). Within the personalised space, dominant and competitive settlements generate structurally distinct incentive environments, with different time horizons, enforcement capacities, and threat dynamics. The operationalisation of this typology for the present study is developed in Chapter 2.

Shorter time horizons create pressure to prioritise immediate, visible outputs over long-term structural consolidation (Levy, 2014, p. 36; Oduro et al., 2014, pp. 15, 21–22). These differences create the expectation that dominant and competitive settlements will face distinct threat environments, leading to different strategic priorities. Whether structural pressures can shift a settlement's character over time depends on an unanswered theoretical question. Khan (2018, p. 1) characterised the settlement as an interactive order, a complex system where the overall pattern emerges from decentralised interactions rather than conscious agreement. Kelsall (2018, pp. 4–5) insists on an ongoing agreement maintained through negotiation. If a settlement is an interactive order, then accumulated micro-level changes can shift its character without conscious renegotiation. If it is an agreement, such shifts require deliberate elite action. This debate and distinction matter for the present study because the conceptual framework developed in Chapter 2 theorises a feedback mechanism through which governance strategies and whether such reshaping operates through incremental accumulation or deliberate renegotiation have direct implications for how cases of apparent settlement transition are interpreted.

Despite its analytical power, PSA has limitations that define the space this thesis occupies. The framework tends to treat power as a given structural constraint, leaving limited space for how rulers actively choose among available strategies (Kelsall, 2018, pp. 4, 12), and that motivation gap is acknowledged: the framework explains when states are structurally positioned to act, but not always why elites choose one strategy over another (Kelsall et al., 2022). This is precisely the question that the survival literature also leaves unanswered, and this thesis addresses it by connecting settlement types to the selection of governance instruments. Across traditions, Cummings (2025, pp. 118–121) critiques the materialist foundations of PSA and argues that identity, status, and moral beliefs shape institutional change in ways the framework cannot yet capture. This is a limitation, which this thesis acknowledges rather than resolves, since the conceptual framework developed in Chapter 2 remains within the materialist tradition. Geographically, PSA was developed for Global South contexts: Khan's (2010) cases are from South and Southeast Asia, and Schulz and Kelsall's dataset (2021) includes no Eastern European cases. Therefore, applying PSA to Eastern Europe's post-

Soviet and post-Yugoslav hybrid regimes is novel, but it also requires acknowledging that post-communist legacies create distinctive conditions that the original framework was not designed to address. Whether PSA holds analytical purchase in this context is part of what the plausibility probe in Chapters 4 and 5 examines. Taken together, PSA provides the structural vocabulary that the survival literature lacked. This connects power configuration to governance outcomes, while Levy's (2014) dominant-competitive distinction provides a comparative foundation for examining how different structural pressures shape distinct categories.

In terms of this thesis, there is one domain that PSA has never addressed. Khan's foundational work (2010) predates systematic digital authoritarianism, Levy (2014) contains no discussion of technology, and Kelsall (2022) still does not engage with digital tools. The only exception is Khan and Roy's (2021) paper on digital identity systems, which addressed a narrow policy domain rather than the broader question of how settlement types shape digital governance strategies. None of them examines the increasingly digital means through which governance strategies are now pursued. Understanding those means requires a different literature, and for that, the following section turns to the scholarship on digital authoritarianism.

1.4 Digital Authoritarianism

As emphasised above, the vocabulary of political settlement analysis has never been applied to the digital domain, yet the means by which rulers pursue surveillance, co-optation, and legitimation are increasingly digital. Over two decades, an interdisciplinary field has documented how non-democratic rulers adapted to and weaponised the digital infrastructure once expected to be their undoing (Deibert, 2008; 2010; Feldstein, 2021). This section maps this scholarship, its evolution, the toolkit it catalogued, and the approaches through which it has been studied.

The internet entered politics with expectations of citizen empowerment (Diamond, 2010), but MacKinnon (2011, p. 38-41) showed that authoritarian regimes had already adapted, creating "networked authoritarianism" in which online conversation was monitored and steered rather than blocked. Deibert's (2010, pp. 10–11, 28–31) generational model captured this evolution: first-generation controls denied access; second-generation controls used legal and just-in-time mechanisms; third-generation controls moved beyond denial to actively appropriate the information environment. The question for the digital domain is whether digital tools merely upgrade existing survival functions or transform them qualitatively. Schlumberger and colleagues (2024, p. 772) argue that digitisation restructures the relationship between rulers and subjects by making control more continuous, more targeted, and less visible. Schlumberger

and colleagues (2024) identify three governance functions: knowing, influencing behaviour, and influencing beliefs, which organise the digital toolkit around the ruler's strategic needs rather than the technology itself. The toolkit that scholarship has catalogued clusters around these three functions, operating across the layers of the digital environment: infrastructure, network, and application (Keremoğlu & Weidmann, 2020, pp. 1691–1692).

Surveillance and data extraction serve the first function by identifying threats, mapping opposition networks, and anticipating mobilisation. At the infrastructure layer, Russia's System for Operative Investigative Activities (SORM) requires internet service providers to install monitoring nodes connected to security services, a system emulated by at least nine former Soviet states (Kerr, 2018, p. 3822; Soldatov & Borogan, 2013, p. 25). Maréchal (2017, pp. 36–38) contextualises this within Russia's broader approach to treating internet governance, cybersecurity, and media policy as components of a unified "information security" doctrine, a framing that legitimises comprehensive state control while obscuring its political function. At the network layer, deep packet inspection examines data in transit (Gohdes, 2024, pp. 36, 151). At the application layer, tools range from mandatory SIM registration and biometric identity systems to commercially available spyware such as Pegasus (Roberts & Oosterom, 2025, pp. 872–873). The political effect extends beyond direct targeting: Dragu and Lupu (2021, p. 10) formalise the "chilling effect," whereby technological innovation reduces the state's monitoring costs and opposition groups decrease mobilisation not because punishment has been demonstrated but because its probability has structurally increased.

Censorship and informational control serve the second function by influencing behaviour, raising the costs of opposition coordination and disrupting collective action. Internet shutdowns remain in active use, as Gohdes (2024, pp. 60-67) shows in the Syrian experience, where they coincided with increases in state violence, suggesting that digital and physical repression are strategically linked. Frantz and colleagues (2020, pp. 14–16) found that digital repression is associated with subsequent increases in high-intensity physical repression because surveillance makes targeting more precise. Still, this relationship is not uniform. Feldstein's (2021, pp. 63, 70) cross-national analysis reveals that a government's limitation of political and civil liberties is the strongest predictor of digital repression, while state-committed physical violence shows the weakest statistical relationship. The implication is that digital repression often operates as a substitute for more violent strategies of control, and this substitution effect is most clear in regimes that feature some degree of liberalisation, precisely the competitive autocracies where rulers cannot afford the political cost of visible coercion (Weidmann & Rød, 2019, pp. 139–142). This substitution logic creates tension with Levitsky

and Way's (2010) framework, which grounds competitive authoritarian survival in organisational power, the material and behavioural capacity to skew the playing field. If the most effective digital substitutes in competitive settings (disinformation, narrative manipulation, platform-level interference) are perceptual rather than coercive in their primary mechanism, then the digital governance logic may diverge from the organisational-power logic that characterises conventional survival strategy. This tension is directly addressed in Chapter 2. Hellmeier (2016, pp. 1175–1178), in the only study to model this variation quantitatively across 34 autocratic regimes, finds that regime type and economic conditions account for variation in internet filtering, but the structural configuration of the ruling coalition is absent from that analysis. Additional behavioural controls include bandwidth throttling, IP blocking, DNS redirection, and keyword filtering at deeper network layers (Earl et al., 2022, p. 11), while at the application layer, governments compel platforms to remove content or shadowban users through legal mandates and informal pressure (MacKinnon, 2011, pp. 38–39).

Additionally, King, Pan, and Roberts (2014, pp. 326–327, 341) showed that China's censorship targets collective expression rather than individual criticism, permitting complaints that serve as feedback while suppressing coordination. This demonstrates that censorship serves a specific survival function (preventing coordination) rather than operating as a blanket tool, suggesting that what determines which content is suppressed may depend on the threat environment the ruler faces. Legal architecture enables all technical tools: laws criminalising "extremism," data localisation requirements, and "information security" doctrines.

Narrative manipulation and behavioural steering serve the third function by influencing beliefs through the construction of pro-regime narratives, the discrediting of opposition, and the manufacture of consent. This dimension has expanded most rapidly and represents the sharpest departure from pre-digital practice — from denial of access to the active construction of the information environment. Information flooding overwhelms the space, drowning critical narratives rather than deleting them, and information channelling redirects attention without producing false content (Earl et al., 2022, pp. 13–14). Moreover, they argue that channelling is uniquely corrosive to accountability because it does not register as repression for those experiencing it: citizens feel free to speak, but the structure of the information environment ensures that critical voices are buried (Earl et al., 2022, p. 18). Operational infrastructures include bot networks, troll armies, and patriotic hackers, whose state relationships are unclear and are described as a form of digital devolution (Conduit, 2024, pp. 979–982). In its practical application, narrative manipulation produces what Schlumberger (2024, p. 774) calls informational agnosticism, which differs from censorship because people can access

information, but it is hard to evaluate. When the informational environment is saturated with contradictory, unverifiable, and emotionally charged content, the rational response is disengagement from political judgment. Informational agnosticism is therefore more effective than blocking, as it produces political apathy without the visible coercion of censors, precisely the kind of subtle control that third-generation controls were designed to achieve (Deibert, 2010, pp. 6, 10).

The empirical landscape is geographically concentrated in China and Russia, whose capital-intensive surveillance architecture and lower-cost law-grounded model dominate the field respectively (Polyakova & Meserole, 2019, pp. 1–2). Kerr (2018, pp. 3828-3829) documented a distinctive post-Soviet regional model characterised by low state censorship, high discourse manipulation, SORM-emulated surveillance, and next-generation controls that maintain plausible deniability, suited to a hybrid regime context by preserving democratic facades while undermining accountability. Kerr (2018, p. 3822) also identifies Armenia and Georgia as the only post-Soviet exceptions to SORM diffusion, which is analytically significant: if Georgia resisted infrastructure-level surveillance, its digital governance must operate through different channels, more likely at the application layer through platform manipulation, coordinated inauthentic behaviour, and legal pressure rather than hardware-embedded monitoring. This directly suggests that structural conditions give rise to different tool configurations. This pattern is strengthened by Feldstein's (2021, pp. 53-55) study: each of the three regimes he examines (Thailand, the Philippines, and Ethiopia) deploys a structurally distinct combination of digital tools that reflects its position within the regime, threat environment, and institutional constraints. However, Feldstein (2021, p. 24) and Schlumberger and colleagues (2024, p. 765) identify the question of which factors underlie a ruler's preference for one tactic over another as an open research problem.

Smaller hybrid regimes in Eastern Europe remain virtually absent from this empirical landscape despite documented digital governance practices. Even the most analytically sophisticated framework in the field (Schlumberger et al., 2024) operates with a generic autocrat. It specifies the functions digital tools serve, but not how the structural configuration of power shapes which functions are prioritised. A ruler in a dominant personalised settlement, where challengers are marginalised, and the coalition controls economic and media assets, faces different imperatives than one in a competitive personalised settlement where elections produce meaningful uncertainty. Deniability is itself a structural variable: regimes lacking the capacity for direct control rely on intermediaries such as patriotic hackers, contracted firms, and compliant platforms, while regimes with stronger party-state integration centralise

operations more openly. The variation is empirically established (Feldstein, 2021; Hellmeier, 2016), but the political settlements literature provides the structural dimension while remaining silent on the digital, and the digital authoritarianism literature provides the instrumental dimension while remaining silent on structure. The two developed within different disciplinary traditions and have never been connected. The following section draws together the gaps identified across all preceding literatures to define the research space this thesis occupies

1.5 Gap Statement and Research Question

smaller hybrid regimes in Eastern Europe remain virtually absent from this empirical landscape despite documented digital governance practices. The most analytically sophisticated framework in the field (Schlumberger et al., 2024) comes closest to addressing this problem. It posits that different regimes develop distinct digital profiles through piecemeal digitisation, focusing on dimensions of control most important for their own survival, and that the combination of tools differs because regimes face different threats; a contested regime may prioritise influencing beliefs while a consolidated one focuses on knowing (Schlumberger et al., 2024, p. 778). However, the framework itself identifies two critical gaps: existing research has failed to operate at a level of abstraction that connects technology usage to the strategic ends of authoritarian regimes, and scholarship has neglected how digitisation relates to the macropolitical regime-type dimension (Schlumberger et al., 2024). The framework operates with a generic autocrat: it specifies functions but not how the structural configuration of power shapes which functions are prioritised and which tools are selected. A ruler in a dominant personalised settlement faces different imperatives than one in a competitive personalised settlement, yet the literature documents tool selection in both settings without explaining the systematic variation, a variation now empirically established by cross-national data showing significant within-autocracy differences in digital methods (Feldstein, 2021; Hellmeier, 2016). Each literature fails at the point where the next could provide analytical help. The survival literature explains strategic choice but stalls because its theorists address different threat audiences without a variable that determines which dominates in a given case (Gandhi, 2008; Svolik, 2012). Digital authoritarianism scholarship catalogues tools but falls back on regime type (Hellmeier, 2016) or defines practices without connecting their selection to the survival process (Glasius & Michaelsen, 2018), and what the field knows is built extensively on China and Russia (Roberts & Oosterom, 2025), whose resource endowments bear little resemblance to smaller Eastern European hybrid regimes. Political settlements analysis provides the structural vocabulary that both literatures lack, but neither has applied it to the digital domain.

The real gap is the absence of a framework connecting the structural configuration of the ruling coalition to the selection of digital governance instruments through the logic of regime survival.

The aim of this thesis is to develop a conceptual framework bridging political settlements analysis, regime survival scholarship, and digital authoritarianism, and to conduct a plausibility probe of its core layers using Georgia and Serbia as comparative cases. The probe is the methodologically appropriate first step for a new framework (Eckstein, 2009). The overarching research question is: how do hybrid political regimes with distinct personalised political settlement types employ digital authoritarian strategies to sustain regime survival in Eastern Europe? Two sub-questions trace the analytical chain: what governance functions do rulers in each settlement type prioritise, and through what combination of digital means do they pursue those functions? These are operationalised through four theoretical propositions derived from the framework, presented in Chapter 2.

Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework

2.1 Layer 1: Political Settlement as Structural Condition

The first layer establishes the structural context within which all subsequent layers operate. This thesis defines a political settlement, following Levy (2014, p. 17), as the set of institutional arrangements through which a country addresses the fundamental governance challenge of restraining violence. A settlement is stable when the distribution of benefits its institutions support is consistent with the distribution of power in society, and the resulting outcomes are sustainable over time (Levy, 2014, pp. 22, 29). Levy organises this concept along two dimensions: the degree of political competitiveness (whether power is concentrated in a dominant leader or party, or organised around a competitive truce between rival forces) and the degree of institutional personalisation (whether governance operates through impersonal, codified rules or through personalised networks centred on specific identities. See Figure 1) (Levy, 2014, pp. 12, 16)

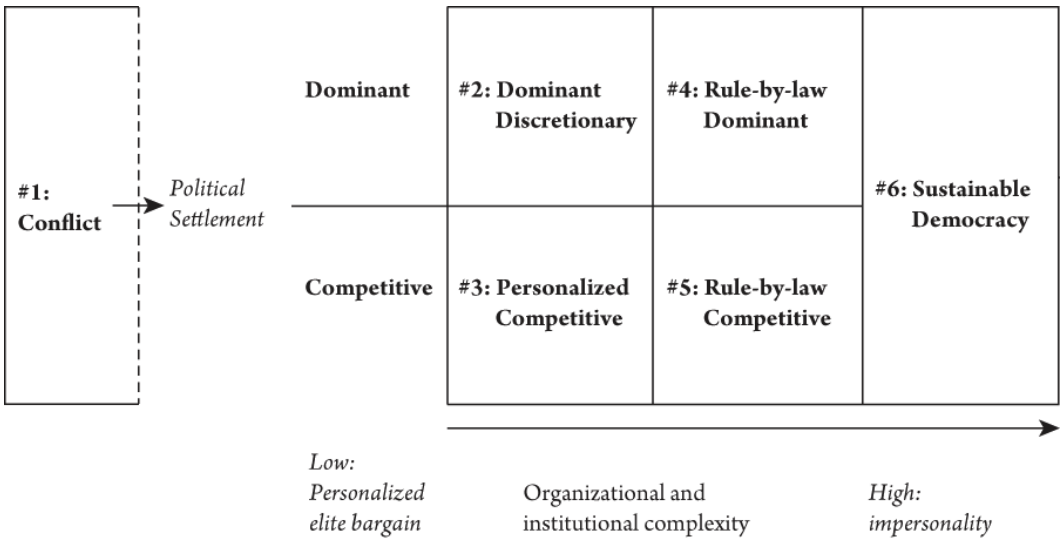

Figure 1: A development Typology Created by Levy (2014)

In a personalised dominant settlement, the power gap between rulers and challengers is very large. The ruler governs as a principal, and all actors function as agents whose positions depend on the patron's continued favour (Levy, 2014, pp. 18, 29). The ruling coalition controls most institutional levers: the security apparatus is staffed by loyalists, the judiciary operates under political pressure, media ownership is concentrated among regime-aligned actors, and regulatory bodies serve coalition interests rather than independent mandates. Because subordinate actors have nowhere else to go, this configuration produces longer time horizons and stronger enforcement capacity (Levy, 2014, pp. 33, 40). The ruler can invest in long-term

strategies and discipline agents who deviate, because those agents cannot credibly threaten to leave. The primary vulnerability is therefore internal: the danger comes from coalition insiders building independent power bases or factional splits in which subordinates signal to rival groups. This type of settlement is held together by the continuous flow of rents downward and loyalty upward.

In a personalised competitive settlement, the power gap is narrower (Levy, 2014, p. 28). This type of settlement operates not as a hierarchy of principals over agents but as an arrangement among principals, though this does not imply a free and plural environment for all actors. Organised opposition possesses party structures, media access, civil society networks, and the capacity to coordinate electoral challenges. Elections produce genuine uncertainty, which does not mean the status quo changes every cycle. Due to this uncertainty, conditionally loyal actors can defect to rival factions, producing shorter time horizons and weaker enforcement capacity (Levy, 2014, pp. 35-40). The credible prospect of alternation compresses the strategic horizon toward immediate survival. The primary vulnerability is therefore external: the existential threat comes from opposition parties, civil society, protest movements, and independent media that possess the organisational capacity to mount a genuine challenge.

The analytical role of this layer is to establish who holds power, how rents flow, and the threat dynamics it generates. It does not explain what rulers do in response to those threats. In fact, that is the task of subsequent layers. However, this layer conditions everything that follows, because the two configurations generate structurally different threat environments: in a dominant personalised settlement, the primary danger runs along the vertical axis and the ruler's problem is monitoring coalition loyalty; in a competitive personalised settlement, the primary danger runs along the horizontal axis and the ruler's problem is managing opposition coordination.

2.2 Layer 2: From Structural Condition to Governance Function

This layer performs the framework's core theoretical move: translating PSA's threat environments into the survival literature's strategic vocabulary, then filtering the result through Schlumberger and colleagues' (2024) governance functions. The translation rests on showing that the two literatures describe the same political dynamics with different vocabularies, and connecting them produces analytical capacity that neither possesses alone.

The concept of holding power is the same capacity that the survival literature describes but never names structurally. Svolik (2012, pp. 2-6) identifies threats posed by actors holding

power within the coalition who are capable of defection. Gandhi's (2008, pp. 1280-1282) outsider threat is posed by actors holding power outside the coalition who may have the capacity to mobilise collective action. The settlement type determines which group poses the dominant threat, an insight absent from the regime-survival literature, which lacks a structural variable to resolve the insider-outsider debate. The same logic applies to mechanisms. Bueno de Mesquita and Smith (2010, pp. 937–938) define private goods as rent distributed to coalition members; Gandhi (2008) describes institutional co-optation, where opponents are offered legislative seats and policy concessions as a form of rent distribution; in the political settlements literature, this is described as managing elements of organised opposition for later control and weakening (Levy, 2014, pp. 23, 35, 88). Svolik (2012, p. 7) documents power-sharing among parties and within inner councils as related mechanisms for insider coalitions. The linking PSA specifies that, in personalised settings, these mechanisms take the form of discretionary patron-client allocation rather than impersonal institutional bargaining.

This synthesis introduces a structural condition. If insiders are the primary threat, the problem of commitment arises: without an independent enforcer, power-sharing is about mutual deterrence, and the ruler must make defection costly. The mechanism connecting internal threat to behavioural control operates through two sequential steps. First, Svolik (2012, pp. 51, 54, 86) establishes that the fundamental problem in authoritarian power-sharing is imperfect information, that allies cannot verify whether the ruler is complying with agreements because of the secrecy inherent in autocratic governance. His solution is institutional transparency, in which formal rules make power grabs observable (Svolik, 2012, pp. 51-52). In personalised dominant settlements, however, institutions are captured and serve the ruler rather than constraining him; they cannot provide the independent transparency Svolik describes (2012, p. 61). Digital monitoring replaces this institutional function because surveillance of elite communications, financial flows, and factional networks makes defection detectable before it materialises. Second, detection alone is insufficient without credible consequences. Dragu and Lupu (2021, pp. 10-11) provide the completion mechanism: technological innovation lowers the cost of preventive repression, and opposition anticipates this enhanced capacity. The resulting chilling effect produces behavioural compliance through structural anticipation rather than actual punishment. In a personalised dominant settlement, where Bueno de Mesquita and Smith (2010, p. 938) show that rulers make essentials feel expendable and where Frantz and Kendall-Taylor (2014, pp. 332-335) document that personalist supporters compete for favour rather than coordinating, this anticipated deterrence completes the behavioural logic: the ruler monitors (knowing), the monitoring creates

anticipated consequences (influencing behaviour), and coalition discipline is maintained through structural expectation rather than constant visible punishment. When outsiders are the primary threat, the strategic logic shifts. In a competitive settlement, organised opposition is the main existential threat, and visible behavioural control carries high risk: backlash through protests and elections can create genuine uncertainty and trigger international scrutiny (Feldstein, 2021; Weidmann & Rød, 2019). This structural limit pushes the primary governance logic toward influencing beliefs (Schlumberger et al., 2024). This faces a challenge from Levitsky and Way's (2010) competitive authoritarianism framework, which grounds survival in organisational power: behavioural restrictions on oppositional capacity rather than belief management. The framework addresses this tension on two grounds. First, many practices Levitsky and Way categorise as behavioural restrictions, such as media control and information asymmetry, also serve a perceptual function by shaping voters' perceptions. In the digital domain, this overlap is especially pronounced, since disinformation, platform manipulation, and coordinated inauthentic behaviour restrict opposition reach while primarily operating through perceptual mechanisms. Second, Weidmann and Rød (2019, p. 6) show that digital tools substitute for traditional repression specifically in more liberalised autocracies, exactly the personalised competitive settlements this framework describes. If digital substitutes for traditional coercion are primarily perceptual, then the digital governance logic of competitive settlements may differ from their conventional survival logic. The framework therefore argues that the belief dimension is analytically primary in competitive settings, not because behavioural control is absent, but because structural constraints push digital governance toward practices whose primary mechanism is perceptual management, even where those practices also restrict opposition capacity.

