

**“US VERSUS THEM”: PERNICIOUS POLITICAL POLARIZATION
AND WITHERING HOPE FOR DEMOCRACY IN GEORGIA**

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Author's Declaration

I, the undersigned, **Lia Chkhetiani**, candidate for the MA/PhD degree in Political Science declare herewith that the present thesis is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Vienna, 06.06.2023

L. Chkhetiani

Signature

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Abstract

Political polarization has been actively studied for its detrimental effects on modern democracies. However, the causal mechanism by which polarization causes the decline of democratic institutions is less examined. This thesis aims to address this gap by testing the theory of pernicious polarization, which contends that toxic polarization occurs when political actors deliberately exploit potent cleavages to gain partisan benefits through the cultivated Manichean “Us. Vs. Them” political discourse. A highly polarized political playground allows them to pursue hostile politics, justify oppression of the opponents, and assault political institutions, ultimately leading to democratic backsliding in established democracies or de-democratization in electoral democracies.

The thesis objects to gain insights into this causal relationship by studying the previously unexamined case of Georgia - a highly polarized hybrid regime that has witnessed a halt in democratization and exhibited autocratic tendencies in 2018-2023. To this end, the thesis employs a single case study research methodology, in combination with qualitative content analysis, with a particular focus on verbal statements of political actors.

The research showed that Georgia experiences signs of pernicious political polarization - political actors perceive each other as existential enemies; political animosity drives them to trespass democratic norms of behavior, primarily in the case of the incumbent, which, motivated to destroy the opposition, abuses the rule of law, electoral integrity, and political liberties.

By demonstrating this, the thesis contributes to understanding the causal relationship between political polarization and democratic erosion, bolsters the validity of the theory of pernicious polarization, and provides a comprehensive account of the nature of polarization in Georgia.

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Introduction

Political polarization is frequently mentioned as one of the main factors contributing to the erosion of modern democracies and the rise of the “third wave of autocratization” (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). Prominent scholars, such as Carothers and O’Donohue (2019), argue that political polarization “weakens respect for democratic norms, corrodes basic legislative processes,” “exacerbates intolerance and discrimination,” and “increases violence throughout society” (6). Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) also note that political polarization destroys the democratic rules of the game, fuels extreme partisanship, and condones political intolerance (142). Boese et al. (2022) link political polarization to the victory of authoritarian and anti-pluralistic leaders worldwide (984) and the deterioration of deliberative democratic institutions in more than 30 countries (987). Orhan (2022) further provides comparative cross-national evidence that the increase in political polarization is correlated with a deterioration in the quality of democracy and broader popular support for undemocratic political actors (727).

Thus, even a quick glimpse into the extensive scholarship studying the consequences of political polarization reveals that it has a negative impact on the quality of democracy; however, the causal mechanism behind this relationship remains relatively unclear. Since both political polarization and the erosion of democratic institutions are long, gradual processes involving various elements and contextual circumstances, it is challenging for political science researchers to identify the underlying logic of causality. Nevertheless, the successful undertaking of this mission is crucial not only for academic clarity but also for the practical need to strengthen the resilience of democratic institutions with evidence-based knowledge. This research aims to contribute to this ambitious endeavor by seeking an answer to the question: How does political polarization harm the quality of democratic institutions?

To this end, the research builds on one of the few attempts to explain the causal relationship between political polarization and democratic erosion, that is, the theory of pernicious polarization proposed by Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer (2016, 2018, 2019, 2021, 2022) with different co-authors in their extensive study on the relationship between political polarization, autocratization, and democratic erosion. The table below briefly captures the process of building this theory across various academic articles.

Table 1. Scholarship on the theory of pernicious polarization¹

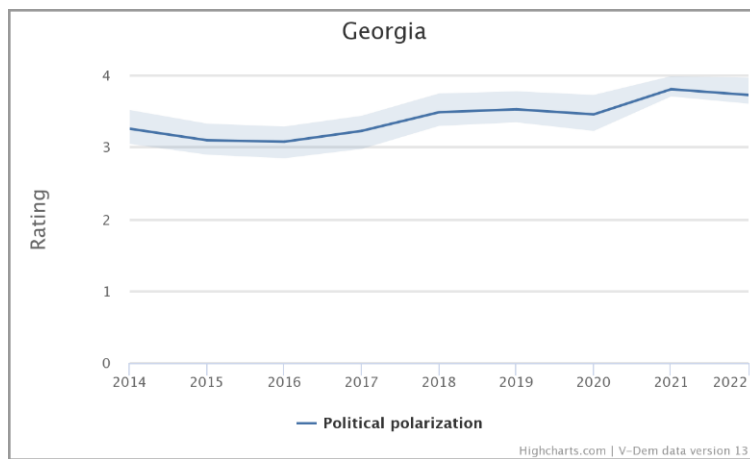
Year	Authors	Title
2016	McCoy and Rahman	“Polarized Democracies in Comparative Perspective: Toward a Conceptual Framework”
2018	McCoy, Rahman, and Somer	“Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities”
2018	Somer and McCoy	“Déjà vu? Polarization and Endangered Democracies in the 21st Century”
2019	McCoy and Somer	“Toward a Theory of Pernicious Polarization and How It Harms Democracies: Comparative Evidence and Possible Remedies”
2019	Somer and McCoy	“Transformations through Polarizations and Global Threats to Democracy”
2021	Somer and McCoy	“Pernicious polarization, autocratization and opposition strategies”
2021a	McCoy and Somer	“Political Parties, Elections, and Pernicious Polarization in the Rise of Illiberalism”
2021b	McCoy and Somer	“Overcoming Polarization”
2022	McCoy and Press	“What happens when democracies become perniciously polarized?”

¹ All the provided tables, Figure 2 and Figure 5 are authors own compilations.

According to the theory, political polarization becomes detrimental to democracy when political actors initiate it as a political strategy and build exclusionary group identities, which elevates over time in perceiving each other as existential enemies (McCoy and Somer 2019, 234). Consequently, political enmity motivates polarizing actors to abuse the democratic rules of the game to defeat their opponents (Somer et al. 2022, 930). Although the theory has gained solid validity through successful case studies in eleven different countries (see a special issue of *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 681(1), co-edited by McCoy and Somer), it requires further examination, particularly in unstudied cases, in light of the fact that all the case studies conducted demonstrated that the causal pathways, although consistent with the theorized pattern, are highly unique and context-dependent.