The same synthesis resolves the information problem that autocrats face. Frantz (2024) frames this as rulers having unreliable information due to repression-induced falsification of preferences. Linked to political settlements, this is actually two distinct problems. In a dominant personalised settlement, the information problem is internal: conditionally loyal coalition members hide their defection intentions. In a competitive settlement, the information problem is external: opposition supporters hide their coordination capacity until the moment of mobilization.

Connecting this to the digital dimension requires specifying how Schlumberger and colleagues' (2024) three governance functions: 1. knowing, 2. influencing behaviour, and 3. influencing beliefs, operate differently across settlement types. Knowing enables both other functions in all settings, because one cannot influence behaviour without knowing whom to

target, and one cannot influence beliefs without knowing what narratives circulate and who is susceptible. However, in dominant-personalised settlements where the primary threat is internal, and coalition discipline is the core problem, knowing also generates direct behavioural effects: when coalition members recognise that the regime's monitoring capacity makes early detection of defection probable, the awareness of surveillance itself produces compliance before formal punishment is applied. In competitive-personalised settlements, knowing primarily supports the other two functions rather than operating as an independent disciplinary mechanism, because the main strategic task is managing outsider perceptions rather than disciplining insiders.

How influencing behaviour operates differs fundamentally between settlement types. In a dominant personalised settlement, institutional capture makes coercion politically costless. The security apparatus, the judiciary, the media ecosystem, and regulatory bodies are already subordinate to the ruling coalition, allowing influence to operate as continuous deterrence (for example, surveillance-backed discipline, legal harassment through captured courts) through institutional channels that face no independent challenge. The regime does not need to hide what it does, because the institutions that would hold it accountable are themselves captured. In a competitive personalised settlement, influencing behaviour is constrained: institutions are not fully captured, elections produce uncertainty, and visible coercion can trigger electoral backlash and international sanctions (Feldstein, 2021; Weidmann & Rød, 2019). These constraints push influencing behaviour toward selective, deniable forms, such as targeting individuals through data leaks, fabricated charges, or harassment by proxy actors whose state connection is formally unacknowledged.

The same variation applies to influencing beliefs. In a competitive settlement, where elections carry weight and contestation is possible (Bernhard et al., 2020), influencing beliefs functions as persuasion, reshaping how voters perceive opposition credibility and regime performance by delegitimising challengers, framing opposition as destabilising or foreign-controlled, and managing public perception around electoral moments. In a dominant settlement, influencing beliefs serves a complementary rather than primary role: because institutional capture already makes behavioural control costless, its function is to maintain an information environment in which critical narratives cannot gain traction and political disengagement becomes the default.

The analytical role of this layer is to establish that the structural configuration identified in Layer 1 determines which governance function carries the most weight. In a dominant personalised settlement, where the primary threat is internal and institutional capture makes

coercion costless, the governance logic centres on influencing behaviour. In a competitive personalised settlement, where the primary threat is external and visible coercion carries high costs, the governance logic centres on influencing beliefs. Both are enabled by knowing, and both can be complemented by the other function in a secondary role.

The theoretical synthesis developed in this layer yields two propositions about how settlement type shapes configurations of governance functions. Each follows from the causal chain constructed above: Levy's (2014) settlement typology determines the power gap, which determines the primary threat audience (Svolik, 2012; Gandhi, 2008), which determines the information problem the ruler faces (Frantz, 2024), which in turn determines which of Schlumberger and colleagues' (2024) governance functions carries the primary strategy weight.

Proposition 1 – In personalised dominant settlements, digital governance is expected to configure around a knowing-behaviour operative axis.

This proposition follows from the mechanism constructed in this layer. In a dominant settlement, the power gap is large, and the primary threat is internal (Levy, 2014). The commitment problem among coalition insiders creates an information deficit that captured institutions cannot resolve through the transparency mechanisms Svolik (2012) describes. Digital monitoring replaces this institutional function, and the chilling effect formalised by Dragu and Lupu (2021) completes the behavioural logic: coalition members reduce defection because they anticipate that surveillance makes early detection probable and the costs prohibitive. In this configuration, knowing is operationally central because it identifies, maps, and exposes politically relevant actors. Influencing behaviour is the main governance output because surveillance, legal pressure, harassment, and institutional discipline raise the cost of deviation. Influencing beliefs supports this configuration by legitimising pressure against targeted actors and sustaining a controlled information environment, but it serves a complementary rather than primary role because institutional capture already makes behavioural control costless

Proposition 2 – In personalised competitive settlements, digital governance is expected to configure around belief-centred perception management.

The second proposition follows from the structural constraints identified in this layer. In a competitive settlement, the power gap is narrower, and the primary threat is external, organised opposition capable of mobilising electoral challenges (Levy, 2014; Gandhi, 2008). Visible behavioural control carries high political costs because elections produce genuine uncertainty and coercion risks backlash and international scrutiny (Feldstein, 2021; Weidmann

& Rød, 2019). These constraints push the primary governance logic toward influencing beliefs (Schlumberger et al., 2024). The tension with Levitsky and Way's (2010) organisational-power framework is addressed by two arguments developed above: first, that many behavioural restrictions also operate through perceptual mechanisms in the digital domain; and second, that Weidmann and Rød's (2019) substitution thesis shows digital tools replacing traditional repression precisely in the more liberalised autocracies that correspond to competitive settlements. This means that influencing beliefs carries the main strategic weight: reshaping how voters perceive the opposition's credibility and the regime's performance. Knowing supports narrative adaptation and target selection, while influencing behaviour is selective and often sequentially dependent on prior belief work, targeting is possible only after the informational groundwork has delegitimised the target

2.3 Layer 3: Digital Means – Technologies and Practices

The previous layer established which governance function each settlement prioritises. This layer specifies how functional priorities translate into observable combinations of digital means, how the same tools serve different governance functions depending on structural context, and how this is empirically grounded.

The analytical foundation is Roberts and Oosterom's (2025, pp. 870, 875) distinction between digital technologies (capacities and infrastructures such as spyware, bot networks, monitoring software, telecom control systems) and digital practices (surveillance, disinformation, informational channelling, coordinated harassment, selective takedowns). Sartori's (1970, p. 1048) insight applies directly: the same structure performs different functions in different contexts. For example, spyware serves knowledge in a dominant settlement by mapping elite reliability and detecting factional realignment (the internal monitoring logic established in Layer 2), but it can serve to influence behaviour in a competitive settlement by enabling targeting of opposition actors and deterring coordination. Bot networks serve legitimation maintenance in a dominant settlement by sustaining a controlled information architecture, but can be deployed for electoral manipulation in a competitive settlement to distort perceptions around elections and protests. Similarly, information flooding and coordinated media campaigns are influencing beliefs by category, but in a dominant settlement, their functional effect can be more behavioural than cognitive. This produces what Schlumberger and colleagues (2024) call informational agnosticism, the process by which citizens disengage from political judgment rather than simply changing their beliefs. The functional assignment of practices that produce agnosticism depends on their

operational context rather than their form alone. The criterion is whether the practice's primary observable linkage is to deterrence outcomes (reduced mobilisation, altered communication behaviour, political withdrawal driven by perceived futility of action) or to perceptual outcomes (changed beliefs about opposition credibility, regime performance, or the reliability of information). This distinction must be assessed on the basis of documented effects rather than inferred from settlement type, to avoid circular classification. What matters is not whether a regime uses spyware or bot networks, but how these tools are assembled into a coherent combination and through what institutional or legal channels their deployment is enabled. Three mechanisms shape this assembly: time horizons, institutional capture, and political cost constraints.

First, time horizons shape investment logic. Dominant settlements produce longer time horizons and competitive settlements produce shorter ones (Levy, 2014, pp. 33, 35–40; as established in Layer 1). Dominant settlements can therefore invest in durable technical capacity, such as telecom monitoring and biometric databases, because the ruler expects to control the institutions that maintain them long enough to extract returns. The expectation is not that dominant settlements rely exclusively on infrastructure-layer controls, but that their digital means are institutionally embedded and routed through captured or dependent channels at the operationally relevant technical layer. Competitive settlements, with shorter time horizons, achieve aims through quicker instruments such as legal infrastructure, which requires a legislative majority rather than years of institutional coordination. Deibert and colleagues (2008; 2010) provide the analytical vocabulary: infrastructure-layer controls (interception systems, SORM-type monitoring) provide continuous, comprehensive capacity, while application-layer controls (platform manipulation, targeted operations) provide adjustable capacity calibrated to specific actors and moments.

Second, institutional capture determines the mode of delegation through which digital governance operates. In a dominant settlement, where the ruler commands subordinate institutions through a principal-agent structure (Levy, 2014, pp. 18, 29; as established in Layer 1), digital governance functions can be delegated directly through captured institutional channels. The security service mandates monitoring equipment at ISPs, the captured regulator grants licences to compliant operators, and the loyalist media ecosystem amplifies regime narratives as a condition of continued access to state advertising and regulatory favour, what Zittrain and Palfrey (2008) describe as second-order regulation, where states pressure private intermediaries to act as enforcers. In a competitive settlement, where institutional capture is incomplete, and the arrangement operates among principals rather than through a hierarchy

(Levy, 2014, p. 28; as established in Layer 1), the regime cannot simply order compliance. Parts of the courts may still challenge, the media may still report, and some regulators might still resist. The regime must therefore create the legal basis for action that institutional capture would otherwise provide. MacKinnon's (2011, p. 38) intermediary liability operates here through legal compulsion rather than patronage subordination, a mechanism that delegates censorship and surveillance to private companies, with legal noncompliance as the enforcement lever. Contracted troll farms operate through intermediaries whose state connections are formally unacknowledged, and cooperative media outlets receive government advertising and regulatory favour, exactly what Conduit (2024, pp. 981-982) describes as digital devolution, in which regimes devolve functions to proxy actors to create a civilian veneer and maintain plausible deniability.

Third, political cost constraints shape the visibility and deniability requirements of digital governance. In competitive settlements, where opposition is organisationally viable, and elections produce genuine uncertainty (Layer 1), visible repression risks international sanctions, opposition solidarity, electoral backlash, and judicial challenges from courts that are not fully captured (Feldstein, 2021, pp. 63, 70; Levy, 2014; Weidmann & Rød, 2019, p. 139). These constraints push the regime toward mechanisms that are formally legitimate (legal frameworks) or deniable (proxy operations). Lucaccini (2025, pp. 6, 46) confirms that illiberal democracies operating under a democratic disguise prioritise information channelling instead of information blocking. Glasius (2018, pp. 3796–3798) notes this as authoritarian practices within formally democratic institutions that sabotage accountability without destroying the institutions. Levy (2014) describes the related phenomenon of isomorphic mimicry: some regimes adopt the institutional form of modern governance (data protection agencies, media regulators, anti-corruption bodies) for external legitimacy, while the underlying function remains personalised control. This is a key characteristic of competitive settlements dependent on external conditionality from international partners. The adopted institutional form allows powerholders to maintain international legitimacy while enabling selective digital intervention through formally legitimate channels.

Time horizons, institutional capture, and political cost constraints operate together rather than independently. A dominant settlement exhibits long time horizons, deep institutional capture, and low political cost constraints simultaneously, and this combination produces a distinctive means-assembly pattern: institutionally embedded, delegated through captured channels, core-attributable digital means. A competitive settlement exhibits short time horizons, partial institutional capture, and high political cost constraints, jointly producing

application-layer, legally constructed, deniably operated means. No single mechanism is sufficient on its own: long time horizons without institutional capture would create investment capacity but no delegation channel; institutional capture without low political costs would create capacity but incentivise concealment. The framework treats these mechanisms as a configuration; the settlement type produces all three conditions simultaneously, and the three together shape the observable means-assembly pattern. This also means that the relationship between governance functions (Layer 2) and digital means (Layer 3) is interpretive rather than mechanical. Because the same technology can serve different functions depending on context, the plausibility probe assesses patterns of deployment rather than the presence or absence of individual technologies.

The theoretical synthesis developed in this layer yields two further propositions. Each follows from the configurational logic constructed above: Levy's (2014) settlement typology simultaneously determines time horizons, the degree of institutional capture, and the political cost constraints the ruler faces, and these three conditions together shape the observable means-assembly pattern.

Proposition 3 - In personalised dominant settlements, digital means are expected to be institutionally embedded and core-attributable.

Long time horizons enable durable investment, deep institutional capture provides direct delegation channels through second-order regulation (Zittrain & Palfrey, 2008), and low political cost constraints remove the need for concealment. The tools may combine infrastructure, device-level, and application-layer means, but their core enabling logic is institutional delegation through subordinated channels.

Proposition 4 - In personalised competitive settlements, digital means are expected to be legally constructed, application-layer, and selectively deniable.

Shorter time horizons limit infrastructure investment, incomplete institutional capture forces reliance on legal compulsion and digital devolution to proxy actors (MacKinnon, 2011; Conduit, 2024), and high political cost constraints push toward formally legitimate or deniable mechanisms (Feldstein, 2021; Glasius, 2018). Control is assembled through platform-level manipulation, proxy actors, and legal-administrative frameworks rather than institutional subordination.

2.4 Layer 4: Actor Configuration and Targeting

In this layer, actors can be mapped regarding who acts and who is acted upon. Overall, as literature argues, there is a wide range of actors involved in the process, which this

framework addresses, and it also suggests that researchers should identify it (Roberts & Oosterom, 2025). Therefore, this framework nests actors at three levels:

- Regime Core - leader, ruling party leadership, security apparatus, captured state institutions.
- Enabling and Delegated Actors - communications regulators, state-aligned media, troll networks, contracted consultants, etc.
- Targets - opposition parties, journalists, civil society activists and NGOs, protest networks, private citizens, etc.

At this level, the main difference lies in the delegation chain connecting the regime core to enabling actors. In a dominant settlement, enabling actors are more likely to be coalition members, whose position depends on the ruler's continued favour. The delegation itself is direct and happens through captured institutional channels. Compared to that, in competitive settlement, enabling actors are more likely to be compelled through legal obligations or incentivised through commercial benefits. Therefore, the delegation is more about formal legitimacy. Schlumberger and colleagues (2024) describe it as the creation of cyber elites, expert agents who operate tools that the security apparatus may not be able to manage. This connects to the PSA literature: these elites act as conditionally loyal actors to powerholders, who control the capabilities on which the powerholders depend but cannot independently verify.

2.5 Layers 5 and 6: First Order and Second-Order Effects

The final two layers trace the consequences of digital authoritarian action, which is heavily based on Roberts and Oosterom's (2025) analytical distinction. First-order effects are the immediate outcomes/effects which targeted actors experience. Examples could be the chilling effect on political expression, reduced privacy, reduced protest capacity, etc. This can mostly be assessed through a rights-based lens by asking which capacities of the target group are diminished by the practice in place. As for the second-order effects, they concern the outcomes for powerholders and generally changes in the power dynamic. As a practical example, when coordination is weakened (a first-order effect), the incumbency advantage grows (a second-order effect). The importance of these layers is to prevent the framework from jumping to conclusions about what was used and what the effect was, without first examining the evidence.

2.6 Causal Logic and the Feedback

The framework (Figure 2) operates as a layered causal chain, with each layer performing a specific analytical task. The output of each layer serves as the basis, or even the input, for the next layer, and so on. Each layer's output serves as the input for the next. This vertical dependence means the chain must be assessed in sequence: functional priorities cannot be interpreted without the structural context, and means cannot be interpreted without functional priorities.

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework - Six-Layer Analytical Architecture (Author's Own)

LAYER 1: POLITICAL SETTLEMENT AS STRUCTURAL CONTEXT
Levy (2014)

Personalised Dominant (Serbia)	**Personalised Competitive (Georgia)**
Principal over agents • Longer time horizons Primary threat: **internal** (elite defection, factional splits)	Arrangement among principals • Shorter time horizons Primary threat: **external** (opposition coordination, electoral challenge)

↓ Structures and Constrains ↓

subject to plausibility probe

LAYER 2: GOVERNANCE FUNCTIONS FOR REGIME SURVIVAL
Gerschewski (2013); Schlumberger et al. (2024)

Both types enabled by **KNOWING** (monitoring, detection, data extraction) as prerequisite

Dominant	**Competitive**
Primary: **INFLUENCING BEHAVIOUR** Continuous deterrence and discipline through captured institutions *Complementary: influencing beliefs (serves behavioural function — paralysis, not persuasion)*	Primary: **INFLUENCING BELIEFS** Narrative manipulation, Delegitimization, electoral perception management *Complementary: influencing behaviour (selective, deniable deterrence)*

↓ Pursued Through ↓

subject to plausibility probe

LAYER 3: DIGITAL MEANS — TECHNOLOGIES AND PRACTICES
Roberts & Oosterom (2025); Feldstein (2021); Deibert (2008; 2010)

Technologies: spyware, bot networks, monitoring software, telecom control, biometric databases
Practices: surveillance, censorship, disinformation, channelling, coordinated harassment, selective takedowns
Shaped by: time horizons • institutional capture • political cost constraints

Dominant	**Competitive**
Institutionally embedded, delegated through captured channels, core-attributable Information flooding serves behavioural function (informational agnosticism)	Application-layer, legally constructed, selectively deniable Legal frameworks create control where institutional capture cannot; isomorphic mimicry

↓ Deployed Against ↓

Theoretically derived, not empirically tested at this stage in this thesis

LAYER 4: ACTOR CONFIGURATION AND TARGETING
Framework synthesis

Deployers: regime core, captured institutions, proxy actors, contracted intermediaries
Targets: coalition insiders, opposition parties, civil society, journalists, voters

↓ Producing ↓

LAYER 5: FIRST-ORDER EFFECTS ON TARGETS
Roberts & Oosterom (2025)

Chilling effect • Self-censorship • Weakened coordination • Reduced protest capacity • Narrowed media freedom • Distorted information environment • Political disengagement

↓ Reshaping ↓

LAYER 6: SECOND-ORDER EFFECTS ON POWER RELATIONS
Roberts & Oosterom (2025); Gerschewski (2013)

Opposition weakened • Incumbency advantage strengthened • Accountability reduced • Coalition control improved • Legitimacy managed • Regime survival capacity increased

The sequence is not linear because second-order effects feed back into the structural conditions under which the next cycle of strategic choice occurs. PSA logic also supports that claim, because Khan (2010) established that a settlement reproduces itself when the distribution of benefits remains compatible with the distribution of powerholders, thereby maintaining a stable power dynamic. Digital authoritarian strategies can alter compatibility and, therefore, the power dynamic. If the strategies reduce the holding power of opposition actors, the structural balance, which defines the settlement type, changes. A competitive settlement, where digital strategies have successfully marginalised previously viable opposition, is no longer structurally competitive in the same way, because the power gap widened, time horizons lengthened, etc. The framework treats the settlement type as a relatively stable condition across the study period, while acknowledging that the digital strategies deployed within it may contribute to its transformation over time, consistent with the critical realist position adopted by this thesis.

The framework's contribution is not to predict a fixed set of tools for each settlement type because they overlap, as explained above. The contribution is to make the structural logic visible and systematically comparable, explaining why differently configured settlements assemble and operate those tools through different enabling mechanisms. By assigning theoretical sources and analytical tasks to each layer, the framework connects political settlements, regime survival and digital authoritarianism without reducing any of them to the others. Each literature provides what the other lacks. The framework treats the concepts from each as sensitising devices rather than rigid categories. It provides structured guidance for observation, while remaining open to findings that challenge or refine the initial theoretical expectations.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Theory Building with Plausibility Probes

The thesis pursues its research question through two integrated components: the construction of an analytical framework that bridges three disconnected literatures, and a structured empirical probe that assesses whether the framework's core propositions are consistent with available evidence from Georgia and Serbia. Taken together, they establish a theory-building exercise in which the empirical work serves to develop and refine the theoretical framework, rather than to fully test it. This design reflects the idea that constructing theoretical frameworks capable of organising previously unexplained variation is itself a legitimate scholarly contribution (George & Bennett, 2005) and that qualitative research contributes to causal understanding by identifying mechanisms rather than establishing statistical regularities (Maxwell, 2012, pp. 657–658).

The empirical component takes the form of a plausibility probe. Eckstein (2009) defines this as a stage of inquiry preliminary to full testing, where the researcher determines whether the potential validity of a candidate theory warrants the costs of rigorous testing. It can be either empirical or non-empirical. A non-empirical probe demonstrates that a theoretical construct is logically derived from validated premises and can account for the strengths and weaknesses of existing approaches. An empirical probe confronts the theory with evidence in a preliminary, structured, but inconclusive assessment (Eckstein, 2009, pp. 136–137). This thesis does both. As detailed in Chapter 2, the conceptual framework was constructed through cross-disciplinary synthesis, mapping the silences across the literatures and assigning each a specific analytical role within a single architecture. This constitutes the non-empirical probe: it demonstrates that the propositions are logically derived from synthesised literature and resolve documented tensions within the field. The empirical chapters constitute the direct empirical probe, confronting the framework's four core propositions with evidence from two cases. The probe does not aim to confirm or falsify the framework. Instead, it asks whether the framework's categories successfully organise the empirical material, whether observed patterns align with the theoretical propositions, and whether the comparison reveals systematic differences consistent with the settlement-type distinction.

However, the probe is limited to the framework's first three layers. Layer 1 establishes the independent structural condition. It is not probed in the same sense as Layers 2 and 3; rather, the analysis asks whether each case can be coherently classified using the framework's criteria, supported by the indicators specified in the operationalisation table. The assignment

of settlement types must be empirically demonstrated rather than assumed from case selection alone. Layers 2 and 3 are the subjects of the plausibility probe proper. Layer 2 performs the core theoretical translation from structure to governance function (Propositions 1 and 2), and Layer 3 specifies the enabling logic through which digital means are assembled and operated (Propositions 3 and 4). If this base fails, the remaining layers would rest on an unsound foundation. Layers 4 through 6 require actor-level, rights-impact, and power-dynamics data that are not available in the secondary sources this study relies on. Their operationalisation is a task for future research, addressed in the discussion chapter.

Philosophically, as mentioned in Chapter 2, the framework's critical realist stance has direct methodological implications for the design of this study. Firstly, critical realism permits structural claims while acknowledging that empirical access to those structures is partial and mediated by the conceptual frameworks through which we observe (Bhaskar, 2013). This means the thesis can treat settlement types as real configurations that generate observable pressures on governance strategy, without claiming to have captured them in their totality. Secondly, critical realism distinguishes between events (what is observed), mechanisms (what produces the observed pattern) and structures (what enables the mechanism to operate) (Bhaskar, 2013). This distinction exactly justifies the thesis's analytical logic: the plausibility probe observes events (documented digital governance practices in Serbia and Georgia), interprets them as evidence of mechanisms (functional priorities shaped by structural pressures), and traces those mechanisms back to structures (settlement type configurations). Lastly, critical realism treats knowledge as fallible and theory-laden, which means the appropriate standard for a new framework is not definitive confirmation but plausibility (Eckstein, 2009). What it can deliver is an assessment of whether the framework's causal logic organises empirical material in a way that reveals systematic, structurally traceable differences between the two settlement types. The plausibility probe operationalises this epistemological commitment by asking whether the framework's proposed mechanisms are consistent with available evidence, without being forced to definitively establish their operation.

The overarching research question is: how do hybrid political regimes with distinct personalised political settlement types employ digital authoritarian strategies for regime survival in Eastern Europe? It is addressed through the framework as a whole. The propositions below translate this question into specific empirical expectations for each settlement type:

Proposition 1 - In personalised dominant settlements, digital governance is expected to configure around a knowing–behaviour operative axis, with influencing beliefs in a supporting role.

Proposition 2 - In personalised competitive settlements, digital governance is expected to configure around belief-centred perception management, with influencing behaviour selective and sequentially dependent on prior belief work.

Proposition 3 - In personalised dominant settlements, digital means are expected to be institutionally embedded and core-attributable.

Proposition 4 - In personalised competitive settlements, digital means are expected to be legally constructed, application-layer, and selectively deniable.

Each proposition specifies what pattern of evidence should be observable if the framework's causal logic holds. The plausibility probe does not aim to definitively confirm or falsify these propositions but to assess whether the framework organises available evidence in a coherent and structurally traceable manner.

3.2 Case Selection and Timeframe

The cases are selected for variation on the theoretically relevant structural condition, the political settlement type as defined by Levy (2014), rather than on the outcome of interest. The phenomenon under investigation is the configuration of digital authoritarian strategies deployed for regime survival. Both cases are instances of the same class: Eastern European hybrid regimes with personalised political settlements, EU candidate status, and documented digital governance practices during the study period (George & Bennett, 2005). By selecting one case approximating a personalised dominant settlement (Serbia) and one approximating a personalised competitive settlement (Georgia), the design ensures variation on the structural dimension while holding contextual features as constant as the real world permits. The comparative logic follows Przeworski and Teune's (1970) principle that holding extraneous factors roughly constant strengthens the attribution of observed differences to the theoretically relevant condition. The same analytical questions, derived from the framework's Layers 1 through 3 and operationalised in the table below, are applied to both cases to ensure a structured, focused comparison (George & Bennett, 2005). The assignment of each case to a specific settlement type is supported through the preliminary evidence presented below and established in full through the Layer 1 analysis in the empirical chapters.

Serbia is classified as a personalised dominant settlement. V-Dem data (Coppedge et al., 2026) for the study period show consistently high scores on the neopatrimonialism index, high executive power concentration, and declining opposition capacity. Freedom House's Nations in Transit (2024) classifies Serbia as a transitional or hybrid regime, with documented media capture, judicial subordination, and ruling-party dominance over the security apparatus.

The power gap between the ruling coalition and the organised opposition is large, and elections do not produce genuine uncertainty about power transfer. EU progress reports consistently document that the ruling party controls most institutional levers. These constitute the principal-agent structure that Levy (2014) connects to the dominant settlement.

Georgia is classified as a personalised competitive settlement. V-Dem data for 2022–2023 show lower neopatrimonialism scores than Serbia, meaningful opposition capacity, and electoral uncertainty (Coppedge et al., 2026). Freedom House (2024) documents a contested political environment with active civil society and elections whose outcomes remained uncertain through most of the study period. The power gap between Georgian Dream and the organised opposition is narrower than in Serbia, consistent with Levy's (2014) competitive settlement. Georgia's trajectory toward greater dominance by late 2024, following the foreign agents law and disputed parliamentary elections, does not invalidate the comparative design; the analysis distinguishes between periods, assessing early evidence against the competitive baseline and late-2024 evidence for whether shifts toward dominant-pattern features correspond to the narrowing documented in Layer 1.

These two cases share several features that strengthen the comparison. Both are post-communist states: Serbia in the Western Balkans, Georgia in the South Caucasus, with post-socialist institutional legacies and EU candidate status (Serbia since 2012, Georgia since 2023), which means both operate under external conditionality that constrains visible repression to some degree. Both are also dependent on external financial resources, such as EU accession-related funding, development assistance, and concessional lending. This means neither operates as a rent-independent regime capable of dispensing with societal cooperation entirely (Gandhi, 2008; Khan, 2010). The degree of dependence varies, but in both cases, external resource flows create incentives to maintain institutional forms acceptable to international partners, thereby reinforcing the conditionality constraint. Both have documented digital authoritarian practices during the study period. These shared features function as the rough controls this comparative logic requires (Przeworski & Teune, 1970)

Serbia and Georgia are selected over other potential cases because they offer the clearest variation on the structural condition within this comparable context. Hungary and Turkey, while exhibiting hybrid characteristics, both lean toward dominant configurations and would not provide the variation the design requires. Russia differs too greatly in scale, resource endowment, and geopolitical position to serve as a comparable case. Serbia and Georgia provide one case approximating each of the two personalised settlement types the framework distinguishes, while sharing enough contextual features to make the comparison meaningful.

The study period is 2022-2024, justified on three grounds:

- Data availability: the specialist reports and documents on digital tools, practices, and enabling mechanisms focus primarily on Georgia and Serbia in this period. These sources constitute the empirical backbone of Layers 2 and 3, and the evidence therefore drives the timeframe.
- Political contestation and analytical visibility: both countries experienced sustained political events during this period, Serbia's 2022 elections and 2023 anti-violence protests, Georgia's foreign agents law process and 2024 parliamentary elections — that activated digital governance practices under heightened pressure (Schlumberger et al., 2024; Bernhard et al., 2020) and made them documentable by the reporting organisations whose documents this study analyses. The study examines the full 2022–2024 period, not only these moments; its inclusion ensures the evidence captures digital governance under both routine and heightened conditions.

3.3 Operationalisation

Operationalisation translates each theoretical concept into observable indicators, specifies in advance how evidence will be recognised, and ensures transparency in the link between data and the propositions (Shoemaker et al., 2004). The tables below follow the vertical logic of Adcock and Collier's (2001) measurement validity framework, moving from the systematised concepts defined in Chapter 2 to observable indicators. Each Layer's concepts are translated into indicators selected on two criteria: 1. They must provide evidence for both cases during the study period; 2. Be assessable through the qualitative document analysis method adopted by this study. Quantitative indices from V-Dem and its Digital Society Project are used descriptively to set baselines and trajectories, triangulating the patterns identified through qualitative documentary sources (Patton, 2015). The codebook specifying inclusion criteria, exclusion criteria, exemplars, and assessment procedures for each indicator is included as an appendix.

Layer 1 (Table 1) operationalises the independent structural variable and the threat environment it generates. This layer must be established before the other two, because the framework's entire analytical chain depends on correctly characterising the structural context. The settlement type cannot be directly observed as a single indicator. It is a composite condition defined by two dimensions: the degree of personalisation and the degree of dominance or competitiveness (Levy, 2014). Personalisation is assessed through V-Dem's neopatrimonialism and personalism indices, which capture patterns of clientelist resource distribution and

executive power concentration, triangulated with governance quality assessments from the World Bank, Transparency International and EU progress reports. The threat-environment sub-dimension translates this structural classification into a causal chain: the settlement type determines whether horizontal (outsider) or vertical (insider) threats dominate, which in turn shapes the governance function priorities assessed in Layer 2.

Concept	Sub-dimension	Indicator	Data Source
Degree of personalisation	Power concentration	Neopatrimonialism and personalism index scores, trajectory 2022–2024	V-Dem dataset (Coppedge et al., 2026)
	Governance quality	Control of corruption and rule of law scores; CPI scores	World Bank WGI; TI CPI
	Institutional capture	Qualitative assessments of judicial independence, media ownership concentration, regulatory subordination	EU Progress Reports 2022–2024; FH Nations in Transit 2022–2024
Dominance vs. competitiveness	Power gap	Electoral democracy index (v2x_polyarchy)	V-Dem dataset (Coppedge et al., 2026)
	Electoral uncertainty	Whether elections produce genuine uncertainty about power transfer	OSCE/ODIHR election observation reports: Serbia 2022; Georgia 2024
Threat environment	Horizontal threat	Documented opposition coordination capacity: party structures, civil society networks, independent media, protest mobilisation	FH Freedom in the World 2022–2024; EU Progress Reports
	Vertical threat	Documented elite cohesion or fragmentation: defection events, party discipline, security apparatus loyalty	EU Progress Reports; FH Nations in Transit

Table 1: Layer 1 operationalisation table

Source: Author's own, based on the framework developed in Chapter 2

Layer 2 (Table 2) operationalises the governance functions: knowing, influencing behaviour, and influencing beliefs, and assesses which carries the most weight in each case. This is where Propositions 1 and 2 are probed. The V-Dem Digital Society Project provides quantitative indicators for all three functions, available for both countries across the study period. These establish baselines, but they cannot tell how those functions operate or what specific practices constitute them; that is the role of qualitative sources. A note on the alignment

between quantitative and qualitative methods is necessary. The DSP variables capture specific mechanisms within each function rather than the function as a whole. For example, v2smgovfilprc measures internet filtering but not legal pressure, harassment, or surveillance-induced chilling, which are central behavioural deterrence mechanisms in both cases. The quantitative baselines are therefore partial proxies that triangulate the qualitative findings; the qualitative coding, structured through the codebook's subcodes, captures the full range of practices within each function.

Concept	Sub-dimension	Indicator	Data Source
Knowing (enabling function)	Monitoring intensity (quantitative)	Gov. social media monitoring (v2smgovsmmon), trajectory 2022–2024	V-Dem DSP dataset
	Monitoring practices (qualitative)	Documented surveillance practices, spyware deployment, infrastructure, targeting patterns	Amnesty Digital Prison 2024 (Serbia); ISFED monitoring reports (Georgia); FH FOTN 2022–2024
Influencing behaviour	Behavioural deterrence (quantitative)	Gov. internet filtering in practice (v2smgovfilprc), trajectory 2022–2024	V-Dem DSP dataset
	Behavioural deterrence (qualitative)	Documented content removal, takedowns, legal pressure, harassment, surveillance-induced chilling	FH FOTN 2022–2024; BIRN articles (Serbia); Amnesty Digital Prison 2024 (Serbia); ISFED reports (Georgia)
Influencing beliefs	Disinformation intensity (quantitative)	Gov. dissemination of false info, domestic (v2smgovdom) and abroad (v2smgovab), trajectory 2022–2024	V-Dem DSP dataset
	Narrative manipulation (qualitative)	Documented disinformation campaigns, information flooding, coordinated inauthentic behaviour	CRTA mapping 2022 (Serbia); ISFED TikTok/Facebook reports (Georgia); Meta adversarial reports 2023 (both); IREX VIB 2022–2024

Table 2: Layer 2 operationalisation table

Source: Author's own, based on the framework developed in Chapter 2

Layer 3 (Table 3) operationalises the enabling logic through which digital means are assembled and assesses whether the pattern differs across settlement types, as Propositions 3 and 4 predict. It has three dimensions: whether controls operate at the infrastructure or

application level; whether digital governance is enabled through institutional capture or legal-administrative construction; and whether the state's connection to digital operations is acknowledged or deniable. The legal architecture for both countries is mapped primarily through EU progress reports (2022–2024), which identify relevant laws, evaluate their implementation and assess regulatory independence. For Georgia, Venice Commission opinions provide additional external legal evaluation; for Serbia, where no Venice Commission opinions exist on digital or media laws, EU progress reports serve as the only external legal assessment. This asymmetry is itself analytically informative: Georgia's reliance on externally scrutinised legal construction is consistent with the competitive settlement's need for legal-administrative legitimacy, while Serbia's lack of such scrutiny is consistent with institutional capture rendering it unnecessary.

Concept	Sub-dimension	Indicator	Data Source
Regulatory and legal baseline (quantitative)	State regulatory capacity and approach	Gov. capacity to regulate online content (v2smregcap); regulatory approach (v2smregapp)	V-Dem DSP dataset
	Legal framework enabling state access	Internet legal regulation content (v2smregcon); privacy protection by law content (v2smprivcon)	V-Dem DSP dataset
	Legal instrument weaponisation	Abuse of defamation and copyright law by elites (v2smdefabu)	V-Dem DSP dataset
Infrastructure vs. application-layer controls	Type of controls deployed	Whether documented tools operate at infrastructure level (telecom interception, monitoring systems) or application level (platform manipulation, targeted operations)	Amnesty Digital Prison 2024 (Serbia); ISFED reports (Georgia); FH FOTN technical sections; BIRN articles
Enabling logic: institutional capture	Enforcement through captured channels	Whether enforcement flows through institutions subordinate to the ruling coalition (security services, captured regulators, subordinate telecoms)	EU Progress Reports 2022–2024; FH NIT; Amnesty Digital Prison (Serbia)
Enabling logic: legal-administrative	Enforcement through constructed frameworks	Whether regime adopted new laws creating enforcement mechanisms for digital control; whether external legal scrutiny exists	EU Progress Reports 2022–2024
Deniability architecture	State attribution	Whether state connection to digital operations is openly	Meta adversarial reports 2023; ISFED reports (Georgia);

		acknowledged or formally deniable	BIRN articles (Serbia); Amnesty Digital Prison (Serbia)

Table 3: Layer 3 operationalisation table

Source: Author's own, based on the framework developed in Chapter 3

3.4 Data Sources and Collection Strategy

The study relies on qualitative document analysis as its primary method of data collection. The analytical task is to identify, appraise, and synthesise evidence contained in existing documents, rather than to generate new data through interviews or observation (Bowen, 2009). Alternative methods, such as interviews with practitioners and affected individuals, would be premature at this stage. The plausibility probe determines whether the framework's analytical categories organise available evidence coherently (Eckstein, 2009, pp. 136–137); establishing plausibility through documentary evidence is the appropriate first step before designing interview protocols informed by what the probe reveals.

Sources were selected purposefully (Patton, 2015) against three criteria:

- Whether the source provided systematic coverage of the relevant country within the study's timeframe (2022–2024).
- Whether the source addressed at least one dimension of the framework: Layer 1 (settlement type), Layer 2 (governance function prioritisation), or Layer 3 (digital means and enabling logic)
- Whether the source's methodology and institutional position are sufficiently transparent to allow critical evaluation of its content, ensuring authenticity, credibility, and accuracy (Bowen, 2009).

Three Source types meet these criteria. Institutional assessments: EU Progress Reports, Freedom House (FiW, NiT, FotN), and OSCE/ODIHR election observation reports providing methodologically transparent evaluations of governance quality, democratic standards, and digital rights across both countries for the full study period. Specialist technical reports - Amnesty International's Digital Prison report (Serbia), ISFED monitoring reports (Georgia), BIRN investigative articles (Serbia), Meta adversarial threat reports (both countries), and IREX Vibrant Information Barometer (both countries), providing detailed documentation of specific digital governance practices, tools, and operations.

Quantitative indices: V-Dem, V-Dem Digital Society Project, the World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators, and Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index—are used as a secondary method for descriptive triangulation and are not subjected to statistical analysis. They establish baselines and trajectories that confirm or complicate qualitative patterns, triangulating through multiple data sources to reduce the impact of any single source's bias (Patton, 2015).

The analytical reading of documents follows a structured coding procedure derived from Saldaña's (2013) provisional coding method. Codes were established deductively from the conceptual framework prior to data collection: Layer 1 codes capture structural conditions (institutional capture, power gap, electoral uncertainty, threat environment), Layer 2 codes capture governance functions (knowing, influencing behaviour, influencing beliefs) with practice-level subcodes and target-type recording (insider/outsider), and Layer 3 codes capture enabling mechanisms (infrastructure vs. application-layer controls, institutional capture vs. legal-administrative construction, deniability architecture) Coding proceeded layer by layer: Layer 1 was completed for both cases before Layer 2, and Layer 2 before Layer 3, because each layer's interpretation depends on the preceding layer's findings. For each codable passage, the coder identified the relevant layer, applied the appropriate code and subcode, recorded the target type for all Layer 2 entries, extracted a brief evidence excerpt with page or section reference, and wrote an analytic memo reflecting on the entry's significance and fit with the framework's expectations (Saldaña, 2013). Each entry received a confidence rating (high, medium, or low) based on the codebook's inclusion criteria. The Georgia dataset comprises 580 entries across 19 documents, and the Serbia dataset comprises 660 entries across 21 documents, all available in the appendix on the UT drive. Together, these materials document the complete analytical procedure from conceptual framework to coded evidence, enabling independent scrutiny and replication of the coding process (Bowen, 2009; Saldaña, 2013). This ensures that the same analytical questions are applied to the same types of documents in both cases, resulting in a structured, focused comparison (George & Bennett, 2005).

Source asymmetry is acknowledged. Georgia's evidence base is stronger on information manipulation and social media monitoring but weaker on surveillance and spyware documentation, while the opposite is true for Serbia. This has two possible explanations. It may be an artefact of which organisations operate in each country, since ISFED has no Serbian equivalent and Share Foundation has no Georgian one. Alternatively, it may reflect genuine differences in what each regime prioritises, which is precisely what the framework predicts.

The study treats this asymmetry as a finding to be interpreted within the framework rather than a gap to be resolved, while acknowledging the possibility that it is partly artefactual.

3.5 Data Analysis Strategy

The analysis draws on the logic of the congruence method (George & Bennett, 2005), adapted to the plausibility probe's epistemic scope. The study asks whether observed patterns are consistent with the framework's propositions. This is complemented by Yin's (2018) pattern-matching logic, in which an empirically observed pattern is compared with a predicted pattern derived from theoretical propositions. In a plausibility probe, the standard is whether the observed pattern is organised coherently by the framework's categories and whether the framework makes sense of the evidence in a way that no single existing literature could achieve independently. The analysis has three stages:

- Within-case Analysis: Each case is analysed individually, working through the three layers in sequence: establishing the settlement type and threat environment in Layer 1, identifying which governance functions are documented and assessing their relative weight in Layer 2, and mapping the digital means deployed, the enabling logic through which they operate, and the deniability architecture in Layer 3. The standardised questions (Table 4) applied to each case at each stage are the following:

Table 4: Standardised questions for within-case analysis

Source: Author's own

	Focus Area	**Standardised Questions**
Layer 1	Political and Strategic Context	What is the degree of power personalisation? Is the settlement dominant or competitive? What is the primary threat environment?
Layer 2	Operational Functions	What is the documented level of monitoring activity? What is the documented level of behavioural deterrence? What is the documented level of narrative manipulation? Which function carries the most weight, judged by convergence across multiple independent sources?
Layer 3	Mechanism and Attribution	Do controls operate at the infrastructure or application layer? Is enforcement enabled through captured institutional channels or constructed legal-administrative frameworks? Is state attribution openly acknowledged or formally deniable?

- Cross-comparison: The two case profiles are placed side by side and compared using the same questions and indicators applied to both cases (George & Bennett, 2005). This comparison identifies where the cases converge and where they diverge, and assesses

whether the observed divergences align with the structural condition in the direction predicted by the propositions.

- Assessment against propositions: Each of the four propositions is assessed individually. For each, the assessment states whether the observed evidence is consistent, partially consistent, or inconsistent with the expected pattern, and explains why. Consistency across all four propositions supports the framework's plausibility. Partial consistency identifies which elements hold and which need refinement. Inconsistency signals where the causal logic, functional assignments, or enabling mechanisms require revision.

Following the same logic, it is important to identify rival explanations as a criterion for interpreting the strength of case study findings (George & Bennett, 2005; Yin, 2018). Three rival explanations are specified in advance. The first is that the observed differences in digital governance strategies are driven by resource availability or technological capacity rather than settlement type. The second is that external conditionality, rather than internal settlement dynamics, explains the pattern of legal-administrative construction in one case and institutional capture in the other. The third is that regime duration, rather than settlement type, accounts for the differences, specifically, that longer incumbency enables deeper institutional capture regardless of settlement configuration. Each rival is addressed in the discussion chapter by examining whether the evidence is more coherently organised by the settlement-type distinction or by the rival explanation, using the cross-case comparison as the assessment vehicle.