Against this background, this research aims to test the theory of pernicious polarization in an unexplored case of Georgia from 2018 to 2022. Georgia's political landscape is frequently described as highly polarized. For instance, Varieties of Democracy Institute's Democracy Report 2022 states that Georgia "suffers" from toxic political polarization, especially since the 2020 parliamentary elections (23). OSCE International Election Observation Mission (2022) cites "hardened" political polarization as one of the main obstacles for voters to make meaningful electoral choices (3). In response to Georgia's EU membership application, the European Commission's one of the main policy recommendations for Georgia's democratic development was to "address the issue of political polarization" (European Commission 2022). The following visualization of political polarization measured by Varieties of Democracy Institute neatly captures the tendency:

Figure 1. Rise of political polarization in Georgia, V-Dem Country Graph (2022).



In parallel with increasing polarization, Georgia, which has been classified as a “transitional or hybrid regime” by Freedom House during the last decade, has halted its democratizing reforms in recent years and has even taken an authoritarian turn with the incumbent party Georgian Dream consolidating power through executive aggrandizement, electoral violence, the capture of judiciary and intimidation of the opposition (Freedom House 2022). Therefore, Georgia is an interesting case to test a theory of pernicious polarization, as it resembles the experience of most other polarized countries suffering from democratic erosion. The absence of systematic academic research that has examined the causal mechanism through which political polarization damages democratic institutions makes the case of Georgia particularly attractive to test the theorized premises.

Consequently, this research holds high relevance for two reasons: First, it bolsters the validity of one of the leading theories examining the causal link between political polarization and democratic erosion by testing its theorized causal logic in a new case. Second, it provides a systematic account of the nature and development of political polarization in Georgia. By providing new insights into the relatively understudied relationship between two widely researched phenomena - political polarization and democratic erosion/autocratization - this research enriches the emerging scholarship investigating this link. Additionally, the research generates new empirical knowledge about Georgian politics, enhancing our understanding of political developments within a broader context of post-Soviet transitional states.

To achieve these goals, qualitative content analysis, integrated into the single case study research design, is employed as the primary method to analyze the political rhetoric and behavior of polarized political elites and their treatment of democratic institutions. The subsequent two chapters (literature review and theoretical framework) outline theoretical considerations; the third chapter justifies methodological choices; the fourth and fifth chapters present evidence for pernicious polarization as a cause and the erosion of democratic institutions as an effect; the sixth chapter analyses the findings of the fourth and fifth chapters and constructs a causal mechanism by which polarization leads to the deterioration of democratic institutions, the conclusion summarizes main findings and contributions, discusses limitations of the research and proposes a further research agenda.

Chapter 1. Literature Review

1.1 Introduction

The following chapter first provides an overview of the relevant scholarly literature on the conceptualization of political polarization, as exploring different traditions of studying polarization over time is essential to situate a theory of pernicious polarization in a broader academic context. The chapter then touches upon different concepts describing the erosion of democratic institutions, such as democratic backsliding, autocratization, and de-democratization. Although this research primarily relies on the concept of de-democratization, similar terms should also be briefly addressed to highlight methodological differences. The final section examines more specific literature that investigates the causal relationship between political polarization and democratic erosion.

1.2 Conceptualization of Political Polarization

The concept of political polarization was first introduced by Giovanni Sartori in his seminal work “Parties and party systems” (1976), where he constructs the political system of “polarized pluralism” characterized by established parties positioned in the “center,” facing a challenge from two antagonistic poles of oppositions “along the left-to-right dimension” (119). These two opposition poles, one of which is defined as “anti-system parties” (e.g., Communist or Fascist parties who openly seek to delegitimize the democratic political system) and the other as “irresponsible oppositions” (marginal parties that are located on the fringe of center parties), are “mutually exclusive” – they oppose each other more than they oppose center parties (117-119). Political polarization is one of the necessary features of polarized pluralism and reveals itself in the existence of the “ideological distance” between two poles of “anti-system parties” and “irresponsible oppositions” (120). According to Sartori, political parties are polarized across the ideological axis; however, their differences are not just issue-related but divergent in

“particular mentality” (121). He notes that “when one finds a large ideological space, it follows that the polity contains parties that disagree not only on policies but also, and more importantly, on principles and fundamentals” (121).

Figure 2. Visualization of Sartori’s “polarized pluralism” (own compilation)



After Sartori, the concept of political polarization was reintroduced by American scholars in the 1990s to describe growing partisan differences over policy issues between Democrats and Republicans (Schedler 2023, 5). Political polarization was redefined based on Anthony Downs’ theory of spatial models of party competition, in which political parties are classified on an ideological continuum between the Left and Right (Dalton 2008, 901). From this perspective, political polarization reflects the ideological distribution of political parties on the liberal-conservative axis (Dalton 2006, 21). In contrast to Sartori’s definition, according to which ideological polarization referred to differences over “principles and fundamentals” (121), the more recent understanding of ideological polarization focuses on ideological differences over policy issues, which Schedler denotes as a “cluster-analytic” perspective as opposed to Sartori’s “conflict-analytic” perspective (2023, 5).

Ideological polarization of political parties is often measured by differences in their ideological positions as revealed by their roll call votes or yes/no ideological surveys (McCarty 2019, 30-34). A significant corpus of academic literature demonstrates the ideological polarization among partisan political elites in the United States. For instance, in “Polarized America: The

Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches” (2008), McCarty et al. analyze rollcall votes in Congress and show that since the 90s, the Republican party shifted to the right “...sharply away from redistributive policies”, while Democrats have moved from universal welfare issues to issues centered around “ascriptive characteristics” like race and gender (11). Some authors argue that moderate ideological polarization can have positive aspects for democratic pluralism and partisan competition. For instance, Hetherington (2001) contends that the ideological polarization of political elites amplifies differences between political parties in the eyes of the electorate and increases the role of partisanship in electoral politics (619).

While there is some consensus among scholars on the existence of ideological polarization among elites in the US, there has been more controversy about whether the masses are ideologically polarized too. This discussion demonstrates that political polarization can separately take place on the level of political elites and their electorate. Fiorina and Abrams (2008) find that centrist attitudes prevail in most of the American electorate, attributing the shift towards clearer ideological positions to “party sorting,” which refers to the more distinct alignment of political parties to different issue positions by voters (581). Abramowitz and Saunders (2008) have directly challenged this claim, providing evidence that Republican and Democratic voters exhibit significant ideological differences which transcend the margins of “sorting” (547).