3.6 Validity and Limitations

There are four tests for judging case study quality: construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability (Yin, 2018). Since this study is a theory-building plausibility probe rather than an explanatory study claiming definitive causation, these tests apply with different intensity. Construct validity is addressed through pre-specified operationalisation tables and triangulation across multiple sources for each concept (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018, pp. 42-44). The primary limitation affecting construct validity is the study's reliance on secondary sources. No primary data were collected through interviews, fieldwork, or direct observation. This means the analysis depends on what reporting organisations choose to document, investigate, and publish, introducing a selection effect that the researcher cannot fully control. Source asymmetry between the cases further affects construct validity, because variation in documented evidence may partly reflect documentation patterns rather than genuine strategic differences. Triangulation across multiple independent sources for each concept mitigates but

does not eliminate this risk (Patton, 2015). Internal validity applies differently in a theory-building plausibility probe than in an explanatory study. The framework posits that settlement type creates structural pressures that shape governance configurations, which is a conditional-causal claim rather than a deterministic one. The probe does not attempt to establish definitive causation between settlement type and a specific digital governance configuration. Rather, it assesses whether the observed configurations are consistent with the structural pressures the framework identifies and whether cross-case variation is patterned in the direction the framework predicts. The standard is therefore congruence rather than causal demonstration (Yin, 2018, pp. 44-45). External validity follows Yin's (2018, pp. 45–46) distinction between statistical and analytic generalisation. The study claims analytic generalisation: if the framework's propositions organise evidence coherently in two cases selected for structural variation, this establishes grounds for applying the logic to additional cases. The scope is explicitly limited to personalised settlements in Eastern European hybrid regimes; extension beyond these conditions would require additional probing. Reliability requires that the study's procedures be documented so that a later researcher could follow the same steps and arrive at the same findings (Yin, 2018, pp. 46-47). This is addressed in three ways. The operationalisation tables specify all indicators and sources in advance. The codebook documents the complete coding logic: code definitions, inclusion and exclusion criteria, exemplars, decision rules, and the five-phase procedure through which documents were read, and evidence was coded against the framework's concepts. The structured, focused comparison method ensures that the same analytical questions were applied to both cases. Together, these constructs document a procedure that an examiner can follow from the research question to the findings. Still, the study was coded by a single researcher without intercoder reliability testing. That is why the codebook's explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria, exemplars, and close-but-no decision rules are designed to make the coding logic transparent and reproducible, partially mitigating this constraint (Saldaña, 2013).

Chapter 4: Analysis

4.1 Georgia: Within-case Analysis

This section presents the within-case analysis for Georgia, working through the three layers subject to the plausibility probe in sequence: establishing the settlement type and threat environment (Layer 1), identifying which governance functions are documented and assessing their relative weight (Layer 2), and mapping the digital means deployed, the enabling logic through which they operate, and the degree of deniability (Layer 3). The analysis follows the standardised questions specified in the methodology chapter and assesses whether the observed patterns are consistent with Propositions 2 and 4.

4.1.1 Layer 1: Political Settlement as a Structural Context

Layer 1 addresses three standardised questions: What is the degree of power personalisation? Is the settlement dominant or competitive? What is the primary threat environment? Across documents, the coding produced 198 Layer 1 entries. The distribution is presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Georgia - Layer 1 Code Distribution

Source: Author's coding results. Full Evidence log available in the Appendix.

Code	Total entries	High confidence	Medium	Low
L1-PERS-CAP (Institutional capture)	68	56	11	1
L1-THREAT-H (Horizontal/outsider threat)	45	38	7	—
L1-TIMHOR (Time horizons)	24	4	20	—
L1-DOM-GAP (Power gap)	22	18	4	—
L1-DOM-ELEC (Electoral uncertainty)	17	11	6	—
L1-RENT (Rent logic)	14	7	6	1
L1-THREAT-V (Vertical/insider threat)	8	2	6	—

Table 6: Georgia - Political Settlement Indicators, 2022-2024

Source: V-Dem v16 (Coppedge et al., 2026); World Bank WGI (2024); Transparency International CPI (2024).

Indicator	2022	2023	2024	Change
Neopatrimonialism (v2x_neopat)	0.289	0.278	0.447	+55%
Political corruption (v2x_corr)	0.147	0.160	0.188	+28%
Rule of law (v2x_rule)	0.744	0.752	0.599	−20%
Electoral democracy (v2x_polyarchy)	0.607	0.591	0.480	−21%
WGI Control of Corruption	61.0	61.2	55.6	−9%

TI CPI	56	53	53	−5%

The quantitative indicators reveal a consistent two-period structure. In 2022–2023, neopatrimonialism was moderate and stable (0.289–0.278), the rule of law was relatively high (0.744–0.752), and electoral democracy indicated genuine contestation (0.607–0.591). In 2024, all indicators shifted simultaneously: neopatrimonialism rose by 55%, the rule of law fell by 20%, and electoral democracy fell by 21%. This trajectory is confirmed across independent measurement systems, V-Dem expert-coded indices, World Bank perception-based governance indicators, and Transparency International's composite corruption measure, all of which show the same two-period structure, reducing the likelihood that the pattern is an artefact of any single methodology. The qualitative evidence identifies the mechanisms driving these movements.

Personalism and Institutional Capture

Institutional capture was the most frequently coded Layer 1 feature, with 68 entries (56 high-confidence) across all 13 source documents. The evidence does not show a fully consolidated dominant settlement. Rather, it documents a competitive settlement undergoing accelerated institutional redesign through three mechanisms: appointment control, regulatory subordination, and the politicisation of communication infrastructure.

The first mechanism was the redesign of institutions constraining executive power through appointment rules. Parliament shifted nomination of the CEC chairperson from the President to the Speaker, replaced the two-thirds appointment requirement with a simple majority, abolished the opposition-nominated deputy chairperson, and later abolished the CEC advisory group, changes that ODIHR assessed as giving the “Georgian Dream” party "outsized influence" over election administration (2024, pp. 23, 27–28). The same logic appeared in the judiciary: the Prosecutor General was appointed by a simple parliamentary majority and retained highly concentrated powers, while a small group of judges was "generally accepted to control the judiciary" (European Commission, 2024, pp. 33–34). The Anti-Corruption Bureau head was appointed by the Prime Minister without sufficient safeguards of independence, and the Anti-Corruption Council was abolished in May 2024 (European Commission, 2025, p. 32). These entries show that personalisation operated through institutional redesign, altering appointment rules to reduce pluralistic constraint, rather than through the open elimination of formal checks. The formal bodies remained; their internal control was restructured. The second mechanism was regulatory subordination. GNCC was described as making rulings from a biased, pro-government stance and serving ruling-party interests (IREX, 2024, pp. 11-12).

Broadcasting-law amendments expanded GNCC authority over content with sanctions including fines and licence suspension, and CSOs accused the regulator of working "hand in hand" with Georgian Dream (Freedom House, 2023, Section A5; IREX, 2023, pp. 8–10). During the 2024 campaign, this mattered in practice: critical broadcasters faced sanctioning pressure, government-aligned broadcasters blocked opposition advertisements without a timely remedy, and the public broadcaster devoted 61% of campaign coverage to Georgian Dream (ODIHR, 2024, Media section; European Commission, 2025, p. 37; IREX, 2023, pp. 12-13). The third mechanism was communication-infrastructure politicisation. Meta removed a coordinated inauthentic behaviour network linked to the Government Administration's Strategic Communications Department (Nimmo, Gleicher et al., 2023, p. 20), and ISFED documented StratCom pages redirecting from countering Russian threats toward attacking domestic critical media (ISFED, 2023, pp. 6–7, 12). The full scope of this politicisation is analysed in Layer 2.

The quantitative data triangulate this qualitative pattern. Neopatrimonialism rose from 0.289 to 0.447, which is a 55% increase, while corruption remained comparatively low (0.147 to 0.188) (Coppedge et al., 2026). This divergence is analytically significant: it suggests that Georgia's personalisation operated through institutional redesign and control over appointments rather than through overt rent extraction. The framework would expect both neopatrimonialism and corruption to be high simultaneously in a fully dominant settlement; in Georgia, personalisation advanced while the rent logic remained moderate, consistent with a competitive settlement where formal legitimacy still matters.

Dominance versus Competitiveness

The power gap and electoral uncertainty codes reveal a competitive, personalised settlement in 2022–early 2024, followed by a visible dominant drift in late 2024. Georgia retained meaningful outsider mobilisation capacity throughout most of the study period. The March 2023 foreign-agents law crisis is the clearest evidence: Georgian Dream had the parliamentary capacity to advance the law, with 76 MPs supporting its adoption (IREX, 2024, pp. 5–6), yet mass protests, EU criticism, and domestic backlash forced the ruling party to withdraw the bill (European Commission, 2024b, pp. 4, 6). This episode demonstrated that institutional control existed but was insufficient to override organised outsider pressure, civil society, protest mobilisation, independent media, and external conditionality still constrained the ruling coalition's available options. Independent and online media contributed to this competitive structure: IREX panellists noted that smaller high-quality online media were pivotal in countering government manipulation during the foreign-agents-law controversy

(IREX, 2024, pp. 5–6). Opposition actors also remained electorally and digitally visible: four opposition lists crossed the electoral threshold in October 2024, and opposition parties were active across Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Telegram during the campaign (ISFED, 2024a; ODIHR, 2024). This does not mean the playing field was equal, but it confirms that Georgian Dream faced organised challengers capable of contesting public narratives and electoral legitimacy.

By late 2024, however, the competitive space narrowed. The same foreign-agents law, withdrawn in 2023, was reintroduced and adopted in May 2024 despite opposition from the Venice Commission and the domestic public (European Commission, 2024, pp. 26–30). The October 2024 elections were assessed as affected by voter pressure, public-sector intimidation, compromised vote secrecy, media asymmetry, and ruling-party advantages (ODIHR, 2024, Section Executive Summary). After the elections, opposition parties rejected the results, and Parliament consisted only of the "Georgian Dream" MPs (European Commission, 2025b, pp. 22–23). In November, the "Prime Minister" suspended EU accession negotiations until 2028, weakening the external conditionality constraint that had previously shaped government behaviour (European Commission, 2025, p. 23).

The contrast between March 2023 and late 2024 is central to the analysis. In 2023, mobilisation and external pressure forced withdrawal. In 2024, similar pressure did not prevent adoption. The quantitative trajectory confirms this: electoral democracy fell from 0.591 to 0.480 in a single year, and rule of law dropped from 0.752 to 0.599 (Coppedge et al., 2026). This does not mean Georgia was fully dominant across the whole period. Rather, the ruling coalition's cost tolerance increased, its willingness to absorb political costs that it had previously been unwilling to bear. Georgia is therefore best classified as a competitive-personalised settlement under transition pressure. Its competitive features explain why belief manipulation and deniable tools predominated across most of the study period, while its late-2024 drift explains why behavioural pressure and open legal coercion became more visible toward the end.

Threat Environment

The coded evidence directly addresses who the ruling coalition perceived as threatening. Horizontal threat (outsider) entries numbered 45 (38 high-confidence), while vertical threat (insider) entries numbered only 8 (2 high-confidence). This is the strongest single quantitative indicator of the competitive settlement classification. The "Georgian Dream's" documented actions were overwhelmingly oriented toward outsider actors: opposition parties, CSOs, critical media, protest movements, election observers, Western-

linked organisations, and public challengers. The horizontal threat was organisationally substantial. Opposition parties maintained party structures, contested elections, and operated across digital platforms (ISFED, 2024a; ODIHR, 2024). Civil society organisations mobilised mass protests that forced legislative withdrawal in 2023 (Freedom House, 2023a, Section B8). Independent media, despite operating under increasing pressure, continued to hold the government accountable, even where good investigations received no government reaction (IREX, 2023, pp. 5, 17–18). Pro-Western public sentiment created an additional constraint, which ISFED concluded the "People's Power" party voiced messages that Georgian Dream refrained from expressing directly, due to the pro-Western public sentiment in the country (ISFED, 2022, p. 18). Together, these actors constituted an organised external field whose political relevance depended on public legitimacy, precisely the condition under which the framework predicts belief-centred governance strategies.

Vertical insider threats existed but were less documented and less central. The most notable episode was the defection of former SSG deputy director Ioseb Gogashvili, who publicly accused Georgian Dream of election interference and was subsequently raided and arrested (Freedom House, 2023, Key Developments). The "People's Power" party was assessed by ISFED as a formally separate but ruling-linked proxy whose independence was doubtful (ISFED, 2022, pp. 3–4). Georgian Dream leaders did not systematically condemn the "People's Power's" claims. This suggests managed or tolerated proxy messaging rather than genuine factional rupture. The low volume of vertical-threat entries (8 total, only 2 high-confidence) and the qualitative character of those entries, managed proxies and isolated defection rather than sustained factional challenge, confirm that the insider axis was not the primary threat dimension.

The quantitative and qualitative evidence converge on the same classification. Georgia operated as a competitive-personalised settlement in 2022–early 2024: personalisation was real but advanced through institutional redesign rather than settled subordination, elections retained genuine uncertainty, organised opposition could impose meaningful political costs, and the primary threat ran along the horizontal axis. By late 2024, this competitive structure narrowed, but the settlement did not consolidate into a fully dominant configuration during the study period. These together establish the structural context within which Layers 2 and 3 operate: a settlement where the primary governance challenge is managing organised outsiders whose political relevance depends on public legitimacy, under conditions where visible coercion carries high costs.

4.1.2 Layer 2: Digital Governance Functions for Regime Survival

Building on Layer 1's finding that Georgia operated as a competitive personalised settlement with horizontal threat dominance, this section assesses which governance functions are documented and which carry the greatest weight. The framework predicts (Proposition 2) that in a competitive personalised settlement, digital governance should be configured around belief-centred perception management, with knowing supporting narrative adaptation and target selection, and influencing behaviour, selectively and sequentially dependent on prior belief work. Across 13 documents, the coding produced 188 Layer 2 entries. The distribution is presented in Table 7.

Table 7: Georgia - Layer 2 Code Distribution

Source: Author's coding results.

Code	Total	High conf.	Medium	Low	Primary target
L2-BELIEF-QL (Influencing beliefs)	83	55	21	6	Outsider (81)
L2-BEHAV-QL (Influencing behaviour)	79	50	29	—	Outsider (77)
L2-KNOW-QL (Knowing)	26	9	17	—	Outsider (17)

Two features of this distribution require immediate attention. First, beliefs (83) and behaviour (79) are close in raw frequency. The assessment of which function carries the most weight, therefore, cannot rest on frequency alone and must incorporate breadth, systematicity, and the qualitative relationship between functions, as specified in the codebook's decision rule. Second, target types are overwhelmingly outsiders across all three functions (81 of 83 belief entries, 77 of 79 behaviour entries, 17 of 26 knowing entries). This is consistent with the horizontal threat axis established in Layer 1.

Table 8: Georgia - Digital Governance Indicators, 2022-2024

Source: V-Dem DSPv7 (Mechkova, 2026)

Function	Variable	2022	2023	2024
Knowing	Gov. SM monitoring (v2smgovsmmon)	2.000	1.919	1.406
Behaviour	Gov. filtering (v2smgovfilprc)	3.421	3.421	3.301
Beliefs	Gov. domestic disinfo (v2smgovdom)	1.890	1.789	1.314
Beliefs	Gov. foreign disinfo (v2smgovab)	2.365	2.090	1.771

The quantitative evidence shows sharp intensification. In government, domestic disinformation scores fell by 30%, and foreign disinformation scores fell by 25% (on the DSP's reversed scale, where lower scores indicate more activity). The behavioural indicator (v2smgovfilprc) remained near-stable, declining only 4% and staying in the 'rarely' range. Monitoring intensity scores fell 30%, tracking with belief indicators rather than behavioural ones, indicating that monitoring expanded in parallel with disinformation rather than with filtering or censorship. This directly supports Proposition 2's expectation that belief functions intensified while behavioural controls remained near-stable. However, the qualitative coding produced nearly equal raw counts (83 vs 79). This divergence is explained by the qualitative character of the behavioural entries: 53 of 79 are LEGAL subcode entries documenting legal-administrative pressure rather than the infrastructure-level filtering, shutdowns, and censorship that V-Dem's behavioural variables capture.

Knowing

The operationalisation table specifies monitoring intensity (v2smgovsmmon) and documented surveillance practices as indicators. Knowing was the thinnest function across the coded sources (26 entries, 9 high-confidence), documenting expanding capacity rather than large-scale deployment.

At the infrastructure level, the SSSG's Operational-Technical Agency controlled surveillance infrastructure across computer and telecommunications networks, had direct access to service-provider infrastructure, and could install covert programs on devices (Freedom House, 2025b, Section B6). Criminal Procedure Code amendments in 2022 expanded the scope and duration of covert measures despite Venice Commission criticism (European Commission, 2023b, p. 33). At the application level, the MIA StratCom's bylaw changes expanded its mandate to include social network monitoring, audience research, and large-scale campaign planning (ISFED, 2023, pp. 2–5). At the individual level, Ministry of Finance officers raided the homes of DFRLab researchers Gelava and Buziashvili, who had analysed online influence operations involving Georgia, and seized their computers and devices (Freedom House, 2025b, Section B6/C7). The most visible analytical significance had the direction of knowing's operational output. The Meta-exposed CIB network's real-time response to the March 2023 protests, posting through the night and reacting to breaking events (Nimmo, Gleicher, et al., 2023, pp. 49–51), showed monitoring feeding into belief manipulation rather than into arrests or shutdowns. The quantitative trajectory confirms this: v2smgovsmmon declined 30%, moving in parallel with belief indicators rather than behavioural ones. In Georgia's competitive settlement, knowing primarily supported the belief

function, consistent with Proposition 2's expectation that knowing enables narrative adaptation and target selection rather than operating as an independent disciplinary mechanism.

Influencing Beliefs

The operationalisation table specifies disinformation intensity (v2smgovdom, v2smgovab) and documented narrative manipulation as indicators. Belief manipulation was the most extensively documented function (83 entries, 55 high-confidence, 81 targeting outsiders) across 12 of 13 source documents, the broadest source coverage of any function. Its significance lies not in frequency alone but in form: the evidence reveals a layered perception-management system whose central function was to make external challengers appear illegitimate, foreign-directed, or dangerous. This form is consistent with the competitive-personalised settlement documented in Layer 1, where the main threat comes from organised outsiders whose political relevance depends on public legitimacy. The subcode distribution confirmed the system's character: CHANNEL (37 entries) dominated over DISINFO (26), CIB (9), and FLOOD (5). Georgia's belief manipulation was predominantly about channelling, steering attention, framing competition through pre-set interpretive templates, and degrading challenger credibility through distributed amplification, rather than crude fabrication. Three patterns structured this function.

The first one was narrative scripting: the production and repetition of core interpretive frames. Across the 2022–2024 evidence, six frames recurred with consistency across multiple independent sources: the West as a force seeking to drag Georgia into war through a "second front" (ISFED, 2022, pp. 5–8); CSOs and NGOs as "foreign agents" maintained for polarisation and government change (ISFED, 2022, pp. 8–10); opposition parties as a radical "war party" seeking "Ukrainization" (Freedom House, 2024); critical media as "partisan TV stations" and "enemies of the Church and state" (ISFED, 2023, pp. 11–12); Georgian Dream as the guarantor of peace, sovereignty, and tradition (ISFED, 2024a); and gendered and homophobic attacks targeting President Zourabichvili and social groups (IREX, 2024, p. 7). These formed a reusable interpretive template through which elections, protests, EU conditionality, and media criticism could be recoded as components of a single hostile outsider field. The coding confirmed this: 37 CHANNEL entries across 8 different source documents documented the same frames appearing in different contexts and periods, which supports systematicity rather than ad hoc messaging.

Attribution laundering was the second pattern, which in practice is the circulation of the same narratives through actors with progressively greater formal distance from the ruling party. In 2022, the People's Power proxy campaign introduced foundational frames through

PosTV and Imedi, with cross-platform amplification naming specific opposition leaders as 'agents of the West' (ISFED, 2022, pp. 3–14). During the March 2023 protests, the Meta-identified CIB network (Nimmo et al., 2023, pp. 20, 49–51) and official StratCom pages (ISFED, 2023, pp. 6–7) operated in parallel, combining platform-level simulation with institutional amplification. This distributed architecture (proxy origin, media-ecosystem amplification, platform-level simulation, official semi-validation) allowed the ruling ecosystem to benefit from hostile narratives without bearing the full political cost of direct authorship. More specifically, a deniability chain is structurally shaped by the competitive settlement's cost constraints.

The third pattern was adaptive resilience, the sustained reconfiguration of belief operations after enforcement disrupted individual channels. After Meta's 2023 takedown, ISFED documented migration to TikTok: 98 channels, 2,562 videos, over 30 million views, with 17 anti-opposition channels showing centralised coordination through simultaneous posting of identical content (ISFED, 2024, Key Findings). Among the newest approaches was spreading AI-generated voice imitations attributed to opposition leaders (ISFED, 2024a, Section Discrediting Campaigns). False media pages simulated journalistic practices to present the Foreign Influence law in a positive light (ISFED, 2024). The adaptation from Facebook CIB through TikTok migration to synthetic media revealed a function that persisted and intensified, but only the means evolved.