As the debates about the ideological polarization of the American electorate persist, researchers of US politics noticed that there was growing animosity, anger, and dislike across partisan lines that extend beyond ideological disagreements on policy issues (McCarty 2019, 62). Consequently, a new approach in the study of political polarization emerged that focuses on “affect, not ideology” (Iyengar et al. 2012). The concept of affective polarization is based on Henri Tajfel’s (1973) social identity theory and measures the social distance between groups

(Iyengar et al. 2012, 3). According to social identity theory, individuals tend to evaluate their own social group more positively in comparison to other groups, resulting in a more negative perception of the “out-group” (Iyengar et al. 2019, 130). Research on affective polarization builds on the assumption that partisanship is a salient feature of citizens’ social identity (Klein 2020, 52). Consequently, Democrats and Republicans perceive each other as out-groups, which breeds hostility and distrust (Iyengar and Westwood 2014, 690). Iyengar and Westwood (2014) also provide evidence that affective polarization is more pronounced in negative perceptions of one’s rival rather than positive evaluations of one’s own group, a phenomenon often referred to as “negative partisanship,” noting that Democrats dislike Republicans more than like their own party, and vice versa (Abramowitz and McCoy 2019, 147).

The relationship between ideological and affective polarization remains a subject of ongoing discussion. Abramowitz (2022) argues that the greater the ideological disagreement, the more intense the emotional division among partisans (661). Some scholars demonstrate a weak correlation between the levels of ideological and affective polarization in multiparty political systems (Wagner 2021, 8). Mason (2014) suggests that once citizens are “sorted” and acquire a partisan social identity, they develop stronger emotional biases toward the ingroup and the out-group, even if their ideological positions remain moderate (141). Similarly, Iyengar et al. (2012) find that affective polarization serves as a more “diagnostic” measure of mass polarization than ideological polarization, while signs of affective polarization are found only “inconsistently” across the distribution of issue positions (405).

While discussions on ideological and affective polarization are essential for a proper understanding of political polarization, it is evident that these concepts might be less relevant to the context outside of American politics or established Western democracies. In developing democratic systems, parties often lack consistent ideological agendas, rendering the concept of

ideological polarization less applicable. Similarly, voters in countries with less institutionalized party systems rarely exhibit stable partisan identities, making the approach of affective polarization less convincing. For instance, the two main political rivals in Georgian politics, the incumbent Georgian Dream and the opposition, the United National Movement, have some differences on issues of religion and welfare policy (Kakhishvili et al. 2021, 23), but still agree on more than half of the salient policy issues (31), with ideological differences playing an inessential role in their rivalry and their confrontations barely ever involve “meaningful discussion” (Samkharadze 2022, 5). Moreover, only about 30% of Georgian voters identify with one party, and even among these partisans, only 30% show signs of affective polarization (Silagadze 2023, 19). Nevertheless, scholars describe the Georgian political spectrum as plagued by “chronic political polarization” (Gegeshidze and De Waal 2021) and suffocated with the antagonism between the Georgian Dream and the United National Movement (Meister 2021, 4).

To meaningfully analyze cases of political polarization that do not fit within the conventional measurements of ideological or affective polarization, various scholars propose an alternative conceptualization that does not necessarily negate the concepts of ideological and affective polarization but concentrates only on the dimension of political polarization that escalates into political conflict and transcends normal political pluralism and “legitimate democratic antagonism” (Stavrakakis 2018, 45). In this conceptualization, ordinary political opponents are perceived as enemies, and regular partisan competition becomes an exceptional war-like and zero-sum conflict (Ignatieff 2013).

Somer and McCoy’s conceptualization of political polarization also belongs within this tradition. They envisage political polarization as a phenomenon that “collapses normal cross-cutting interests and identities into two mutually exclusive identities” (Somer and McCoy 2019,

9). To contrast with the “conventional definition” (8), they classify their conceptualization as “pernicious polarization” – a division of the political landscape into “mutually distrustful Us versus Them camps” (Somer et al. 2021, 929). Similarly, Schedler (2023) argues that political polarization refers to an “intense” (11) and “extraordinary” (12) conflict that divides the macro-political spectrum into two opposing “imagined communities” (10). Key features of political polarization in this view include the perception of normal political opponents as existential enemies and a “breakdown of basic democratic trust” between polarized actors, preventing them from cooperating or reaching a consensus (16).

Thus, the theory of pernicious polarization takes a different perspective from established approaches to studying political polarization either as an ideological difference over policy issues or partisan dislike towards the out-groups. While these approaches aptly explain different conceptual dimensions of political polarization, they may be less applicable in contexts outside of established democracies. Furthermore, by concentrating on the conflictual side of political polarization that extends beyond normal democratic competition, this approach is more relevant for studying the negative consequences of political polarization on democracy.

1.3 Conceptualization of Democratic Erosion: Democratic Backsliding, Autocratization, and De-democratization

This section examines the scholarly attempts to conceptualize the decline in the quality of democratic institutions, focusing on the similar but analytically distinct concepts of democratic backsliding, autocratization, and de-democratization. The analysis and further application exclude cases of sudden “democratic breakdown” but rather focus on a gradual “decay in democratic institutions” (Diamond 2015, 148).

In her influential essay “On Democratic Backsliding” (2016), Nancy Bermeo contends that in its broadest sense, democratic backsliding refers to the “debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy” (5). She identifies six forms of backsliding ranging from rapid democratic breakdown to an incremental erosion of democratic institutions. The most prevalent form of backsliding in today’s world is a gradual weakening of checks and balances by democratically elected actors, who are motivated to consolidate institutional power, referred to as “executive aggrandizement” (10). Waldner and Lust (2018) add that democratic backsliding refers to the deterioration of democratic qualities within “any regime”; thus, the concept is relevant for studying the deterioration of democratic elements in both democracies and autocracies (95).

Lürhmann and Lindberg (2019) introduce the new concept of “autocratization,” which serves as an “antonym of democratization” (1098). They argue that “democratic backsliding” is a problematic formulation for several reasons. First, the term implies that the decline takes place within the “democratic regime spectrum,” making it difficult to describe political processes in non-democratic settings (1099). Second, it suggests a “reversion” to the older state of play, whereas a transformation into completely new forms of regimes may take place (1099). Third, the term “sliding” implies an “involuntary” process, while it can be a deliberate strategy driven by undemocratic political actors (1099).