Influencing Behavior

Behavioural deterrence was documented through 79 entries (50 high-confidence), with legal pressure dominating (53 of 79). The qualitative character of this function is critical: it operated through legal-administrative channels rather than at the infrastructure level, and it demonstrated a documented sequential relationship with belief manipulation. The first mechanism pattern was the belief-to-law conversion. The "foreign agent" frame was converted into registration duties, reporting obligations, and liability when the law was reintroduced in May 2024 (European Commission, 2024, pp. 26–27). By the end of 2024, a new registration act introduced punishments of up to five years for failing to register (Freedom House, 2025, Section B6). CSOs suspended cooperation with the government and parliament and reduced overall operations (European Commission, 2024, pp. 26–30). The family-values legislative package similarly converted anti-LGBTIQ framing into legal content restrictions (European Commission, 2025, pp. 27, 40). This pattern directly operationalised the belief-behaviour sequential linkage that Proposition 2 predicts: actors were first framed as foreign, destabilising, or anti-state through narrative operations; then the state created legal categories that made them

administratively vulnerable. The second pattern SLAPP cases escalated from 28 in 2022 to 39 in 2023 to 36+ pending in 2024; GNCC fined Mtavari TV 118,688 GEL; Pirveli TV was ordered to pay 45,565 GEL; and government-aligned broadcasters blocked opposition advertisements without a timely remedy (IREX, 2024, Media section; ODIHR, 2024, Media section). Nika Gvaramia, director of Mtavari Arkhi, was imprisoned in 2022 on charges widely viewed as politically motivated (Freedom House, 2024, Overview). Critical outlets were not blocked online but faced a dense field of lawsuits, regulatory fines, licensing risks, and advertising restrictions that made critical reporting operationally costly. The third was selective punishment of digital expression. The evidence did not show mass arrests for online speech but selective cases where digital expression triggered offline legal consequences: a citizen detained and fined 2,500 GEL for a Facebook post insulting police (Freedom House, 2023, Section C3); Formula News founder Mshvildadze charged under Article 315 for a Telegram protest-mobilisation post (Freedom House, 2023, pp. 19–20); military blogger Abashidze arrested after opposing the foreign-agents law via Telegram (Freedom House, 2024, Section C3); Georgian Dream announcing plans for a public database of individuals involved in protest-related actions, including online (Freedom House, 2024, Section C5). These were selective signals that calibrated deterrence, which the framework associates with competitive settlements where visible mass coercion is politically costly.

The absence of infrastructure-level behavioural controls is analytically meaningful. No source documented shutdowns, deep packet inspection, DNS blocking, or systematic filtering, confirmed by Freedom House across the study period. The single BLOCK subcode entry in the dataset underscores this absence. Behavioural deterrence in Georgia operated entirely through legal-administrative and selective-targeting channels.

Proposition 2 predicts that in a competitive-personalised settlement, digital governance configures around belief-centred perception management, with knowing supporting narrative adaptation and behaviour selective and sequentially dependent on prior belief work. Belief operations were documented as sustained, coordinated campaigns across multiple platforms, actors, and periods, while behavioural entries were documented as individual cases, regulatory actions, and legal proceedings rather than as a single sustained system. On all three dimensions, beliefs carry greater weight. But the more important finding is the functional relationship between beliefs and behaviour. The belief-to-law conversion pattern, where narrative framing preceded and enabled legal-administrative deterrence, establishes the sequential dependence that Proposition 2 predicts. Behaviour was substantial, but its dominant form (legal pressure) was functionally downstream of belief operations. Knowing tracked with beliefs rather than

behaviour, both quantitatively (V-Dem monitoring declining in parallel with disinformation indicators) and qualitatively (the CIB network's real-time monitoring feeding into narrative operations rather than enforcement). Here, the quantitative and qualitative evidence converge. V-Dem showed belief indicators declining steeply (25-30%) while behavioural indicators barely moved (<4%), confirming that the belief function intensified while conventional behavioural controls remained near-stable. The qualitative coding explains why: behavioural deterrence operated through legal-administrative channels that V-Dem's technical variables do not capture, while belief manipulation operated through the platform-level campaigns that both measurement systems detected.

4.1.3 Layer 3: Digital Means – Technologies and Practices

Layer 2 documented a governance-function configuration in which belief manipulation operated through a layered perception-management ecosystem, behavioural deterrence worked through legal-administrative channels with documented sequential dependence on prior narrative framing, and infrastructure-level controls were absent. This section assesses how the digital means serving these functions were assembled. Proposition 4 predicts that in a competitive personalised settlement, digital means should be application-layer, legally constructed, and selectively deniable. Across documents, the coding produced 194 Layer 3 entries. The distribution is presented in Table 9.

Table 9: Georgia - Layer 3 Code Distribution

Source: Author's own.

Code	Total	High conf.	Medium	Low
L3-ENABLE-LA (Legal-administrative)	44	31	12	1
L3-DENY (Deniability)	42	24	16	1
L3-INFRA (Infrastructure/application)	41	25	14	2
L3-ENABLE-IC (Institutional capture)	26	8	17	1
L3-ISOMIM (Isomorphic mimicry)	19	12	6	1
L3-POLCOST (Political cost)	17	9	8	—

The quantitative baselines (Table 10) reveal a pattern consistent with the enabling logic of the competitive settlement. The legal framework for content regulation remained formally protective throughout, while the regulatory approach shifted toward more direct state involvement (v2smregapp declining 15% from 2.2 to 1.9, indicating the state assumed a more direct regulatory role rather than delegating to private actors). Legal weaponisation, rare in 2022–2023 (v2smdefabu near 3.85), increased in 2024 (declining to 3.62), consistent with qualitative evidence of an escalation in SLAPP cases and regulatory pressure against critical

media. Regulatory capacity remained moderate and stable (v2smregcap ~2.2). This quantitative pattern triangulates with the qualitative findings: the legal framework was not overtly repressive, but the state expanded its direct regulatory hand and increasingly weaponised legal tools during the period when Layer 1 documented the narrowing of the competitive settlement. The formal protections remained, while new legal instruments (foreign influence law, broadcasting amendments, surveillance expansions) created specific mechanisms for control within that architecture, which is precisely the legal-administrative construction pattern that Proposition 4 predicts.

Table 10: Georgia - Layer 3 Quantitative Baselines, 2022-2024

Source: V-Dem DSPv7 (Mechkova et al., 2026).

Indicator	Variable	2022	2023	2024	Change
Regulatory capacity	v2smregcap	2.063	2.240	2.240	+9%
Legal framework	v2smregcon	3.302	3.302	3.302	0%
Regulatory approach	v2smregapp	2.188	1.865	1.865	−15%
Legal weaponisation	v2smdefabu	3.851	3.851	3.619	−6%

Application-Layer Dominance

The application-layer evidence is documented in detail in Layer 2's belief and behavioural analysis. The key instances, Meta's CIB network (Nimmo, Gleicher et al., 2023), ISFED's TikTok monitoring (ISFED, 2024), AI-generated voice imitations (ISFED, 2024), and non-transparent advertising (IREX, 2024, pp. 7–8), all operated at the platform or content level. The 30:6 ratio between application-layer and infrastructure-layer entries confirms this dominance. The evidence at the infrastructure layer was thin and concentrated in the surveillance domain. The SSSG's Operational-Technical Agency controlled surveillance infrastructure across computer and telecommunications networks and had direct access to service-provider infrastructure (Freedom House, 2025, Section B6). Criminal Procedure Code amendments in 2022 expanded covert-surveillance provisions despite criticism from the Venice Commission (European Commission, 2023, p. 33). However, no source documented SORM-type interception systems, deep packet inspection, DNS blocking, systematic filtering, or network-level shutdowns. This absence is analytically significant and consistent with Kerr's (2018) finding that Georgia was one of only two post-Soviet states that did not adopt SORM-based infrastructure monitoring. Where surveillance infrastructure existed, it served the knowing function rather than operating as a behavioural control mechanism, which is

consistent with Layer 2's finding that knowing supported belief operations rather than enforcement.

Legal-Administrative Construction as the Primary Enabling Logic

The foreign influence law is the clearest example because it directly converted prior narrative framing into enforceable administrative control. Actors previously described as foreign-influenced or destabilising were placed under a new legal category involving registration, reporting, inspection, and sanctioning powers (Freedom House, 2025, Section B6; European Commission, 2024, pp. 26–27). The Ministry of Justice was given oversight capacity, and later provisions increased penalties, including criminal sanctions for non-compliance (European Commission, 2024, pp. 26–27; Freedom House, 2025, Section B6). The same legal-administrative logic extended beyond this single instrument. Covert-surveillance amendments expanded the legal basis for monitoring (European Commission, 2023, p. 33). Broadcasting amendments strengthened GNCC's regulatory sanctioning capacity (IREX, 2023, pp. 8–10). Revised accreditation procedures restricted media access to Parliament (Freedom House, 2024, Section B4). StratCom bylaw changes authorised online monitoring and campaign planning (ISFED, 2023, pp. 2–5). Electoral-law amendments altered the institutional environment for political competition (ODIHR, 2024, pp. 23, 27–28). Together, these measures created legal channels through which belief management and behavioural deterrence could be implemented without infrastructure-level censorship. The cumulative pattern is more important than any single provision: the ruling coalition expanded formal authority across surveillance, media regulation, parliamentary access, strategic communication, and electoral administration. Institutional capture functioned as a secondary enabling mechanism. GNCC's expanded sanctioning role, the Anti-Corruption Bureau's selective application concerns, public-broadcaster bias, and the Government Administration's connection to the Meta-identified CIB network all show that aligned institutions helped implement or amplify the legal framework (European Commission, 2025, pp. 32, 37; Nimmo, Gleicher et al., 2023, p. 20; IREX, 2024, pp. 11–12). However, the confidence distribution (8 high-confidence for capture vs. 31 for legal construction) suggests that institutional capture was less consistently documented. The observed pattern is legal construction first, captured or aligned implementation second. This refines Proposition 4: in Georgia, the ruling coalition did not rely solely on pre-existing captured institutions but built legal-administrative tools that expanded control capacity, while politically aligned institutions helped operationalise them.

Function Specific Deniability

In the Georgian case, deniability varies by function. It was strongest in belief-manipulation operations. These relied on proxy actors, fake or anonymous platform assets, false media formats, and non-transparent advertising. The People's Power party provided a formally separate but ruling-linked channel through which sharper anti-Western narratives could be voiced, while Georgian Dream maintained partial distance (ISFED, 2022, pp. 3–4). Meta's CIB network simulated grassroots opinion through fake accounts and fictitious personas (Nimmo, Gleicher et al., 2023, p. 20). Anonymous Facebook and TikTok pages concealed management while spreading anti-opposition narratives (ISFED, 2024, Key Findings). The shared mechanism was distributed attribution: hostile narratives were introduced by proxies, amplified by aligned media, circulated through anonymous accounts, and selectively validated by official actors, which allowed the ruling ecosystem to benefit without bearing the full political cost of direct authorship. On the other hand, behavioural enforcement was more attributable. The foreign influence law was adopted through Parliament and implemented through identifiable state institutions. GNCC fines, court cases, SLAPP lawsuits, criminal proceedings, and official demands for content deletion operated through recognisable legal, regulatory, or political actors (IREX, 2024, Media section; Freedom House, 2023, Section C3; Freedom House, 2024, Section C3). Here, legal-administrative enforcement requires formal authorship, laws need sponsors, regulators issue decisions, and courts process cases. Proposition 4 should therefore be refined rather than entirely accepted or rejected. Georgia's digital means were not uniformly deniable; they were functionally deniable. Belief manipulation was deniable because it depended on platform operations and proxy circulation, while behavioural enforcement was attributable because it depended on formal legal authority. The pattern is best understood as a split attribution structure: deniable influence for shaping beliefs, attributable institutions for enforcing behaviour.

Political Cost and Isomorphic Mimicry

Sensitivity towards political cost was evident early. The 2023 withdrawal of the foreign-agents law, following mass mobilisation and international criticism, showed that visible coercive legal measures still carried high costs (European Commission, 2023, pp. 4, 16). ISFED's conclusion that People's Power voiced messages Georgian Dream avoided because open anti-Western positioning was costly in a pro-Western society points to the same logic (ISFED, 2022, p. 18). Meta's 2023 CIB enforcement helps explain later migration into less-regulated platform spaces, especially TikTok. Isomorphic mimicry reduced these costs by presenting control-oriented instruments through formally acceptable language. The foreign influence law was framed as transparency; broadcasting amendments as EU alignment; the

Anti-Corruption Bureau as specialised oversight; GNCC's Media Academy as media literacy; and legal changes affecting expression as protection, security, or administrative necessity (European Commission, 2024, pp. 26–30; IREX, 2024, pp. 9–10; ODIHR, 2024, Campaign Finance section). These forms provided legitimacy shields for instruments that external observers documented as constraining civic, media, or opposition actors. A temporal qualification is necessary. By late 2024, political-cost sensitivity weakened. The foreign influence law was adopted despite international criticism; the EU described accession as effectively halted, and the government suspended EU negotiations (European Commission, 2025, pp. 22–23). This suggests that as Georgia's competitive settlement narrowed, the ruling coalition became more willing to absorb costs that earlier encouraged deniable, proxy-based, or mimetic forms of control, consistent with the Layer 1 finding of a competitive settlement under transition pressure.

Taken together, Georgia's within-case analysis supports both propositions assigned to the competitive-personalised settlement. Proposition 2 is consistent: belief-centred perception management was the dominant governance function, with behaviour selective and sequentially dependent on prior belief work. Proposition 4 is consistent with refinements, that digital means were application-layer, legally constructed, and functionally deniable, with legal construction and institutional capture operating in sequence and deniability varying by function. The structural context established in Layer 1, a competitive settlement under transition pressure, with horizontal threat dominance and increasing cost tolerance, explaining both the predominance of belief-based strategies and the late-2024 emergence of more overt behavioural controls.

4.2 Serbia: Within-case Analysis

4.2.1 Layer 1: Political Settlement type as Structural Condition

Table 11: Serbia - Layer 1 Code Distribution

Source: Author's own.

Code	Total	High conf.	Medium	Low
L1-PERS-CAP (Institutional capture)	54	47	7	—
L1-RENT (Rent logic)	32	21	10	1
L1-THREAT-H (Horizontal/outsider threat)	26	17	9	—
L1-DOM-GAP (Power gap)	20	14	6	—
L1-DOM-ELEC (Electoral uncertainty)	18	14	4	—
L1-TIMHOR (Time horizons)	17	—	17	—
L1-THREAT-V (Vertical/insider threat)	8	5	3	—

Across the coded sources (Table 12), Serbia's Layer 1 evidence supports classification as a personalised dominant settlement. The strongest evidence concerned the concentration of effective authority around Aleksandar Vučić and the ruling SNS ecosystem, combined with institutional capture across parliament, media regulation, judiciary, public administration, security structures, and state-linked economic resources. This pattern repeatedly showed that formally existing institutions operated in ways that reduced autonomous constraints on the ruling coalition. The most direct evidence of personalisation was the repeated description of Vučić as the dominant political figure despite the constitutionally limited powers of the presidency. Freedom House described Serbia as operating as a "de facto presidential system" (Freedom House, 2023), in which formal parliamentary arrangements remain in place but effective authority is concentrated around Vučić and the ruling-party ecosystem. More precisely, the quantitative indicators reveal a structural profile fundamentally different from Georgia's. Where Georgia showed a two-period shift, Serbia shows structural stability at dominant settlement levels. Neopatrimonialism was already high in 2022 (0.661) and rose gradually to 0.718, more than double Georgia's 2022 baseline (0.289). Critically, political corruption was simultaneously high (0.694–0.760), unlike Georgia, where neopatrimonialism and corruption diverged. The co-presence of high neopatrimonialism and high corruption indicates that personalisation in Serbia operates through rent extraction and patronage rather than through institutional redesign alone, the pattern the framework associates with a settled dominant settlement in which the ruling coalition controls both institutional levers and resource flows. Rule of law was consistently low (0.428–0.488) and electoral democracy consistently low (0.315–0.360), both well below Georgia's 2022–2023 levels. This trajectory is confirmed across independent measurement systems: WGI Control of Corruption (38.0–36.5) and TI CPI (36–35) both show persistently low scores that have gradually worsened (Table 12). The qualitative evidence identifies the mechanisms sustaining this configuration.

Table 12: Serbia - Settlement Indicators, 2022-2024

Sources: V-Dem v16 (Coppedge et al., 2026); World Bank WGI (2024); Transparency International CPI (2024)

Indicator	2022	2023	2024	Change
Neopatrimonialism (v2x_neopat)	0.661	0.668	0.718	+9%
Political corruption (v2x_corr)	0.694	0.686	0.760	+10%
Rule of law (v2x_rule)	0.488	0.473	0.428	−12%
Electoral democracy (v2x_polyarchy)	0.357	0.360	0.315	−12%

WGI Control of Corruption	38.0	37.7	36.5	−4%
TI CPI	36	36	35	−3%

This personalisation was reinforced by parliamentary subordination. EU reports documented that parliament lacked an annual work plan, that its agenda was government-driven, that laws were adopted through accelerated or minimum-notice procedures, and that opposition motions were sidelined or not placed on the agenda (European Commission, 2023, p. 12; European Commission, 2024, p. 23; European Commission, 2025, p. 23). Thus, the legislature formally operates, but not as an independent arena capable of constraining the executive/ruling coalition. Judicial and prosecutorial autonomy were also repeatedly documented as compromised. EU reports noted continuing political pressure on judges and prosecutors, public comments by government and parliamentary actors on ongoing cases, and weak institutional defence of judicial independence (European Commission, 2023, pp. 20–23; European Commission, 2024, p. 29; European Commission, 2025, p. 29). The transfer of prosecutors working on sensitive corruption cases linked to the state-owned EPS company added a concrete mechanism: institutional discipline operated through internal reassignment and pressure within formal structures (European Commission, 2023, p. 23; Freedom House, 2024, Judicial Framework and Independence). This is important for the settlement classification because it shows institutional capture as a practical relation of dependence, not merely as a low rule-of-law score. The media-regulatory sphere provided another strong capture mechanism. The Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM) repeatedly failed to demonstrate independence, renewed national licences for strongly pro-government television stations despite prior concerns, remained passive during elections, and failed to act sufficiently against media violations (European Commission, 2023, pp. 41–44; European Commission, 2024, p. 38; European Commission, 2025, pp. 40–41; Freedom House, 2023). Public and private media further reinforced the ruling-party advantage. In 2024, Radio Television of Serbia (RTS) central news coverage reportedly devoted 94% of its airtime to the ruling majority, compared with 6% to opposition parties (European Commission, 2025, p. 41). Earlier monitoring similarly found ruling-party dominance over national television airtime, while opposition coverage remained limited or negative (European Commission, 2023, p. 44; Freedom House, 2024, D1; IREX, 2024, pp. 4–6, 12). This indicates that media capture was both regulatory and informational: regulators failed to constrain pro-government dominance, while the media system itself reproduced the power gap. Institutional capture also operated through the public administration and security sector. Senior civil-service recruitment formally

retained merit procedures, but acting appointments and non-civil-servant appointments created discretionary executive leverage over administrative personnel (European Commission, 2023, p. 18). In the security field, EU reports repeatedly noted that police operational autonomy from the Ministry of Interior was not guaranteed and that Bezbednosno-informativna agencija (BIA) and the Military Security Agency retained covert interception powers without clear separation between criminal investigation and security-service remits (European Commission, 2023, pp. 52–55; European Commission, 2024, p. 44; European Commission, 2025, p. 48). This matters because the dominant-settlement expectation is that the coercive, regulatory, and administrative channels are embedded within the ruling coalition's command structure. Rent logic reinforced this capture pattern. EU reports documented large procurement exemptions worth billions of euros, state-aid discretion, and selective public co-financing of media (European Commission, 2024, p. 59; European Commission, 2025, pp. 60, 65). Freedom House (2023; 2025) and IREX (2025, pp. 7–8, 12) documented patronage networks, public-sector dependence, and public funding for pro-government media, while Telekom Srbija's expansion in the telecom and media market created a state-linked channel for influence over media distribution and online information access. Together, these channels enabled selective resource distribution, thereby securing compliance and maintaining loyalty.

The Serbian pattern, therefore, differs from Georgia's. The evidence shows a more consolidated ruling-party ecosystem in which formal institutions, regulators, public resources, and media-market structures already operate in ways favourable to the ruling coalition. Personalisation is therefore not reducible to Vučić's individual dominance; it is institutionalised through a wider ruling-party-centred system of administrative, regulatory, judicial, media, security, and rent-based control.

Dominance versus Competitiveness

The evidence also supports the dominance dimension of Serbia's settlement. Serbia retains formal electoral competition, opposition parties, civil society organisations, independent media, and large protest movements. However, the coded sources consistently show a large power gap between the ruling coalition and organised challengers. Elections are competitive in procedural form, but the playing field is structurally tilted in ways that reduce genuine uncertainty about power transfer. Across three electoral cycles (2022 presidential and parliamentary, 2023 parliamentary, 2024 local and Belgrade), ODIHR and Freedom House consistently documented the same structural pattern: elections offered voters genuine alternatives, but the playing field was tilted by unbalanced media access, misuse of

administrative resources, public-sector pressure on employees and vulnerable voters, campaign-finance disparities, and ineffective oversight bodies (ODIHR, 2022, pp. 1–2; European Commission, 2024, pp. 22–23; Freedom House, 2023, A1–A3; Freedom House, 2025, A2–A3). Competition was procedurally present but did not produce genuine uncertainty about national-level power transfer. The power gap was especially visible in media and parliamentary arenas. Monitoring of central news shows found the ruling coalition receiving 95% of airtime, compared with 5% for opposition actors; RTS showed a similar imbalance of 94% to 6% (European Commission, 2023, p. 44). In parliament, the opposition formally held seats but had limited agenda-setting capacity: the agenda was government-driven, few committees were chaired by opposition MPs, oversight sessions were limited, and opposition motions were not placed on the agenda (European Commission, 2024, p. 23; European Commission, 2025, p. 23). This indicates that opposition visibility and institutional access existed but were structurally subordinated.

At the same time, the Serbian case should not be described as a closed or uncontested political system. Several entries complicate a simple "no competition" interpretation. The opposition returned to parliament in 2022 and won 86 of 250 seats; in Belgrade, opposition lists came close to depriving the SNS-SPS coalition of a majority (Freedom House, 2023, Electoral Process; Freedom House, 2023, Local Democratic Governance). In 2023, the Serbia Against Violence coalition achieved the strongest opposition result since 2012 and nearly contested Belgrade (Freedom House, 2024b, Electoral Process). These entries show that challengers are visible and sometimes electorally relevant, especially in urban arenas. However, these pockets of contestation do not overturn the dominant-settlement classification. Instead, they show that Serbia's dominance is not the absence of opposition, but the structural management of opposition. Opposition parties, civic movements, and independent media can mobilise, but they operate within a field shaped by media asymmetry, administrative pressure, clientelist mobilisation, regulatory passivity, campaign-finance disparities, voter-pressure mechanisms, and weak or delayed institutional remedies. The settlement is therefore dominant because the ruling coalition's position is not seriously uncertain at the national level, even when local or protest-based challenges put pressure on it.