I believe that both concepts capture the essence of democratic erosion effectively and will be frequently utilized in the subsequent chapters. However, to maintain academic precision, the term “democratic backsliding,” as a broader concept, will primarily be employed to describe a general phenomenon of democratic erosion. In parts of the text where there is an emphasis on the authoritarian intentions of political actors, the term “autocratization” will be employed. When analyzing transitional regimes or “defective democracies” (Merkel 2004, 49), a more

specific terminology for describing democratic decline would be the concept of “de-democratization,” as it allows for “a direct comparison with democratization” (Bogaards 2018, 1482). Therefore, this term will be employed to underline the halt or reversal in the democratization process in transitional countries like Georgia. This approach ensures that the language employed to describe democratic erosion is consistent and accurately reflects tendencies in the relevant academic literature.

1.4 Relationship between Political Polarization and Democratic Erosion

Although some authors suggest that increasing political polarization contributes to higher voter turnout and more robust political engagement (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008, 553), broader academic literature puts emphasis on the negative consequences of political polarization. Haggard and Kaufman (2021), who conceptualize political polarization as “a process through which political elites and publics become increasingly divided over public policy and ideology” (31), consider political and social polarization as a major driver of democratic backsliding (27). Based on the measures of social and political polarization, the Varieties of Democracy Institute’s Democracy Report 2022 demonstrates that most countries that have experienced democratic backsliding have also suffered an increase in political polarization along with intensified misinformation flows and hate speech (12). According to Haggard and Kaufman (2021), the mechanisms by which polarization harms democracy are the inefficiency of political institutions, frequent political stalemates, and the shift of the established parties to the extremes (31). Such an environment contributes to diminishing political trust in political institutions and, in combination with “Us versus Them” rhetoric, creates fertile ground for the emergence of populist, anti-pluralist illiberal perceptions of democratic rule (33). Similarly, Iyengar and Westwood (2014) suggest that increased partisan animosity reduces the willingness to view rivals’ claims as legitimate and leads to “more intense contestation of policy outcomes” (705).

Hetherington and Rudolph (2017) show that due to increased political polarization, voters rely on “motivated reasoning” to assess political decisions, leading them to distrust the government more when the opposing party is in power (580). Since a lack of trust is one of the main reasons for delaying policy proposals, institutions tend to be less effective in times of increased polarization (Hetherington and Rudolph 2017, 589).

Arbatli and Rosenberg (2021) provide comparative evidence from Varieties of Democracy Institute and World Values Survey datasets that in polarized societies, an incumbent more confidently engages in electoral manipulation and intimidates the opposition parties (286). The reason for this lies in the implicit approval of the polarized voters: because of the Manichean split into two rival political groups, citizens are more likely to tolerate the harassment of the other group; therefore, the government does not suffer from electoral loss due to the intolerant and undemocratic treatment of the opposition (288). Following the same logic, Orhan (2022) shows that there is a strong correlation between high levels of affective polarization and democratic backsliding. Due to the “inter-party animosity,” polarized voters stay loyal to their partisan identities and are more reluctant to cross partisan lines even when their party engages in undemocratic behavior (718). Therefore, despite the violation of democratic principles, the incumbent still enjoys broad voter support. Similarly, Svobik (2019) demonstrates through multiple experiments conducted across different countries that political polarization presents a strategic opportunity for authoritarian leaders because polarized voters, even those who care about democratic ideals, prioritize their partisan aspirations over democratic commitment and vote for authoritarian politicians (26).

Somer et al. (2021) argue that during the “pernicious polarization,” politics is perceived as being in an “exceptional state,” in which polarized camps see each other as existential threats (930). Extremists gain ground in both camps and push for non-democratic actions against opponents,

which is considered broadly legitimate due to the enmity and prevailing sensation of emergency (931). The creation of “Us versus Them” exclusionary identities give a leeway to the incumbent to intimidate the opposition and change the rules of the democratic competition to its own benefit (933).

Thus, the scholarly corpus examining the relationship between democratic backsliding and political polarization suggests that polarization pushes political parties to their extremes and fuels partisan animosities, fosters political deadlocks, creates incentives for incumbents to persecute the opposition, and increases tolerance for undemocratic behavior.

1.5 Conclusion

This chapter briefly reviewed the main approaches to the study of political polarization and justified the decision to rely on the conceptualization of political polarization as a form of political conflict. The chapter also examined the concepts of “democratic backsliding,” “autocratization,” and “de-democratization” as similar but analytically distinct attempts to capture the nature of the deterioration of democratic institutions and explained the terminological choices. The final section focuses on the literature that explores the relationship between political polarization and the decline of democracy and identifies various mechanisms through which polarization damages democracy. With this in mind, the next chapter delves into the theory of pernicious polarization and the causal mechanism through which it harms democracy.

Chapter 2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Introduction

The following chapter presents a theoretical framework for understanding the causal relationship between political polarization and democratic backsliding. In particular, the theory hypothesizes the conditions and mechanisms that allow polarization to affect the quality of democratic institutions. To this end, the theoretical framework fully builds on the theory of pernicious polarization proposed by Murat Somer and Jennifer McCoy in a multitude of co-authored articles listed above in Table 1. The following sections outline the main testable features of the theory.

2.2 Conditions for Pernicious Polarization

As noted earlier, Somer and McCoy's conceptualization of political polarization differs from mainstream American scholarship, which views polarization as an ideological or emotional distance between two poles that can fluctuate at different levels (Somer and McCoy 2019, 8). The authors refer to these types of polarization as "benign" (McCoy and Somer 2019, 258) and focus on political polarization, which is "pernicious" in its nature because ordinary democratic cleavages are transformed into one-dimensional hostility and antagonism between bipolar political camps (McCoy et al. 2018, 18). The main feature of pernicious polarization is the simplification of the "normal complexity of politics" and the split into two political camps, which can occur even without ideological or social distancing (Somer and McCoy 2018, 5). The authors also note that majoritarian electoral systems, which disproportionately favor big parties and winner—take—all politics, appear to be a good predictor for pernicious polarization: Case studies testing the theory of pernicious polarization show that 9 out of 11 different countries that exhibited high levels of political polarization had some form of the majoritarian electoral system (McCoy and Somer 2019, 261). Moreover, pernicious

polarization does not necessarily reflect pre-existing social or political cleavages in the society, but it is more likely to sustain in environments where societies experience “formative shifts” – unsettled conflicts over national identities, territories, rights of particular groups or other macro-political issues that have arisen during the state formation, breakdown of dictatorship or some other major transformative event (McCoy and Somer 2021, 15).