Threat Environment and Time Horizon

The Serbian evidence indicates a more complex threat environment than the simplest version of the dominant-settlement expectation would suggest. Horizontal threat was clearly present. Civil society, independent media, protest movements, environmental activists,

election-monitoring groups, students, and opposition parties all retained some capacity for collective action. However, these actors were repeatedly pressured, smeared, legally harassed, or structurally contained. The clearest outsider mobilisation was the Serbia Against Violence movement following the May 2023 mass shootings, which produced sustained protests across Belgrade and other municipalities (European Commission, 2023, p. 11; Freedom House, 2024, E1; Amnesty, 2024, pp. 17–18). Civil society also organised around elections, environmental protection, and the ProGlas initiative (Freedom House, 2024, B8; Freedom House, 2025, B8). Yet the state response consistently showed containment: CSOs, journalists, and activists faced smear campaigns, SLAPPs, spyware attacks, and data exposure (European Commission, 2023, pp. 14–15; Freedom House, 2023, Civil Society; IREX, 2023, Indicators 3 and 18). Outsider actors remained politically meaningful as targets to be managed, not as actors capable of producing national power-transfer uncertainty. The more diagnostic evidence for Serbia's settlement type, the more it concerns vertical/ruling-ecosystem discipline. Parliament dismissed the Minister of Economy after a politically sensitive disagreement over sanctions against Russia and his views on the anti-violent protests (European Commission, 2023, p. 13). Freedom House's Nations in Transit reports linked the Belivuk and Jovanjica cases to accusations involving organised crime, former interior ministry figures, ruling-party-linked actors, police inspectors, security officials, prosecutors, and pro-government tabloids (Freedom House, 2023; Freedom House, 2024). In the EPS corruption case, prosecutors were transferred after indicting individuals in a politically sensitive state-linked case; in the Jovanjica-related case, inspectors who disrupted protected networks were reportedly demoted (Freedom House, 2024). insider/ruling-ecosystem risk is not limited to open presidential-government conflict. It includes state officials, prosecutors, inspectors, former ministers, security-linked actors, and regime-adjacent figures who expose, disrupt, or accumulate leverage within protected networks. The pattern suggests that the ruling coalition's deeper survival logic involves disciplining agents inside the state and ruling ecosystem so that none can become autonomous power centres. This corresponds closely to Levy's (2014) dominant-personalised configuration, in which subordinate actors depend on the patron's continued favour, and the primary vulnerability lies in insider defection, factional exposure, or autonomous resource accumulation.

Time-horizon evidence supports the dominant classification. Serbia's frequent snap elections could appear to indicate short-termism, but in context they reflect an incumbent with sufficient control to use electoral timing strategically (European Commission, 2023, pp. 3, 11–12). The stronger pattern is long-term consolidation: SNS dominance since 2012, REM's eight-

year licence renewals for pro-government broadcasters, Telekom Srbija's multi-year market expansion, and sustained use of media co-financing and advertising channels all indicate durable control-building rather than short survival cycles (Freedom House, 2023, B5/B6; IREX, 2024, pp. 10–12).

4.2.2 Layer 2: Digital Governance Functions for Regime Survival

Table 13: Serbia - Digital Governance Indicators, 2022-2024

Source: V-Dem DSPv7 (Mechkova et al., 2026).

Function	Variable	2022	2023	2024
Knowing	Gov. SM monitoring (v2smgovsmmon)	2.069	1.733	1.908
Behaviour	Gov. filtering (v2smgovfilprc)	3.025	3.025	3.025
Beliefs	Gov. domestic disinfo (v2smgovdom)	1.112	0.826	0.747
Beliefs	Gov. foreign disinfo (v2smgovab)	1.666	1.442	1.558

The quantitative pattern in Serbia differs from that in Georgia, complicating Proposition 1's prediction (Table 13). Domestic disinformation was already very intense in 2022 (v2smgovdom at 1.112, between "often" and "extremely often") and intensified further to 0.747, lower (meaning more active) than Georgia's 2024 score of 1.314. The belief indicators are the most active of any function quantitatively. Monitoring showed an irregular pattern: intensifying in 2023 (score dropping from 2.069 to 1.733), then partially recovering in 2024 (1.908). Filtering remained completely flat (3.025 across all years, in the "rarely" range). This quantitative evidence creates a tension. Proposition 1 predicts a knowing-behaviour operative axis, yet the most active quantitative indicators are in the belief domain. The resolution depends on the qualitative evidence: if the 61 behavioural entries (38 high-confidence) document sustained institutional deterrence that V-Dem's filtering variable does not capture, including legal pressure (30 entries) and coordinated harassment (27 entries), then the quantitative-qualitative divergence reflects measurement differences rather than a contradiction. V-Dem's behavioural variables measure technical filtering, not the legal harassment, SLAPP suits, and institutional intimidation that constitute behavioural deterrence in Serbia's dominant settlement. Qualitative coding captures the full range of deterrence mechanisms, whereas quantitative data captures only a narrow dimension.

Table 14: Serbia - Code Distribution for Layer 2

Source: Author’s own.

Code	Total	High conf.	Medium	Low	Primary target

L2-BEHAV-QL (Influencing behaviour)	61	38	23	—	Outsider (60)
L2-BELIEF-QL (Influencing beliefs)	61	32	27	2	Outsider (61)
L2-KNOW-QL (Knowing)	36	20	14	2	Outsider (25)

Table 14b: Serbia – Code Distribution for Layer 2.

Source: Author's own

Subcode	Entries	Parent function
LEGAL	30	Behaviour
CHANNEL	30	Beliefs
HARASS	27	Behaviour
TARGET	23	Knowing
DISINFO	20	Beliefs
MASS	10	Knowing
CIB	8	Beliefs
FLOOD	1	Beliefs
TAKEDOWN	1	Behaviour

One finding requires particular attention. Target types are overwhelmingly outsiders across all three functions (60 of 61 behaviour entries, 61 of 61 belief entries, 25 of 36 knowing entries target outsiders). Proposition 1 predicts that in a dominant settlement, the primary threat is internal and digital governance should centre on insider monitoring and behavioural discipline. The near-absence of documented insider targeting (only 1 entry) does not necessarily falsify this expectation; insider surveillance is by nature less observable in secondary sources, since reporting organisations primarily document effects on journalists, opposition, and civil society rather than intra-coalition dynamics. This observational limitation is acknowledged, and its implications are addressed in the discussion chapter.

Knowing

The knowing function was the most analytically distinctive element of Serbia's Layer 2 profile, with 36 entries (20 high-confidence). Its significance lay not in frequency but in the type of evidence documented and its operational connection to behavioural deterrence. The entries showed a layered monitoring architecture combining targeted spyware, phone extraction, metadata-retention systems, Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) tools, facial recognition capabilities, and insider-directed surveillance. Serbia's knowing function was more technically developed and more closely connected to discipline. The first mechanism was the targeted extraction of information from politically relevant outsiders. Amnesty International

(2024, pp. 7–9, 21–23, 42–51), BIRN (2024) and Freedom House (2025) documented spyware or phone forensics targeting journalists, civil society workers, protest organisers, environmental activists, and government critics. The strongest evidence came from cases involving Pegasus-like attacks, references to Predator, Cellebrite extraction, and the domestic spyware NoviSpy. Phones were seized during police or BIA interviews, unlocked or searched through forensic tools, and in some cases, allegedly infected while in state custody. These practices collect information and expose communication networks, encrypted conversations, source relations, locations, and organising infrastructures.

The second mechanism was the capacity for ambient monitoring. Serbia's legal and technical infrastructure enabled broader forms of data access: telecommunications metadata retention, SIM-card registration, covert interception by security agencies, and tools capable of mapping online identities, social-media profiles, geolocation traces, personal networks, and "entities of interest" (Freedom House, 2023, C5–C6; 2024, C4-C6). BIRN's reporting on Social Links, Maltego, Mozenda, Griffeye, Huawei-linked surveillance capacities, and facial-recognition procurement shows that the state did not rely only on individual spyware infections (Tešić, 2022a). It also developed capacities for large-scale profiling and network analysis across online and offline identifiers.

The third mechanism, smaller in count but analytically important, was insider or ruling-ecosystem monitoring. Several entries documented surveillance directed not only at opposition or civil society actors, but also at actors inside or adjacent to the ruling ecosystem. BIRN's reporting on EPS listening centres, surveillance equipment, pressure on internal controls, and the spyware targeting of high-ranking police general Slobodan Malešić showed that monitoring could be used to discipline regime-adjacent or insider-linked actors as well as outsiders (Tešić, 2022a; Tešić & Zorić, 2024). This matters for the framework because dominant-personalised settlements are expected to invest in mechanisms that keep agents, allies, and subordinate power-holders from becoming autonomous centres of leverage. Taken together, the knowing evidence strongly supports the "enabled by knowing" part of Proposition 1. Serbia's surveillance practices were not episodic or marginal. They formed a technical and institutional layer through which the ruling ecosystem could identify targets, map networks, extract information, and convert private vulnerability into political discipline.

Influencing Behavior

Behavioural deterrence was documented through 61 entries (38 high-confidence). The dominant behavioural subcodes were legal pressure (30 entries) and harassment (27 entries), indicating that deterrence operated through both informal intimidation and formal procedure.

The most important result was the relationship between behaviour and knowing. In Serbia, surveillance did not stop at information acquisition. It produced behavioural effects: activists changed communication practices, deleted group messages, avoided phones and computers, reconsidered mobilisation, or redirected organisational resources toward digital security. Knowing, therefore, became deterrence. The first behavioural mechanism was surveillance-induced discipline. Amnesty (2024, pp. 49–51) and BIRN (2024) documented cases in which activists' phones were seized, searched, unlocked, or infected, while interviews or detention appeared to function as opportunities for device access. The behavioural effect was repeatedly visible in the evidence: targeted individuals reported anxiety, isolation, distrust of digital tools, reduced ability to communicate with sources, and greater reliance on in-person meetings. Some activists deleted messages from communication groups, expected further police action, or reconsidered participation. This is the clearest point at which Serbia's knowing function translated into behaviour: surveillance created a chilling effect before or beyond formal punishment.

The second mechanism was the imposition of legal and procedural costs. Instead of banning critical speech directly, Serbian authorities and ruling-linked actors repeatedly used legal procedures to make criticism costly. Investigative outlets such as KRIK faced lawsuits and defamation proceedings, which turned watchdog journalism into a financially and procedurally burdensome activity (European Commission, 2023, p. 42; IREX, 2024, pp. 9–10). Protest organisers, environmental activists, and online commentators faced charges, fines, police visits, or investigations connected to mobilisation and digital expression (Amnesty International, 2024, pp. 19–23; Freedom House, 2023d, Sections 3–7, 2024, Sections 3–7). The behavioural effect was deterrence through procedure: criticism remained formally possible, but its cost increased.

The third mechanism was insider discipline through the same surveillance capacities documented in the knowing section. The EPS listening centres and the Malešić spyware case (Tešić, 2022a; Tešić & Zorić, 2024) showed that monitoring extended into the ruling ecosystem itself, supporting the dominant-settlement expectation that surveillance also serves insider discipline. Overall, Serbia's influencing-behaviour function combined surveillance-induced chilling, procedural burden, reputational intimidation, and insider discipline into a continuous deterrence environment. This is broadly consistent with Proposition 1: behaviour was the core governance output, but it was enabled by extensive knowing rather than operating independently from it.

Influencing Beliefs

Belief manipulation was documented in 61 entries (32 high-confidence), all of which targeted outsider actors. The dominant subcodes were CHANNEL (30 entries) and DISINFO (20 entries), with CIB (8) and FLOOD (1) being smaller. Unlike Georgia, where belief manipulation was the primary strategic function organised around a layered perception-management ecosystem constructed through proxy actors and platform operations, Serbia's belief function operated primarily through an already-captured media infrastructure. Three patterns structured this function.

The first pattern was information channelling through the captured media ecosystem. The ruling coalition dominated the information environment not by constructing proxy networks but by leveraging institutional media capture documented in Layer 1. CRTA monitoring found ruling parties appeared in 95% of media coverage on five national television channels, while opposition coverage was minimal or negative (European Commission, 2023, p. 44). By 2024, RTS central news devoted 94% of its airtime to the ruling majority, compared with 6% to the opposition (European Commission, 2025, p. 41). Government representatives maintained a permanent ban on appearing on critical media, while pro-government outlets directly broadcast official statements and social media posts (IREX, 2023, Indicator 18; Freedom House, 2024, Section D1). REM's renewal of national broadcasting licences for strongly pro-government stations, despite documented regulatory breaches, institutionalised this imbalance (Freedom House, 2023; European Commission, 2023, pp. 43–44). Telekom Srbija served as an additional channel: its campaign against SBB and United Group restricted the distribution of independent content, while RATEL, the telecommunications regulator, remained passive (IREX, 2024, pp. 8–10). This channelling operated through institutional channels already subordinated to the ruling coalition, consistent with the dominant settlement's enabling logic — the regime did not need to build proxy media infrastructure because it already controlled the mainstream one.

Delegitimation through fabricated and misleading content was another important pattern. Pro-government tabloids and broadcasters deployed targeted disinformation against opposition figures, independent journalists, and civil society. Pink TV aired the quasi-documentary "Meta Porodica," labelling independent journalists as foreign mercenaries collaborating with intelligence services (IREX, 2023, Indicator 6). Informer TV aired reports alleging a "special war against Serbia" by approximately 40 foreign-funded NGOs, naming organisations, employees, salaries, and budgets, with senior officials, including the President, pre-signalling the forthcoming "revelations" (Amnesty International, 2024, pp. 17–18). In a distinct digital manipulation mechanism, Pink TV's editor-in-chief aired deepfake videos of

several opposition politicians, altering both context and spoken words during the 2024 period (IREX, 2024, Indicator 6). RSF documented "Ugly Twins" websites designed to confuse readers by mimicking independent media outlets, plagiarising their work, and publishing content directly favourable to the government (Freedom House, 2023, Freedom on the Net). Before the December 2023 elections, EDMO reported that pro-government media spread false stories, including claims that the opposition planned to ban the Serbian Cyrillic script (Freedom House, 2024). These delegitimation campaigns targeted the credibility and public standing of outsider actors, recoding opposition, independent media, and civil society as foreign-controlled, corrupt, or threatening.

As for the coordinated inauthentic behaviour and platform-level amplification, Meta removed a network of over 5,000 Facebook and Instagram accounts and a dozen groups engaged in coordinated inauthentic behaviour supporting President Vučić and the SNS, linked to employees of the party's "Internet Team" and some Serbian state employees (Nimmo, Franklin et al., 2023; Freedom House, 2024, Freedom on the Net). The operation ran across Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and local news media, using a stand-alone web application to coordinate commenting across platforms and create a perception of widespread grassroots support (Nimmo, Franklin et al., 2023). IJAS and BIRN reported that journalists and newsrooms were exposed to organised, synchronised bot attacks in website comments and on social media profiles (IREX, 2024, Indicator 6). During the 2023 election campaign, the volume of SNS videos far exceeded the sum of all opposition videos, with the campaign mostly conducted by the party's social media team rather than individual members (IREX, 2024, Indicator 18). This CIB infrastructure showed that even in a dominant settlement with captured mainstream media, the ruling coalition also invested in platform-level amplification, particularly where online spaces remained less controlled than broadcast media.

4.2.3 Layer 3: Digital Means and Enabling Logic

Table 15: Serbia - Layer 3 Code Distribution

Source: Author’s own.

Code	Total	High conf.	Medium	Low
L3-DENY (Deniability)	45	25	19	1
L3-INFRA (Infrastructure/application)	37	21	13	3
L3-ENABLE-IC (Institutional capture)	36	29	7	—
L3-ISOMIM (Isomorphic mimicry)	22	12	10	—
L3-ENABLE-LA (Legal-administrative)	11	7	4	—

L3-POLCOST (Political cost)	4	—	3	1

Table 15b: Serbia – Subcodes

Subcode	Entries	Dimension
L3-INFRA:APP (application-layer)	28	Infrastructure vs. application
L3-INFRA:HARD (infrastructure-layer)	9	Infrastructure vs. application
L3-DENY:HIGH (high deniability)	23	Deniability
L3-DENY:LOW (low deniability)	18	Deniability

Layer 3 shifts the analysis from governance functions to the means through which those functions were operationalised. Following the standardised questions defined in the methodology, this section assesses whether Serbia's digital controls operated mainly at the infrastructure or application layer, whether they were enabled through captured institutional channels or constructed legal-administrative frameworks, and whether state attribution was openly acknowledged or formally deniable. Proposition 3 predicts that, in a personalised dominant settlement, digital means should be infrastructure-heavy, institutionally delegated, and openly operated**.** The coded evidence broadly supports the institutional-capture and attribution components of Proposition 3, but qualifies the infrastructure component. Serbia demonstrated a robust surveillance capacity through telecommunications metadata retention, covert interception powers, SIM registration, and security-service access to communications data. However, the operational repertoire also relied heavily on endpoint and application-layer practices: phone extraction, spyware, coordinated inauthentic behaviour, and platform-based amplification (Table 16). The best description is therefore not that Serbia relied only on hard infrastructure, but that its digital means were institutionally embedded across infrastructure, device, and platform layers.

Table 16: Serbia - Layer 3 Quantitative Baselines, 2022-2024

Source: V-Dem DSPv7 (Mechkova et al., 2026)

Indicator	Variable	2022	2023	2024
Regulatory capacity	v2smregcap	1.263	1.263	1.273
Legal framework	v2smregcon	3.633	3.633	3.517
Regulatory approach	v2smregapp	2.331	2.331	2.331
Legal weaponisation	v2smdefabu	3.037	2.945	2.974

The quantitative baselines for Serbia's enabling logic diverge from Georgia's, partially supporting and partially complicating Proposition 3 (Table 16). Regulatory capacity is very low (v2smregcap at 1.263, "very limited resources"), well below Georgia's moderate 2.240. This might seem inconsistent with a dominant settlement expected to have strong enforcement

capacity, but the qualitative evidence resolves the apparent contradiction: institutional capture (36 entries, 29 high-confidence) provides the primary enabling mechanism, meaning the regime does not need formal regulatory capacity because it operates through captured institutions that enforce at the coalition's discretion. The regulatory approach remained stable at mixed state-private regulation (v2smregapp at 2.331 across all years), unlike Georgia, where the state shifted toward more direct regulation. Legal weaponisation was already elevated (v2smdefabu between 2.945 and 3.037, between "sometimes" and "rarely") and stable, not escalating as in Georgia's late-2024 period. The legal framework remained formally protective of political speech (v2smregcon stable near 3.5) but showed a slight decline in 2024 (3.517). The most striking contrast with Georgia is political cost: only 4 entries (none high-confidence) compared to Georgia's 17. This near-absence of political-cost evidence is itself consistent with the dominant settlement's expected profile, where institutional capture makes coercion costless, the question of political cost sensitivity largely does not arise. The enabling logic operates through institutional subordination rather than legal construction: institutional capture (36, 29 high-confidence) vastly outweighs legal-administrative construction (11, 7 high-confidence), the inverse of Georgia's pattern (26 vs 44).

Infrastructure Versus Application Layer

The first Layer 3 question asks whether controls are operated primarily at the infrastructure or application layer. The Serbian evidence gives a mixed but theoretically interpretable answer. Application-layer entries were more numerous (28) than hard-infrastructure entries (9). However, many application-layer entries were not ordinary social-media manipulation. They are concerned about device-level surveillance, spyware, and phone extraction linked to police, intelligence, or security service practices. Therefore, they should not be interpreted as purely deniable or decentralised platform activity. The hard infrastructure component was most evident in telecommunications and interception capacity. Freedom House documented that ISPs and mobile and fixed-line operators were required to retain communications metadata for 12 months and provide access to competent authorities, including police and security agencies (Freedom House, 2023, Section C6). The same metadata-retention structure was documented again in 2024, with authorities reportedly accessing retained metadata directly through applications installed in operating systems (Freedom House, 2024e, Section C6). EU reporting also located interception capacity within identifiable state bodies, especially the BIA and the Military Security Agency (European Commission, 2023a, pp. 53–54, 2024a, p. 44). These entries support the hard-layer component of Proposition 3 because monitoring capacity was embedded in telecom infrastructure and

security institutions. At the same time, Serbia's operational repertoire extended beyond the network layer. Targeted spyware and forensic extraction formed an important endpoint layer. Google's Threat Analysis Group reported that government-backed actors in Serbia likely deployed Predator spyware against Android devices (Freedom House, 2025, p. C5). Later evidence documented Pegasus-style targeting of civil society workers and concerns about the use of commercial spyware products against journalists and activists (Freedom House, 2024, 2025). EU reporting also noted complaints concerning spyware and mobile-phone forensic products targeting civil society actors, journalists, and activists (European Commission, 2025, p. 39). These tools were application- or device-layer in technical terms, but they were institutionally embedded because they were linked to police, intelligence, or security-service capacities. Proposition 3 is therefore partially supported and should be refined: Serbia's means were not purely infrastructure-heavy, but institutionally embedded across infrastructure, device, and platform layers.