Pernicious polarization is not an exogenous process caused by economic, social, institutional, or other independent structural factors (Somer et al. 2021, 930). Rather, although such structural factors may play a role, pernicious polarization is primarily an endogenous, “agentic” process deliberately driven by political actors who perceive polarizing politics as a successful strategy for achieving their political interests (930). Therefore, pernicious polarization is a product of an intentional, conscious decision of “political entrepreneurs” who seek to manipulate and reinforce latent cleavages in society for their own benefit (McCoy and Somer 2019, 248). Its main initiators are political parties (McCoy and Somer, 2021a, 490). Polarization can be perceived beneficial, at least in the short-term, from a partisan perspective, as it can help parties stand out from their competitors, mobilize their voter base, and strengthen intra-party homogeneity (489). These prospects are particularly attractive to “patronage-based” parties that lack clear political programs and try to differentiate themselves by manipulating formative shifts or exposing other underlying fissures in society (490). The intentions of polarizing political parties are not necessarily authoritarian, but once they adopt polarizing strategies, polarization takes on a life of its own and gradually transforms partisan intentions into an undemocratic direction (Somer et al. 2021, 931).

2.3 Characteristics of Pernicious Polarization

Since political polarization is both a strategy (McCoy and Somer 2019, 247) and a discourse for political actors (McCoy et al. 2018, 20), its characteristics can be traced in the strategic

political decisions and public forms of communication adopted by political parties and individual politicians. Direct cross-party interactions and treatments of each other can be particularly revealing. The most common observable characteristics of pernicious polarization are:

- Political actors are divided into two hostile camps, refer to each other as existential enemies, and perceive their relationship in “Us versus Them” terms;
- Partisans demonstrate a tribal loyalty to their own party and demonstrate a homogenous attitude toward the opponent;
- The two camps describe each other in terms of “good” and “evil,” construct negative stereotypes and prejudices about each other, and use morally charged statements against the other, often incorporating populist and illiberal discourses;
- Two camps question the legitimacy of each other’s existence and are not willing to acknowledge each other’s interests;
- Two camps can hardly imagine the possibility of having common interests or finding common ground; they perceive each other’s identities only in antagonistic terms;
- Attempts to negotiate or reach conciliatory solutions fail because polarized camps are reluctant to compromise or cooperate;
- Polarized actors speak to each other in the language of ultimatums and propose available policy solutions only in terms of “either-or”; they place full blame on the opponent for policy failures;
- Direct interaction is usually hostile, insulting, and violent, sometimes even leading to direct physical clashes;

- Two camps criticize all neutral actors who call for depolarization or refrain from taking sides in the partisan animosity and blame them for being “traitors” and accomplices of the “other side”;
- Both camps usually have affiliated media outlets that further disseminate polarizing discourses (McCoy and Somer 2019, 246-247).

These empirical characteristics distinguish pernicious political polarization from normal democratic partisan competition or “benign” political polarization, and they can be traced in the treatment of the opponent in public political forums, such as in parliamentary sessions, working meetings, TV interviews, and public statements. Pernicious polarization has a totalizing nature, making it a primary “framework” through which polarized actors interact with each other and make strategic decisions (McCoy and Somer 2019, 247).

2.4 How does Pernicious Polarization Damage Democracy?

The process of pernicious polarization begins when one of the major political parties, usually the one in power, initiates polarizing politics as a political strategy to advance its partisan interests (McCoy and Somer 2021a, 486). Although the incumbent has more capacity to drive a polarized process, achieving a sustained state of pernicious polarization depends on the counterreaction of the opposition – whether they respond in a similarly polarizing manner (Somer et al. 2021, 934). Even when polarizing actors are guided by democratic interests and believe that polarization would help promote democratic reforms by offering simplifying version of politics to the citizens, they risk falling into an undemocratic pitfall, as they will likely become increasingly hostile and opt for more intolerant and uncivil treatment of the opponent (McCoy and Somer 2021a, 488).

Pernicious polarization lays the ground for autocratization because the antagonistic division between two political camps and their respective constituencies becomes the overarching

macro-conflict that engulfs the entire political sphere and fertilizes the view that politics is in an “exceptional state” (Somer et al. 2021, 930). The sense of urgency, in combination with the hatred and strong out-group bias against the adversary, incentivizes political actors to use “extraordinary,” undemocratic means against the opponent and ignore moderate voices in their own group (931). Because of the “mindset of polarization,” an incumbent is motivated to abuse institutional power, reshape a constitution and electoral laws, manipulate elections, and weaken checks and balances to secure power in combination with demonizing, vilifying, and stigmatizing the opposition to justify its undemocratic behavior (McCoy and Somer 2019, 245). The opposition has several options to respond, including compromising and power-sharing. However, the incumbent’s polarizing treatment often forces them to respond with reciprocal polarization and counter-mobilization (McCoy and Somer 2019, 255).

Overall, the following negative outcomes for the quality of democracy can be identified in the perniciously polarized polities:

- Hollowing deliberative mechanisms; frequent stalemates in power-sharing political institutions; protracted but unsubstantial processes of bargaining;
- Weakening of moderate and conciliatory voices in rival political camps and increase in extremist and radical views;
- Declining shared understanding of general political principles, including the emergence of a disputed understanding of the meaning of democracy and disagreements over straightforward factual notions;
- Endorsement of undemocratic treatment of opponents in both political camps;
- Incumbent’s executive aggrandizement of democratic institutions (gerrymandering, media capture, courts capture);

- Radicalization of the opposition and willingness to consider undemocratic measures against the incumbent (McCoy et al. 2018. 25-27).

2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, the characteristics and causal logic of pernicious polarization were established. The first section explains the institutional and structural conditions that create fertile ground for the emergence of pernicious polarization and how it comes about. In particular, it was noted that political polarization comes into play when one of the political actors exploits underlying cleavages in society to distinguish itself from its opponent and remobilize its supporters. When polarizing tactics are met with similar polarization from the other side, pernicious polarization begins to emerge, ultimately leading to the creation of two exclusionary groups of identities. The second section outlined testable characteristics through which pernicious polarization is manifested in the political sphere. The third section explains the logic of the causal mechanism through which pernicious polarization harms democratic institutions: antagonism and the perception of opponents as enemies motivate rivals to use all possible means, including undemocratic measures, against each other. In this way, political polarization serves as a cause and trigger for the erosion of democratic institutions.