Institutional Capture as the Primary Enabling Logic

The clearest institutional-capture mechanism was media regulation. REM repeatedly failed to demonstrate independence, renewed licences for strongly pro-government television stations, and failed to fully exercise its mandate during periods of political contestation (European Commission, 2023, pp. 43–44, 2024a, p. 38). By the 2024 window, EU reporting again documented inconsistent implementation of media laws and continuing concerns about REM's independence and effectiveness (European Commission, 2024, pp. 40–41). REM did not need to be newly created as a control instrument. It already existed as a formal regulator, but its weak independence enabled the ruling-party media advantage. The public broadcaster and state-linked media economy formed a second captured channel. EU reporting found that RTS central news airtime in 2024 overwhelmingly favoured the ruling majority, with 94% of coverage devoted to the ruling bloc and only 6% to opposition parties (European Commission, 2025, p. 41). Freedom House (2023) documented SNS influence over media through state-owned enterprises and private owners dependent on government support. Freedom House (2024) also documented state co-financing and advertising mechanisms supporting private media owned by ruling-party members or sympathisers. These show that information control was enabled by a media-political economy already structured around the ruling party's advantage. Telecommunications and media distribution provided a third channel for capture. Telekom Srbija has been repeatedly documented as a state-owned actor with influence over the media and telecom markets (Freedom House, 2023, 2024). IREX described Telekom Srbija as a key channel for the ruling regime, while RATEL remained silent during Telekom's campaign

against SBB (IREX, 2024, pp. 8–10). This matters because digital governance operates not only through security agencies but also through market position, distribution infrastructure, ownership, and regulatory passivity. Along with that, the European Commission (2024, p. 44) noted that police operational autonomy from the Ministry of Interior was not guaranteed, while BIA and other security institutions retained covert interception capacities, which leads to security and coercive institutions establishing another enabling channel. Freedom House (2025) later attributed the use of spyware to Serbian police, intelligence services, and BIA-linked structures, which generally support the institutional-delegation component of Proposition 3 because surveillance and deterrence were routed through identifiable institutions already embedded within the ruling structure.

Attribution and Deniability

High-deniability entries outnumbered low-deniability entries 23 to 18. Serbia's most strongly evidenced control channels were openly institutional or clearly attributable, although a substantial deniable proxy layer also existed. Low-deniability evidence clustered in security, regulatory, and public media channels: covert interception through BIA and the Military Security Agency, metadata retention through legally mandated ISP cooperation, REM's licensing decisions, RTS's pro-government news coverage, Telekom's market interventions, and ministry-produced media reports (European Commission, 2023, pp. 53–54; Freedom House, 2023, Sections C5–C6; European Commission, 2025, p. 41; IREX, 2023). These mechanisms were visibly institutional. These examples support the "openly operated" dimension of Proposition 3 for core institutional mechanisms.

However, Serbia also contained deniable operations. Meta's CIB evidence showed fake accounts, coordinated manipulation, and cross-platform amplification, even though Meta linked the network to SNS Internet Team employees and some Serbian state employees (Freedom House, 2024; Nimmo, Franklin, et al., 2023). Pro-government tabloids and portals with close government ties, public funding, or ruling-party ownership also functioned as intermediary channels for smear campaigns and disinformation (Freedom House, 2024). Privately owned national broadcasters and tabloids participated in attacks against opposition and independent media, creating a proxy layer between the ruling coalition and reputational intimidation (Freedom House, 2024, Section D1). These practices were more deniable because they operated through party teams, fake accounts, private media, or proxy outlets rather than directly through state agencies. The attribution finding, therefore, supports Proposition 3 with refinement. Serbia's core channels were openly institutional: security services, police, REM, RTS, Telekom, ministries, and formal regulatory decisions. Yet belief manipulation and

reputational attack often used a more deniable perimeter: fake accounts, party-linked online teams, tabloids, and formally private media. Serbia's digital means were therefore openly institutional at the core and deniable at the proxy perimeter**.**

Isomorphic Mimicry and Political Cost

The supplementary entries on isomorphic mimicry and political cost explain how Serbia maintained a formal institutional appearance while weakening constraints. Media laws formally strengthened REM independence and included provisions aligned with European standards, but implementation remained weak, and state-owned media influence continued (European Commission, 2023, pp. 41–43). Serbia's legal framework formally guaranteed press freedom, while media freedom was undermined by political influence, regulatory passivity, and pressure on independent outlets (Freedom House, 2024, Section D1/F1). During the 2022 elections, a Temporary Supervisory Authority was created to monitor media compliance, but ODIHR found its role limited and the media environment still highly imbalanced (ODIHR, 2022, pp. 21–22). In Serbia, mimicry operates mainly through already existing institutions whose formal democratic appearance remained intact while their constraining function was weakened. Political-cost evidence was limited, which itself fits the dominant-settlement profile. Visible pressure on independent media, smear campaigns, and spyware allegations did not appear to impose prohibitive costs on the ruling coalition (Freedom House, 2023). Still, the Meta CIB network shows that platform exposure mattered: fake accounts and coordinated behaviour suggest that even a dominant settlement may use deniable tools when platform rules or reputational exposure create costs (Nimmo, Franklin, et al., 2023).

For the Layer 3, Serbian evidence supports Proposition 3 with refinements. First, the infrastructure-heavy expectation is partially supported. Serbia had hard-layer capacities through telecommunications metadata retention, direct-access applications, covert interception, SIM registration, and security-service authority. However, the coded evidence contained more application-layer entries because endpoint spyware, phone extraction, fake-account networks, and cross-platform manipulation were also central. Serbia's means were therefore institutionally embedded across infrastructure, device, and platform layers. The institutional-delegation expectation is strongly supported. Institutional capture was the dominant enabling logic, with 36 entries and 29 high-confidence entries. REM, RTS, Telekom, RATEL, police, security services, state co-financing, and pro-government media channels provided already existing structures through which digital governance could be implemented. Legal-administrative construction existed, but mainly supplemented this institutional architecture. The openly operated expectation is mostly supported for core mechanisms but

qualified at the proxy layer. The strongest low-deniability entries concerned state agencies, public institutions, regulators, public broadcasters, metadata access, and state-owned companies. However, belief manipulation and reputational attack often relied on fake accounts, party-linked online teams, tabloids, and formally private media. Therefore, Serbia's Layer 3 configuration can be described as institutionally embedded, partially infrastructure-heavy, and core-attributable digital governance. This configuration is broadly congruent with the framework's expectation for a personalised dominant settlement. Serbia did not rely primarily on newly constructed legal-administrative frameworks or fully deniable application-layer operations. Instead, it used already-captured or dependent institutional channels to enable surveillance, deterrence, and information control, while maintaining a deniable proxy perimeter for online amplification and reputational attacks.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Answering the Research Question

The central research question asked how personalised political settlement types shape the combination of digital authoritarian strategies used for regime survival in Eastern European hybrid regimes from 2022 to 2024. The answer suggested by the findings is configurational: settlement type does not determine the simple presence or absence of specific digital tools. Rather, it shapes how governance functions are combined, sequenced, enabled, and attributed.

The comparison supports the framework's central intuition, but it also requires refinement. Both Serbia and Georgia used knowing, influencing behaviour, and influencing beliefs. Therefore, the difference lies in how these functions were organised. Serbia's personalised dominant settlement was associated with a surveillance-enabled behavioural deterrence configuration. Knowing was operationally central because surveillance, phone extraction, metadata access, and monitoring practices identified and exposed politically relevant actors. Behavioural deterrence was the main output, as this information translated into chilling effects, legal pressure, harassment, reputational intimidation, and insider discipline. Belief manipulation supported this arrangement by delegitimising the targets of pressure and sustaining a pro-government information environment. Georgia's personalised competitive settlement produced a belief-centred perception management configuration. Belief manipulation carried the main strategic weight because organised outsiders remained politically relevant, and visible coercion carried higher costs. Behavioural deterrence was present but often sequentially dependent on prior belief work, the "foreign-agent" narrative was normalised through proxy and platform channels before being converted into legal-administrative pressure

Rulers in different personalised settlement types prioritised different functional configurations rather than isolated functions. Serbia's configuration was knowing → behavioural deterrence → belief support. Georgia's configuration was belief manipulation → legal-behavioural pressure → knowing support. Regarding deployment mechanisms, the findings also diverged. Serbia's digital means were assembled through captured and dependent institutions: regulators, public broadcasters, security agencies, police, telecom actors, state-linked companies, and pro-government media. Georgia's means were assembled more through application-layer tools, proxy actors, legal-administrative construction, and selective deniability. The thesis, therefore, finds that settlement type shapes digital authoritarian strategies by structuring threat perception, political-cost constraints, time horizons, enabling

channels, and attribution requirements. These findings address the two sub-questions directly. Rulers in each settlement type prioritised different functional configurations, a knowing–behaviour axis in the dominant case, a belief–behaviour sequential linkage in the competitive case — and pursued those configurations through structurally distinct means: institutionally embedded channels in Serbia, legally constructed and application-layer channels in Georgia.

5.2 Cross-case comparison: How the configurations differ

The first comparison concerns Layer 1. Both cases are personalised, but personalisation took structurally different forms. Serbia's personalisation was settled: power was concentrated, institutions were already captured, rent extraction and patronage reinforced subordination, and the ruling coalition managed contestation rather than being threatened by it. Georgia's personalisation was advancing: institutional redesign proceeded through appointment control and regulatory subordination, but organised opposition could still impose costs, as the 2023 withdrawal of the foreign-agents law demonstrated. By late 2024, Georgia's competitive space narrowed, but it did not consolidate into a fully dominant configuration during the study period. The key comparative finding is that these different structural forms generated different threat environments.

This difference matters because it shaped threat environments. In Serbia, an outsider threat existed but was structurally contained. The more diagnostic feature was the need to discipline actors inside or adjacent to the ruling ecosystem: state-linked employees, public-sector actors, prosecutors, inspectors, security-linked figures, and regime-adjacent critics. In Georgia, the dominant threat was horizontal. The ruling coalition’s attention was directed overwhelmingly toward opposition parties, CSOs, independent media, protest networks, election observers, and Western-linked civic actors. Vertical threat existed but remained secondary. Thus, Layer 1 already suggests why digital governance would differ. Serbia’s main problem was discipline within a consolidated ruling ecosystem; Georgia’s main problem was managing outsider mobilisation under conditions of remaining contestation

Layer 2 confirms this difference. Serbia’s strongest pattern was the fusion of knowing and behaviour. Surveillance and information acquisition did not remain passive; they enabled functions and generated behavioural effects. Monitoring identified targets, exposed networks, created vulnerabilities, and made activists, journalists, organisers, and insider-linked actors alter their behaviour. The Serbian case, therefore, refines the concept of knowing. Knowing, besides being a prerequisite for later intervention, under dominant-personalised conditions, can itself become disciplinary. Fear of exposure, uncertainty about device compromise, and

anticipation of monitoring can lead to compliance before formal punishment is applied. Georgia's Layer 2 pattern was different. Belief manipulation had two faces – it was propaganda added to repression and, additionally, an organising function through which the ruling coalition constructed the political meaning of the threat. Outsider actors were framed as foreign agents, war-seeking radicals, anti-state forces, enemies of sovereignty, or instruments of Western pressure. This mattered because these narratives made later legal-behavioural measures more politically usable. The "foreign-agents" sequence is the clearest example: delegitimation preceded codification. Therefore, the state created a category through which punishment could be presented as transparent at the first step, and then punished the actors accordingly to strengthen the image of transparency, as a defender of sovereignty, and as a protector of the public.

Layer 3 shows the same divergence in means assembly. Serbia's digital means were institutionally embedded. The main enabling channels were already existing institutions or dependent structures: REM, RTS, Telekom Srbija, RATEL, police, BIA, pro-government media, and public-sector networks. The key point is not that Serbia used only infrastructure-level tools. It used infrastructure, device-level, and application-layer tools. However, these tools were routed through institutional channels that were already subordinated or dependent. This is why the original infrastructure-heavy expectation needs refinement. The stronger finding is institutional embeddedness across layers. Georgia's means were more legal-administrative and application-layer. Platform manipulation, fake accounts, TikTok channels, false media pages, Telegram exposure, coordinated reporting, and proxy narratives were central. Hard infrastructure capacity existed, but it did not define the main political pattern. The enabling logic was legal construction: new laws, regulations, administrative categories, appointment rules, accreditation procedures, and monitoring mandates created formal authority where full institutional capture was not yet consolidated. Institutional capture was present, but it often appeared as a secondary implementation channel rather than the primary source of control.

The deniability structure also differed. Serbia had an open institutional core but a deniable proxy perimeter. Security services, regulators, public broadcasters, and state-linked companies were visible. Fake accounts, tabloids, party-linked teams, and formally private media created a more deniable outer layer for belief manipulation and reputational attack. On the other hand, Georgia had a different split. Belief operations were highly deniable, using proxies, anonymous pages, false media formats, and non-transparent amplification. Legal-behavioural enforcement, however, was more attributable, as laws, regulators, courts,

ministries, and parliamentary procedures require formal authorisation. This shows that deniability is not a regime-wide property. It varies by function.

The comparison, therefore, supports the framework's central claim, but not in its narrowest form. Settlement type does not produce exclusive functions or fixed toolkits. It shapes configurations. Serbia's dominant-personalised settlement generated institutionally embedded surveillance and behavioural deterrence, supported by belief management. Georgia's competitive-personalised settlement generated belief-centred perception management, legal-administrative construction, and selective deniability, with late-2024 evidence showing movement toward more dominant-pattern features.

5.3 Assessing the Propositions and the Plausibility of the Framework

As stated in Chapter 3, the proposition assessment should be understood in light of the theory-building purpose of the thesis. The propositions are not treated as law-like hypotheses. They are conditional-configurational expectations derived from the framework. The question is whether the evidence is consistent enough with them to justify further development of the framework.

Proposition	Verdict	Interpretation
P1: Personalised dominant settlements configure around surveillance-enabled behavioural deterrence.	Partially Consistent	Serbia supports the knowing-behaviour operative axis as the most distinctive feature, but beliefs were equally frequent in raw count and insider targeting was near-absent. The knowing-behaviour linkage is qualitatively the strongest pattern; beliefs served a complementary rather than primary role. Partially consistent due to observational limitations on insider targeting.
P2: Personalised competitive settlements configure around belief-centred perception management.	Consistent	Georgia supports the expected configuration: belief manipulation carried the main strategic weight, while behavioural pressure was selective and often followed prior narrative construction.
P3: Personalised dominant settlements assemble means through institutionally embedded and core-attributable channels.	Consistent	Serbia supports the expectation that digital means were routed through captured or dependent institutions, with an open institutional core and proxy channels at the perimeter.
P4: Personalised competitive settlements assemble means through legal-administrative, application-layer, and selectively deniable channels.	Consistent	Georgia supports the expectation of legal-administrative construction, application-layer tools, and selective deniability, especially in belief operations.

Proposition 1 is partially consistent with the Serbian evidence. Serbia's digital governance is configured around a knowing–behaviour operative axis, but the evidence complicates the proposition in two respects. First, behaviour and beliefs were equally frequent in raw count (61 entries each). The knowing–behaviour axis is supported not by frequency dominance but by qualitative character: behaviour had more high-confidence entries (38 vs 32), knowing was substantially stronger than in Georgia (36 vs 26 entries), and the most distinctive qualitative pattern had no Georgian equivalent. Beliefs served a complementary information-environment role, sustaining a pro-government media ecosystem and delegitimising the targets of behavioural pressure, rather than carrying primary strategic weight. Second, target types were overwhelmingly outsider-directed (60 of 61 behaviour entries, 25 of 36 knowing entries). Proposition 1 expects insider monitoring and behavioural discipline to be central in a dominant settlement. The qualitative evidence partially addresses this: BIRN documented EPS listening centres, the Malešić spyware case, and insider-directed leverage within state-linked companies (Tešić, 2022; Tešić & Zorić, 2024). However, the near-absence of insider targeting in the coded dataset reflects an observational limitation of secondary sources, which primarily document effects on journalists, opposition, and civil society rather than intra-coalition dynamics. The proposition's core logic is supported. The complication concerns the relative weight of beliefs and the visibility of insider targeting.

Proposition 2 is consistent with the Georgian evidence. Georgia’s digital governance is configured around belief-centred perception management. Influencing beliefs carried the main strategic weight because organised outsider actors remained politically relevant and visible, and coercion carried higher political costs, especially before late 2024. Behavioural deterrence was present, but it was selective and often sequentially dependent on prior belief work. The foreign-agent narrative illustrates this sequence clearly: it first defined civil society, critical media, and Western-linked actors as suspicious or destabilising, and then legal-administrative pressure was applied to those categories. This supports the proposition’s expectation that, in a personalised competitive settlement, belief manipulation organises the regime’s digital strategy and prepares the conditions for selective behavioural control. This finding also addresses the Levitsky and Way challenge raised in Chapter 2. The Georgian evidence shows that many practices operating through organisational-power logic simultaneously served perceptual functions in the digital domain. The foreign influence law restricted organisational capacity, but its primary digital deployment was as a narrative device that delegitimised civil society before administrative enforcement began. The overlap between behavioural restriction and perceptual management in the digital domain supports the framework's argument that belief

manipulation is analytically primary in competitive settings, because the digital means through which organisational advantages are exercised operate primarily through perceptual mechanisms.

Proposition 3 is consistent with the Serbian evidence. Serbia's digital means were institutionally embedded and core to the state. Digital governance operated through captured or dependent institutions and state-linked structures, including security services, police, regulators, public broadcasters, telecom actors, state-linked companies, and regime-aligned media. The tools were not limited to one technical layer: Serbia used infrastructure, device-level, and application-layer means. However, their core enabling logic was institutional delegation through subordinated channels. Deniable proxy channels also existed, but mainly at the perimeter for belief manipulation and reputational attack. This supports the proposition's expectation that personalised dominant settlements assemble digital means through an open institutional core rather than primarily through newly constructed legal authority.

Proposition 4 is consistent with the Georgian evidence. Georgia's digital means were legally constructed, application-layer, and selectively deniable. Control was assembled through platform-level manipulation, proxy actors, semi-formal or false media channels, and legal-administrative frameworks that created formal authority to monitor, label, sanction, or restrict challengers. Deniability was strongest in belief operations, where proxy actors, anonymous pages, false media formats, and non-transparent amplification played a central role. Legal-behavioural enforcement was more attributable because laws, regulators, ministries, and parliamentary procedures require formal authorship. This supports the proposition's expectation that, in personalised competitive settlements, deniability is selective rather than uniform.

The support across all four propositions remains qualified, as appropriate for a plausibility probe. The evidence does not allow the thesis to claim that settlement type is the only or primary cause of these configurations. Resource capacity, external conditionality, regime duration, and source asymmetry remain relevant rival explanations, addressed below. The contribution of the probe is plausibility: it shows that the framework can organise the evidence into coherent cross-case configurations that are not visible through tool inventories or regime-type labels alone.

5.4 Main Findings and Framework Refinements

The plausibility probe was designed not only to assess whether the propositions hold but to identify where the framework requires refinement. Four refinements emerge from the

evidence. Firstly, the framework's propositions should predict functional configurations rather than functional hierarchies. The original expectation was that one function would dominate, with the others subordinate. The evidence showed something more nuanced: both cases used all three functions, but the operative relationship between them, the axis along which the configuration was organised, differed systematically. In Serbia, knowing and behaviour fused into a single disciplinary mechanism; in Georgia, beliefs and behaviour linked through a sequential conversion logic. The framework's value lies in identifying these configurational relationships, not in predicting which function has the highest count. This refinement should be incorporated into future iterations of the revised proposition language used throughout this thesis.

Secondly, the knowing function requires reconceptualisation under dominant-personalised conditions. The framework initially treated knowing as an enabling function, a prerequisite for intervention but not itself a governance output. The Serbian evidence challenges this. Surveillance, phone extraction, metadata access, and monitoring practices did not merely identify targets for later punishment. They produced behavioural compliance directly: activists changed communication practices, deleted messages, avoided digital tools, and reconsidered mobilisation due to awareness or suspicion of monitoring (Amnesty International, 2024, pp. 49–51; Tešić, 2024). This means that under dominant-personalised conditions, knowing can itself become disciplinary, and fear of exposure generates compliance before formal punishment is applied. Future iterations of the framework should distinguish between knowing-as-enabling (the competitive pattern, where monitoring feeds narrative adaptation) and knowing-as-disciplinary (the dominant pattern, where monitoring directly produces behavioural effects).

Thirdly, deniability is function-specific rather than settlement-wide. The framework initially expected deniability to vary by settlement type: high in competitive, low in dominant. The evidence showed that deniability varied by governance function within each case. Georgia's belief operations were highly deniable (proxy actors, anonymous platforms, false media formats), while its legal-behavioural enforcement was attributable (laws, courts, regulators). Serbia's core institutional channels were openly attributable (security services, REM, RTS, Telekom), while its belief manipulation operated through a more deniable perimeter (fake accounts, party-linked teams, tabloids). The refinement is that each settlement type produces a characteristic deniability split: competitive settlements are deniable-for-beliefs and attributable-for-behaviour; dominant settlements are attributable-at-the-core and deniable-

at-the-perimeter. Future versions of the framework should specify this function-specific pattern rather than treating deniability as a unitary settlement-level property.

Finally, the threat environment mechanism is configurational rather than binary. The framework predicted that dominant settlements would be primarily concerned with insider threats, while competitive settlements would be primarily concerned with outsider threats. The evidence supported this as an organising tendency; Georgia's horizontal-to-vertical threat ratio was 45:8; Serbia's was 26:8, with higher-confidence insider entries, but not as an exclusive targeting rule. Serbia's digital governance targeted outsiders extensively while also disciplining insiders; Georgia's targeted outsiders almost exclusively. The refinement is that settlement-type shapes the threat axis that organises the overall strategy, not which actors are targeted in every individual instance. In dominant settlements, outsider targeting coexists with insider discipline as the distinctive structural feature; in competitive settlements, outsider targeting is near-total because insider management is handled through non-digital coalition mechanisms.

5.5 Rival Explanations

The plausibility of the framework's explanatory contribution depends on whether the observed patterns are better organised by settlement type than by rival explanations. The first rival, based on resource and technological capacity, does not account for the observed variation. Serbia and Georgia are broadly comparable in GDP per capita, internet penetration, and technical capacity. Georgia's Operational-Technical Agency possessed telecommunications surveillance infrastructure comparable in legal scope to Serbia's BIA and metadata-retention systems. The difference was not in capacity but in operational emphasis: Serbia's capacity was deployed primarily for behavioural discipline, while Georgia's digital governance was concentrated at the application layer. Capacity alone does not explain why similar technical resources produced different functional configurations. The second rival regarding external conditionality is more explanatory, but it cannot fully account for the pattern. Both countries held EU candidate or aspirant status and were subject to similar external scrutiny. Georgia's greater reliance on legal-administrative construction and deniable operations is consistent with conditionality pressure, but conditionality cannot explain why Serbia, which faced the same EU reporting framework, invested more heavily in surveillance-enabled discipline rather than perception management. Moreover, Georgia's late-2024 shift toward more openly coercive measures occurred precisely as the government weakened its conditionality exposure by suspending EU negotiations, suggesting that conditionality modulates rather than determines the configuration. The third rival about regime duration is

partially addressed by the framework itself. The SNS has governed since 2012, giving institutional capture more time to consolidate. However, the framework treats institutional capture as endogenous to the dominant settlement: the power gap enables capture, and capture deepens over time. Duration, therefore, interacts with settlement type rather than replacing it as an explanation. Georgian Dream has governed since 2012 as well, yet its institutional capture has remained less consolidated, consistent with the competitive settlement's structural constraints on full subordination.