Chapter 3. Methodological Framework

3.1 Introduction

This chapter lays the methodological foundation for the research and justifies the methodological choices based on the relevant scientific literature. The first section describes the single case study research design as the main methodological framework. The second section explains that Georgia is one of the typical cases for testing the theory of harmful polarization. The other half of the chapter focuses on qualitative content analysis as a method of data collection and analysis. The final section describes the nature and scope of the collected data.

3.2 Single-Case Study Research

The topic of social science research should be relevant to both real-world contexts and academic research (Brady and Collier 2010, 132). This research aims to bolster a theory of pernicious polarization by testing the hypothesized causal mechanism in a previously unexamined case of Georgia. In this way, the research will help to increase the scientific significance of the theory and provide an explanation for political developments in Georgia that may have normative significance for the successful democratization of the country as well as for the elucidation of political processes in the post-communist “third wave democracies” (Mainwaring and Bizzarro 2019, 107). Because of its primary objective, this thesis belongs to the domain of theory-driven research, particularly because it is a theory-testing case study (Rohlfing 2012, 9). According to Yin (2003), case study research is particularly useful when the research aims to explore a “complex social phenomenon,” as this approach allows us to preserve its “holistic and meaningful characteristics” and provide persuasive answers to “why” and “how” questions (2).

A case is defined by Gerring (2007) as a “spatially delimited phenomenon observed at a single point in time or over some period of time” (19). Rohlfing (2012) places a case within a larger population it belongs to and conceptualizes it as “a bounded empirical phenomenon that is an instance of a population of similar empirical phenomena” (24). Combining both definitions, then, a case is a self-sufficient unit of analysis with empirically observable geographic, temporal, and substantive boundaries that resides within a larger population of cases. In the context of examining causality between political polarization and democratic backsliding, since both cause and effect can only be experienced by nation-states, a population of cases is comprised of countries that have experienced either political polarization or democratic backsliding in a given period of time. This population also assumes substantive boundaries that encompass the political institutions relevant to the study of the quality of democracy in a nation-state. For this research, the main case of interest is Georgia in 2018-2023.

Case study research can be conducted at two levels of analysis, the cross-case level and the within-case level (Rohlfing 2012, 29). These levels have different research goals: The cross-case level aims to demonstrate the causal effect of X on Y in the predefined set of cases, while the within-case level of analysis aims to identify a causal mechanism by which X exerts its effect on Y in specific cases (Rohlfing 2012, 32; Gerring 2007, 42). A causal mechanism is defined as a process that is triggered by a cause, and its functioning leads to the emergence of the effect (Beach and Pedersen 2019, 30). In the case of studying the effect of political polarization on the quality of democracy, the goal of the cross-case analysis is to show that such an effect exists systematically, but it does not have to explain “why” or “how” this effect comes about. Within-case analysis, on the other hand, aims to reveal micro-level contexts to demonstrate a causal mechanism that explains why or how political polarization harms

democratic institutions. Since this research aims to test a causal mechanism of how pernicious polarization causes democratic backsliding, only within-case analysis will be conducted.

As within-case research must decipher micropolitical developments and use deep contextual knowledge about each case, it can only work with a small number of cases, sometimes even a single case. For this reason, case study research, especially a single case study, has limited external validity, i.e., the potential of its causal mechanism to be generalized to the unexamined cases in the concerned population is limited because the mechanism is inclined to be context-bound (Gerring 2007, 43; Rohlfing 2012, 200; Brady and Collier 2010, 330). However, case study research has strong internal validity, i.e., causal inference is robust, has a low level of uncertainty, and is less at risk of being compounded by the unexamined factors, especially when data are systematically collected and triangulated (Gerring 2007, 43; Brady and Collier 2010, 334; King et al. 1994, 76).

The external validity of case study research can be increased by testing new cases according to different selection strategies (Rohlfing 2012, 203). The present thesis aims to test a theory of pernicious polarization in a theoretically typical case. However, before it can be determined that a selected case is a typical case, it should be first explicitly established that a case belongs to the population of the concerned cases. As mentioned earlier, a population for studying the causality between democratic backsliding and political polarization includes nation-states that have experienced either political polarization or democratic backsliding in a given period of time. To examine the within-case causal mechanism of the relationship, it should be first specified at the cross-case level that the selected case has experienced both democratic backsliding and political polarization; in other words, the selected case should demonstrate causal homogeneity (Rohlfing 2012, 24). Since Georgia's scores in both democratic quality and degree of political polarization have deteriorated in 2018-2023, we can assume that the country

meets the criterion of causal homogeneity; however, less is known about the causal mechanism. Therefore, the selection method is in line with Rohlfing's (2012) recommendation to select a case with positive scores on cause and effect but to refrain from cases where the within-case mechanism is obvious or largely confirmed (89).

3.3 Georgia as a Typical Case

As mentioned earlier, before conducting empirical analysis, it is theorized that Georgia (2018-2023) is a typical case for the theory of pernicious polarization based on the country's macropolitical characteristics. A typical case, synonymous with a representative case, has features that exemplify the nature of the causal relationship between X and Y because it is similar to most of the concerned cases (Gerring 2007, 91; Rohlfing 2012, 66). Therefore, a typical case has a strong potential to increase the external validity of the tested theory.

Typical case studies can be conducted in both single- and multiple-case designs (Yin 2009, 39). The multiple-case design evidently has a higher degree of external and internal validity. However, conducting single-case study research may be justified if the research context meets one of the five conditions listed by Yin (2009, 40-42). One of these conditions is that a case belongs to a group of typical cases. The rationale behind this justification is that the insights generated from typical case study research are "assumed to be informative" about a broader pool of similar cases (41). "Similarity" can be identified based on the factors which are analytically relevant to study a relationship between political polarization and the quality of democracy. Based on the conditions and characteristics of pernicious polarization and democratic backsliding outlined in the theoretical framework above, such factors may include inter alia a type of political regime, the electoral system, a distribution of power between political institutions, historical background, the ethnic and racial composition of the country. The most important two features, however, can be a type of political regime and the electoral

system. The following table summarizes case studies of pernicious polarization based on these features:

Table 2. Characteristics of case studies of pernicious polarization²

Author s	Title	Case	Political Regime ³ (As of now)	Electoral System ⁴ (As of now)	Main findings	Main Source of evidence
Abramowitz and McCoy (2019)	“United States: Racial Resentment, Negative Partisanship, and Polarization in Trump’s America “	United States, 2016-2018	Liberal Democracy	Plurality/Majority	Deep partisan rifts between Democrats and Republicans contributed to Trump’s victory. Increased polarization led to political gridlock and growing intolerance toward political opponents.	American National Election Studies (ANES)
García-Guadilla and Mallen (2019)	“Polarization, Participatory Democracy, and Democratic Erosion in Venezuela’s Twenty-First Century Socialism “	Venezuela, 1999-2018	Electoral Autocracy	Mixed System	The political polarization that emerged during the Chavez era and reached ominous proportions over the decades revolved around competing conceptions of participatory and electoral democracy and was exacerbated by socioeconomic inequalities. The exclusionary Chavista project led to a deep division in society and fostered the decline of democratic institutions.	Legal documents, Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflicts
Andreadis and Stavrakakis (2019)	“Dynamics of Polarization in Greek Case “	Greece, 1970-2015	Electoral Democracy	Proportional Representation	Greek politics revolved around the deep ideological divide between PASOK and ND, which contributed to the dismissal of popular demands by political elites and the emergence of antagonistic views about the EU.	The True European Dataset, historical records.
Vegetti (2019)	“The Political Nature of Ideological	Hungary, 2002-	Electoral Autocracy	Mixed System	The severe political polarization is driven by political elites, hardly	Hungarian party manifestos

² This table is based on Volume 681, Issue 1 (2019) of the American Academy of Political and Social Science “Polarizing Politics: A Global Threat to Democracy” co-edited by Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer. See here: <https://journals.sagepub.com/toc/anna/681/1>.

³ Regime type is defined based on the Varieties of Democracy Institute dataset visualized by Our World In Data. See here: <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/political-regime?tab=chart&country=~LBV>.

⁴ Electoral systems are defined and assigned according to International IDEA’s Electoral System Family Dataset. See here: <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/question-view/130357>.

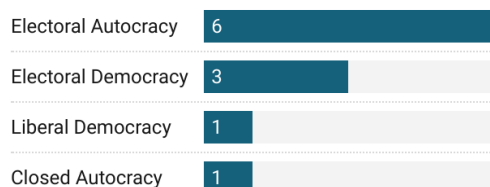
	Polarization: The Case of Hungary “	2010; 2010-2018			reflecting traditional ideological differences. However, there is a strong cleavage between urban and folk ideologies. The FIDESZ party views opponents as existential enemies and uses non-democratic means to eliminate them.	; National Electoral Data for Hungary; political speeches.
Tworzecki (2019)	“Poland: A Case of Top-Down Polarization “	Poland, 2015-2018	Electoral Democracy	Proportional Representation	The ruling party delegitimized its opponents and the pre-existing political institutions through polarizing rhetoric and changed the institutional framework to its own favour, representing an exemplary case of democratic backsliding.	IPSOS survey, historical records, National Election Survey Data.
Somer (2019)	“Turkey: The Slippery Slope from Reformist to Revolutionary Polarization and Democratic Breakdown “	Turkey, 2002 - 2018.	Electoral Autocracy	Proportional Representation	Transformative and polarizing politics employed by AKP along with the similar counterreaction from the opposition, have set a spiral of pernicious polarization in motion that has led Turkey to the erosion of democratic institutions.	High Electoral Board (YSK) data, academic publications, historical records.
Rahman (2019)	“Party System Institutionalization and Pernicious Polarization in Bangladesh “	Bangladesh (1971-2018)	Electoral Autocracy	Plurality/Majority	Pernicious polarization has emerged from the competing views on the foundation of the nation, matching Islamist/secular divisions. Hostile camps harassed each other, freedom of expression declined, and political institutions did not function properly.	Varieties of Democracy Institute data, official state documents, newspaper articles.
Kongkiat (2019)	“From Illiberal Democracy to Military Authoritarianism: Intra-Elite Struggle and Mass-Based Conflict in Deeply Polarized Thailand “	Thailand (2005-2018)	Closed Autocracy	Mixed System	The two opposing political camps of the Yellow Shirts and Red Shirts are driven not only by partisan interests but also by competing views of Thailand’s nationhood. The split contributed to long-term political instability, which also resulted in a military coup.	Historical records, newspaper articles.
Arugay, Slater (2019)	“Polarization Without Poles: Machiavellian Conflicts and	Philippines, 2000-2010	Electoral Autocracy	Mixed System	Pernicious polarization has emerged from political elites’ struggle over executive power,	Newspaper articles, legal documents,

	the Philippine's Lost Decade of Democracy, 2000-2010 “				leading to the violation of human rights and the abuse of political institutions.	historical records.
LeBas, Munemo (2019)	“Elite Conflict, Compromise, and Enduring Authoritarianism: Polarization in Zimbabwe, 1980-2008	Zimbabwe, 1980-1987; 2000-2008	Electoral Autocracy	Mixed System	Pernicious polarization was instigated by political parties over the role of the liberation war in the political space, leading to mass violence and profound societal divisions. Both polarizing episodes ended with the elites' consensus, but deeply-grained fissures continue to live.	NGO reports, newspaper articles, Zimbabwe Peace Project data
Southall (2019)	“Polarization in South Africa: Toward Democratic Deepening or Democratic Decay? “	South Africa, 1994-2018	Electoral Democracy	Proportional Representation	While deep-cutting pernicious polarization stemming from apartheid was successfully overcome in 1994, South Africa has still suffered from structural inequalities and divisions, posing dangers to the country's stable democratic development.	World Bank, newspaper articles, academic publications.

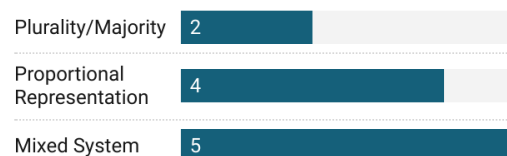
Hypothesized placement of Georgia in the distribution of cases	Georgia, 2018-2023	Electoral Democracy	Mixed System	Political polarisation has emerged between the incumbent Georgian Dream and the opposition UNM, with both parties perceiving each other as enemies and trespassing on democratic norms of behaviour. As a result, the polarized incumbent has consolidated power and curtailed opposition rights.