However, source asymmetry remains a genuine limitation. Georgia's evidence base is richer on belief manipulation, partly because ISFED conducts systematic social media monitoring with no Serbian equivalent, while Serbia's evidence base is richer on surveillance, partly because Amnesty International's Digital Prison report had no Georgian counterpart. The framework predicts that dominant settlements would generate more surveillance evidence and competitive settlements more belief-manipulation evidence, which aligns with the documentation pattern. Still, the thesis cannot fully separate framework-consistent variation from documentation-driven artefact. This limitation does not invalidate the findings, but it means the cross-case functional ratios should be treated as indicative rather than precise.

5.6 Directions for Future Research

The plausibility probe establishes that the framework can organise empirical evidence coherently across two cases, but it also identifies five directions for future research. Therefore, Layers from 4 to 6 remain unoperationalised. Testing these layers would require primary data: interviews with digital rights practitioners, journalists, activists, and affected individuals; ethnographic observation of how targeted actors adapt to digital governance; and rights-impact assessments documenting how digital strategies affect civic space, electoral integrity, and political participation. The secondary sources used in this study document what regimes do, but cannot fully capture what targets experience or how power relations shift in response. With that, additional cases within the same region would strengthen the cross-case logic. The current design examined one case per settlement type. Adding a second dominant case (Hungary, which was excluded because it would not provide variation) and a second competitive case (Moldova or Ukraine pre-2022) would test whether the configurational patterns replicate or whether they are case-specific. Further methodological extension toward process-tracing within specific episodes would allow the framework to be tested at the mechanism level rather than the congruence level. Lastly, the framework's feedback loop between digital governance outcomes and settlement stability represents the most ambitious future research direction.

Longitudinal research tracking Georgia's competitive-to-dominant transition could test whether the shift in digital governance configurations (from belief-centred to more coercive) both reflects and accelerates the narrowing of the competitive settlement, as the framework's feedback mechanism predicts.

Conclusion

The thesis asked how hybrid political regimes with distinct personalised political settlement types employ digital authoritarian strategies for regime survival in Eastern Europe. It addressed this question through two integrated contributions: the construction of a six-layer analytical framework that bridges political settlements analysis, regime survival scholarship, and digital authoritarianism research, and a structured plausibility probe of the framework's three layers against evidence from Georgia and Serbia across 2022-2024.

The answer it proposes suggests a configurational explanation. Settlement type does not determine which digital tools a regime possesses; both Serbia and Georgia used surveillance, legal pressure, media channelling, platform manipulation, harassment, and delegitimation. What made them different was how these overlapping repertoires were organised into distinct governance configurations. Serbia's personalised dominant settlement produced a knowing–behaviour operative axis: surveillance identified and exposed targets, behavioural deterrence translated that exposure into compliance through chilling effects, legal pressure, and institutional intimidation, and belief manipulation sustained the information environment within which this discipline operated. Georgia's personalised competitive settlement produced a belief–behaviour sequential linkage: narrative construction first delegitimised organised outsiders as foreign-directed or destabilising, legal-administrative instruments then codified those categories into enforceable obligations, and behavioural pressure acted on actors already rendered governable through prior perception work. The framework's structural logic organised this variation across both cases.

The thesis makes three contributions:

1. Theoretical contribution: The framework's original synthetic contribution connects Levy's (2014) settlement typology to Schlumberger and colleagues' (2024) digital governance functions. A linkage not derivable from either source independently. This connection provides a structural explanation for why regimes with similar tools produce different digital authoritarian configurations: the settlement type generates distinct threat environments, distinct political cost constraints, and distinct institutional conditions, which together shape what the regime needs its digital apparatus to accomplish.
2. Empirical contribution: The plausibility probe demonstrated that the framework's categories can organise real evidence from two cases into patterns that are not visible

through tool inventories, regime-type classifications, or single-country studies alone. The probe also generated refinements that sharpen the framework for future application.

3. Methodological contribution: The thesis demonstrates that political settlements analysis, developed for and predominantly applied in Global South contexts (Khan, 2010; Schulz & Kelsall, 2021), can be operationalised for Eastern European hybrid regimes, extending PSA's geographic scope into post-communist institutional environments where it has not previously been applied.

The findings are subject to important limitations. The probe tested only three of six layers using secondary documentary sources without primary data collection. The study was coded by a single researcher. Source asymmetry between the cases means that variation in documented evidence may partly reflect which organisations operate in each country rather than genuine strategic differences. The near-absence of documented insider targeting in Serbia may reflect an observational limitation of the sources rather than a substantive inconsistency, but it cannot be resolved with available evidence. These limitations are inherent to the probe's design: a plausibility assessment determines whether a framework is worth further development, not whether it has been definitively confirmed.

The broader significance of this work lies in its reorientation of the analytical question. Digital authoritarianism scholarship has predominantly asked what tools regimes use and has catalogued surveillance systems, censorship mechanisms, and disinformation campaigns across an expanding set of countries. This thesis asks a different question: why do regimes with access to similar tools organise them differently? The answer it proposes shifts attention from the technology to the political structure that gives it purpose. If this logic holds beyond the two cases examined here, it suggests that efforts to understand, anticipate, or counter digital authoritarianism require attention not only to the tools deployed but to the settlement-level conditions that determine how those tools are combined, sequenced, and attributed. The framework developed in this thesis offers one architecture for conducting that analysis.

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Appendix 1 – Codebook

This codebook was developed through Provisional Coding (Saldaña, 2013) based on the study's six-layer conceptual framework prior to data collection and revised after pilot coding. It specifies the codes applied during the qualitative document analysis of institutional assessments, specialist technical reports, and legal evaluations for Serbia and Georgia (2022–2024). The unit of analysis is the meaning unit.

Code Summary:

Layer	Code	Subcode(s)	Description
L1	L1-PERS-CAP	—	Institutional capture by ruling coalition
L1	L1-DOM-GAP	—	Power gap between rulers and opposition
L1	L1-DOM-ELEC	—	Electoral uncertainty
L1	L1-THREAT-H	—	Horizontal threat (outsider organisational capacity)
L1	L1-THREAT-V	—	Vertical threat (insider elite cohesion/fragmentation)
L2	L2-KNOW-QL	:MASS, :TARGET, :INSIDER, :OUTSIDER	Monitoring practices
L2	L2-BEHAV-QL	:LEGAL, :TAKEDOWN, :HARASS, :BLOCK	Behavioural deterrence
L2	L2-BELIEF-QL	:DISINFO, :FLOOD, :CIB, :CHANNEL	Narrative manipulation
L3	L3-INFRA	:HARD, :APP	Infrastructure vs. application-layer controls
L3	L3-ENABLE-IC	—	Institutional capture as enabling logic
L3	L3-ENABLE-LA	—	Legal-administrative construction
L3	L3-DENY	:LOW, :HIGH	Deniability architecture

LAYER 1: POLITICAL SETTLEMENT AS STRUCTURAL CONTEXT

Purpose: Establish the independent structural variable — settlement type and threat environment.

Code: L1-PERS-CAP — Institutional Capture

Description: Evidence that the ruling coalition controls institutions meant to operate independently, judiciary, media, regulatory bodies, security apparatus, through political subordination rather than formal legal authority.

Inclusion criteria: External assessors (EU, FH) document ruling party control over courts, media regulators, public broadcasters, or security services. Appointments based on loyalty. Regulatory decisions favouring coalition interests. Media ownership is concentrated among regime-aligned actors.

Exclusion criteria: Institutional weakness due to low capacity rather than political subordination. Cases where specific institutions successfully resisted executive pressure. General governance complaints without evidence of deliberate political control.

Typical exemplar: EU Progress Report states: "The independence of the judiciary remains a serious concern. Key appointments continue to reflect political affiliations rather than merit-based criteria."

Atypical exemplar: An OSCE report documents a regulatory body issuing a ruling favourable to the government, but there is no explicit evidence that the ruling was politically directed. Code only if the report links the outcome to political pressure.

"Close, but no": A media outlet is financially struggling and reduces critical coverage. This is a market effect, not institutional capture, unless the financial pressure is documented as politically engineered (e.g., withdrawal of state advertising as punishment).

Source types: EU Progress Reports 2022–2024; FH Nations in Transit 2022–2024

Code: L1-DOM-GAP - Power Gap

Description: Evidence regarding the size of the gap between the ruling coalition's power and the organised opposition's capacity to challenge it.

Inclusion criteria: Assessments describing the relative strength of rulers vs challengers: whether opposition can mount credible challenges, whether elections produce genuine uncertainty, and whether alternative power centres exist.

Exclusion criteria: Statements about formal democratic provisions without evidence of real contestation.

Typical exemplar: FH FIW states: "Opposition parties remain organisationally fragmented and financially dependent, unable to present a unified electoral challenge."

"Close, but no": Low voter turnout. This alone does not indicate a large power gap, it could reflect disillusionment in a competitive system.

Source types: V-Dem dataset; OSCE reports 2022–2024; FH FIW 2022–2024.

Code: L1-DOM-ELEC, Electoral Uncertainty

Description: Whether elections produce genuine uncertainty about power transfer.

Inclusion criteria: OSCE assessments of electoral competitiveness, playing field conditions, and whether outcomes were predetermined or genuinely contested.

Exclusion criteria: Routine descriptions of electoral procedures without assessment of competitiveness.

Typical exemplar: OSCE final report: "While the legal framework provides for competitive elections, the uneven playing field, including media dominance by the ruling party and misuse of administrative resources, significantly limited the ability of opposition parties to compete on equal terms."

Source types: OSCE/ODIHR election reports: Serbia 2022; Georgia 2024.

Code: L1-THREAT-H - Horizontal Threat (Outsider)

Description: Evidence of the organisational capacity of actors outside the ruling coalition to coordinate collective challenges.

Inclusion criteria: Functioning opposition parties with party structures. Sustained protest movements. Active civil society organisations. Independent media with significant reach. Evidence of coordination among opposition actors.

Exclusion criteria: Weak, fragmented, or co-opted opposition with no coordination capacity. Civil society is avoiding political engagement. Media are formally independent but editorially regime-aligned.

Typical exemplar: EU Progress Report: "Civil society organisations played a significant role in mobilising public opposition to the proposed legislation, organising sustained street protests over several months."

"Close, but no": Multiple opposition parties exist, but are fragmented and cannot form coalitions. This is evidence of a weak horizontal threat. Code it and record the direction, low capacity, not high.

Source types: FH FIW 2022–2024; EU Progress Reports.

Code: L1-THREAT-V - Vertical Threat (Insider)

Description: Evidence of elite cohesion or fragmentation within the ruling coalition, factional tensions, defection events, party discipline, and security apparatus loyalty.

Inclusion criteria: Elite defections from the ruling party. Factional tensions within the coalition. Security apparatus disloyalty or independent power-building. Purges or disciplinary actions against coalition members.

Exclusion criteria: Policy disagreements within normal debate. Routine personnel changes, criticism by former officials who left the coalition years ago.

Typical exemplar: FH NIT: "Several senior party members publicly broke with the leadership, signalling fractures within the ruling coalition."

"Close, but no": A minister is replaced in a cabinet reshuffle. Unless explicitly linked to political discipline or loyalty enforcement, this is routine governance.

Source types: EU Progress Reports; FH NIT.

LAYER 2: GOVERNANCE FUNCTIONS

Purpose: Identify which governance functions are documented and assess their relative weight, interpreted in light of Layer 1 findings.

Framework Definitions:

- **Knowing**: The acquisition and processing of information about threats, opponents, and societal dynamics, surveillance, data extraction, and monitoring of elite and mass actors (Schlumberger et al., 2024). Enabling function for both settlement types.
- **Influencing behaviour**: Raising the costs of opposition action through deterrence, enforcement, disruption or targeted intimidation. Surveillance-based discipline, legal harassment, and demonstrated willingness to punish deviation (Schlumberger et al., 2024).
- **Influencing beliefs**: Construction of pro-regime narratives, discrediting opposition, shaping public perception through disinformation, information flooding, and narrative channelling (Schlumberger et al., 2024).

Target recording: For every Layer 2 entry, record in the Evidence Log who was targeted: INSIDER or OUTSIDER.

Code: L2-KNOW-QL - Monitoring Practices (Qualitative)

Description: Documented instances of state or state-directed monitoring of digital communications, social media activity, or online behaviour.

Inclusion criteria: Specific documented practices, spyware deployment, social media surveillance programmes, telecom interception, platform monitoring, targeting of specific individuals or groups.

Exclusion criteria: General privacy concerns without documented specific state practices. Surveillance by private actors with no state connection. Cybersecurity monitoring for technical (non-political) purposes.

Subcodes:

L2-KNOW-QL: MASS - Bulk/mass monitoring: telecom interception systems, broad social media scanning, mandatory data retention infrastructure. Typical exemplar: Amnesty

documents that Serbian security services operate interception systems installed at all major telecommunications providers.

L2-KNOW-QL:TARGET - Targeted surveillance: spyware on specific individuals, phone extraction, monitoring of individual accounts. Typical exemplar: Report documents forensic evidence of Pegasus or similar spyware on a journalist's phone.

L2-KNOW-QL: INSIDER - Monitoring directed at actors within the ruling coalition: party members, security officials, coalition allies. Typical exemplar: Report notes surveillance tools used against a factional rival within the ruling party. Critical note: This subcode tests whether dominant settlements actually monitor insiders as the framework predicts. Absence of evidence here for Serbia would weaken Propositions 1 and 2.

L2-KNOW-QL: OUTSIDER - Monitoring directed at actors outside the ruling coalition: opposition politicians, journalists, civil society, protest organisers. Typical exemplar: Report documents state monitoring of opposition party communications or journalist phone records.

Source types: Amnesty Digital Prison 2024 (Serbia); ISFED reports (Georgia); FH FOTN 2022–2024.

Code: L2-BEHAV-QL - Behavioural Deterrence (Qualitative)

Description: Documented instances where the state or state-directed actors raised the costs of opposition activity to deter, disrupt, or punish specific behaviours.

Inclusion criteria: Specific documented cases of state-directed action against political speech or organisation.

Exclusion criteria: Content removal for non-political reasons (child protection, copyright). Self-censorship without documented state pressure. Platform-initiated moderation without state direction.

Subcodes:

L2-BEHAV-QL: LEGAL - Legal pressure: defamation suits, criminal charges for online speech, SLAPP suits, arrests for social media posts. Typical exemplar: FH FOTN reports that a journalist was charged with defamation after a critical investigative piece.

L2-BEHAV-QL: TAKEDOWN - State-directed content removal from platforms: government requests, court-ordered removals, regulatory takedown orders. Typical exemplar: Report documents government requests to social media platforms to remove protest-related content.

L2-BEHAV-QL: HARASS - Coordinated online harassment and intimidation: troll campaigns targeting individuals, doxxing, threatening messages from state-linked accounts. Typical exemplar: BIRN article documents a journalist receiving coordinated threats from accounts linked to the ruling party's online operations. "Close, but no": A journalist receives angry comments from citizens after a controversial article. Unless coordination or state linkage is documented, this is public backlash, not state-directed harassment.

L2-BEHAV-QL: BLOCK - Technical restrictions: filtering, throttling, blocking, shutdowns, DNS interference. Typical exemplar: FH FOTN documents website blocking or bandwidth throttling during protests.

Source types: FH FOTN 2022–2024; BIRN (Serbia); Amnesty Digital Prison (Serbia); ISFED (Georgia).

Code: L2-BELIEF-QL - Narrative Manipulation (Qualitative)

Description: Documented instances where the state or state-linked actors manipulated the information environment to shape public perceptions, discredit opposition, or manufacture consent.

Inclusion criteria: Campaigns attributed to state or state-linked actors by reporting organisations. Documented coordination. Identifiable state-linked infrastructure (troll farms, bot networks, party media operations).

Exclusion criteria: Disinformation by non-state actors with no documented state link. Partisan media bias without coordination evidence. Legitimate political communication (campaign messaging, official statements). Opinion or propaganda is distinguishable from fabricated content.

Subcodes:

L2-BELIEF-QL: DISINFO - Fabricated or misleading content attributed to state-linked actors. Typical exemplar: CRTA mapping identifies fabricated news stories about opposition politicians disseminated through party-linked networks.

L2-BELIEF-QL: FLOOD - Information flooding: overwhelming the information space, drowning critical narratives rather than deleting them. Typical exemplar: During a protest period, pro-government accounts dramatically increase posting volume, pushing critical coverage out of trending topics.

L2-BELIEF-QL: CIB - Coordinated inauthentic behaviour: bot networks, troll farms, fake account operations. Typical exemplar: Meta's adversarial report identifies and removes a network of fake accounts linked to actors affiliated with the ruling party.

L2-BELIEF-QL: CHANNEL - Information channelling: redirecting attention without producing false content; agenda-setting through selective amplification. Typical exemplar: ISFED documents government-aligned pages coordinating to amplify specific narratives while suppressing opposition viewpoints through reporting mechanisms. "Close, but no": A government-aligned TV station runs biased coverage. Unless coordination with digital campaigns or state direction is documented, this is media bias, not information channelling.

Source types: CRTA mapping 2022 (Serbia); ISFED reports (Georgia); Meta adversarial reports 2023; IREX VIB 2022–2024.

LAYER 3: DIGITAL MEANS AND ENABLING LOGIC

Purpose: Map the digital means deployed, the enabling logic through which they operate, and the deniability architecture.

Code: L3-INFRA - Infrastructure vs Application-Layer Controls

Subcodes:

L3-INFRA: HARD - Infrastructure-layer: telecom interception systems (SORM-type), mandatory data retention hardware, deep packet inspection, network-level filtering, DNS blocking, national gateway controls. Typical exemplar: Amnesty documents ISPs required to maintain interception equipment accessible to security services.

L3-INFRA: APP - Application-layer: platform manipulation, social media bot/troll operations, targeted spyware on individual devices, content-level takedowns, coordinated social media campaigns. Typical exemplar: ISFED reports coordinated inauthentic behaviour on Facebook and TikTok during the pre-election period.

Exclusion criteria: General internet infrastructure (broadband, 5G) unrelated to political control. Platform content moderation by private companies under their own ToS without state direction.

Source types: Amnesty Digital Prison; ISFED; FH FOTN technical sections; BIRN.

Code: L3-ENABLE-IC - Institutional Capture as Enabling Logic

Description: Digital governance enforced through institutions already subordinate to the ruling coalition, without requiring new legal authority.

Inclusion criteria: Security services enforce monitoring at the coalition's discretion. Captured regulators grant/withdraw licences based on political compliance. Subordinate telecoms implement interception without independent court orders. State-controlled media amplifies narratives as a condition of continued access to state resources.

Exclusion criteria: Enforcement through institutions documented as independent. Regulatory action under a clear, pre-existing legal mandate applied equally—actions requiring new legislation (→ L3-ENABLE-LA).

Typical exemplar: EU Progress Report: "The telecommunications regulator continues to lack independence from the executive. Licensing decisions appear to reflect political considerations rather than regulatory criteria."

"Close, but no": A court issues a ruling favourable to the government on a digital governance matter. Unless the court's independence is compromised (documented under L1-PERS-CAP), this could be a lawful adjudication.

Source types: EU Progress Reports 2022–2024; FH NIT; Amnesty Digital Prison (Serbia).

Code: L3-ENABLE-LA - Legal-Administrative Construction

Description: Regime adopted new laws or legal frameworks during the study period, creating mechanisms for digital control, content regulation, surveillance expansion, or platform compliance.

Inclusion criteria: New legislation enabling content regulation, foreign influence registration, surveillance expansion, and mandatory platform compliance. Venice Commission evaluation of these laws (Georgia). EU assessment of legal framework. Evidence that the legal framework was constructed to create control where institutional capture could not provide it.

Exclusion criteria: Existing laws unchanged during the study period. Laws assessed as meeting rule-of-law standards. Laws adopted before 2022, unless amended during the period.

Typical exemplar: EU Progress Report: "The adoption of the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence in 2024 introduced new registration requirements for organisations receiving foreign funding."

"Close, but no": A pre-existing criminal code defamation provision is used against a journalist. This is weaponisation of existing law (L2-BEHAV-QL: LEGAL), not new legal-administrative construction, unless the provision was amended during the study period.

Source types: EU Progress Reports 2022–2024; Venice Commission opinions (Georgia only).

Code: L3-DENY - Deniability Architecture

Subcodes:

L3-DENY: LOW - Low deniability: operations through identifiable state agencies (security services, state broadcasters, official regulators, ministries). State connection visible. Typical exemplar: Amnesty documents BIA directly operating surveillance equipment at ISPs.

L3-DENY: HIGH - High deniability: operations through intermediaries - proxy actors, formally independent media, party-linked but state-unacknowledged troll farms, contracted consultants, patriotic hackers, compliant platforms under informal pressure. Typical exemplar: Meta adversarial report removes fake accounts attributed to "individuals associated with" a political party rather than a state agency.

Exclusion criteria: Private-sector operations with no documented state link. Independent media without state coordination.

Source types: Meta adversarial reports 2023; ISFED (Georgia); BIRN (Serbia); Amnesty Digital Prison (Serbia).

Appendix 2 – Coding Entries

Due to the size of the coding results and quantity of entries, layers and other filters, to ensure transparency and replicability, links to the Excel files are provided, which are uploaded to Tartu University OneDrive. Coding results are open to everybody with the link:

Coding Entries – OneDrive

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