Table 3 Distribution of studied cases across political regimes and electoral systems

Political Regimes in Studied Cases



Electoral Systems in Studied Cases



Based on the summary of the studied cases of pernicious polarization, we can argue that Georgia, which belongs to electoral democracies and mixed electoral systems, can be representative of electoral democracies and electoral autocracies, as the dynamics in these two regimes are similar and during the democratic backsliding, electoral autocracy is a next “station” for electoral democracies. Since mixed political systems include both majority and proportional electoral systems, the various aspects of electoral systems can be generalized to both proportional and majoritarian electoral systems, not to mention mixed systems. Based on the already studied cases, thus, Georgia meets the criteria of a typical case. However, the ultimate goal of studying a typical case is to generalize its findings to the potentially relevant unstudied cases. The glimpse into the already examined cases and Georgia’s general characteristics suggest that the findings may be particularly relevant for gaining insights into other post-communist electoral democracies and/or mixed electoral systems.

3.4 Qualitative Content Analysis

The main area of observation for the following research is the political behavior of political elites, that is, political parties and politicians, as the theory suggests that the main actors of pernicious polarization are political parties (McCoy and Somer 2021a, 488). To study partisan political behavior, the research will examine (1) political decisions and (2) political rhetoric. To this end, the research will incorporate qualitative content analysis into the single case study research design as a major tool for systematic and iterative analysis and interpretation of the collected data (Schreier 2012, 12).

Originally, content analysis was developed as a quantitative research method that identifies, measures, and quantifies explicit meanings conveyed in recorded communicative verbal or visual materials, such as documents, speeches, video recordings, interviews, and field notes (Halperin and Heath 2020, 376). Qualitative content analysis, which was developed as an

independent research method in the 1980s, serves the purpose of reconstructing and analyzing relatively less obvious meanings and contextualizing their significance to the initial research question (Kohlbacher 2005, 16). Qualitative content analysis allows the researcher to analyze the collected material in depth and interpret the motives, messages, and narratives of the political actors (Schreier 2012, 3). With these characteristics, qualitative content analysis resembles a method of discourse analysis. However, the former has a narrower purpose: it aims to understand the collected material itself, while the latter goes beyond the material and analyses the text or other data source in a larger context (Halperin and Heath 2020, 379; Schreier 2012, 44).

Qualitative content analysis is strictly tied to the initial research question and examines the collected material only in light of the hypothesized elements (Kohlbacher 2006, 15). It starts with the selection of the appropriate sources of material, usually textual data, which are then classified into predefined categories relevant to the research question; elements inside the categories are then organized as “units of content,” which can be symbols, words, sentences, paragraphs, or themes (Halperin and Heath 2020, 379). After these decisions are made, the categories and their units are coded according to a predefined “coding protocol” (380). I used the qualitative data analysis computer software NVivo to organize data and conduct the coding.

Thus, qualitative content analysis involves two major analytical steps: First, the data are categorized and coded into theory-based frames. Then, the coded “units” are analyzed and interpreted in depth (Mayring 2014, 10). This method is particularly useful for case study research because it allows the researcher to handle a large and diverse amount of data, avoid anecdotalism, reduce the risk of bias, ensure a systematic approach, and maintain transparency (Kuckartz 2014, 12).

3.5 Data Collection

As mentioned above, the research examines the political behavior of political parties and their members within democratic political institutions. To determine that Georgia (2018-2023) is perniciously polarized, the theoretically predicted characteristics of pernicious polarization are traced in the political decisions and political discourses of political parties, an analytical strategy otherwise called “pattern-matching” (Yin 2009, 116). To contextualize political developments, polarizing processes are analyzed chronologically. Political decisions are assessed in line with political rhetoric, as the theory places a special emphasis on the hostility and antagonism expressed in verbal means of communication. To this end, the Facebook posts of the concerned actors are analyzed. Additionally, a video collection of Georgia’s parliamentary plenary sessions, TV interviews, press releases, and official statements are examined. Most of these sources are available only in the Georgian language. However, some of the exemplary citations, which are also directly referred to in the text, are translated and provided in English as an appendix. To establish that Georgia has experienced de-democratization, measurements, and reports of international observer organizations, such as OSCE and Freedom House, will be used.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter explained and justified the methodological choices made throughout the research. In the first part, the research design of the single case study was presented, and it was hypothesized that Georgia is one of the typical cases of pernicious polarization. Therefore, the results are expected to be generalizable for countries that have similar institutional characteristics. In the second part, it was established that the optimal choice for data collection and analysis is a method of qualitative content analysis, which is integrated into the single case study research design. In doing so, a reader gains a comprehensive understanding of the

development of the research process and the methodological justification of the choices made, which increases the scientific validity of the research.

Chapter 4. Evidence of Pernicious Polarization

4.1 Introduction

To test the theoretical characteristics of pernicious polarization, I examined the Facebook profiles of the two main political parties: Georgian Dream (GD) and the United National Movement (UNM). I also examined the Facebook profiles of GD Chairman Irakli Kobakhidze and Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili. From the UNM, I examined the Facebook accounts of former party chairman Nika Melia and the newly elected chairman Levan Khabeishvili. I collected public posts from these accounts through the tool Apify. Posts involved textual statements, videos, reposted interviews, and speeches. Since Apify could not generate more than 1000 posts per account, therefore no older than posts from 2021, to observe earlier political developments, an additional 50 press releases and statements published by the GD on its official website from 2018 to 2022 and 10 television interviews of UNM leaders, primarily of the third president of Georgia and leader of the UNM Mikheil Saakashvili from 2019 to October 2021 (before Saakashvili's imprisonment) were examined. This data was organized and analyzed in Nvivo according to the codes displayed in Table 4.

The selection of codes was partly deductive - the code groups were based on the characteristics of pernicious polarization theorized in Chapter 3, and part of the subcodes, particularly those related to war/peace and pro-European/pro-Russian foreign policy, national interests/foreign interests were based on the similar approach applied in the policy paper examining the thematic dimensions of Georgian polarization (Samkharadze 2022, 8), while other subcodes related to democratic/authoritarian commitments, moderation/radicalization and modernization/backwardness were inductively identified as a result of the preliminary examination of the data and academic publications on the polarization in Georgia. This chapter

provides evidence of the pernicious polarization in Georgia and provides a contextualized, chronological overview of its development.

Table 4. Analyzed Facebook Pages

Facebook Page	Number of Page Followers	Number of examined posts	Timeframe
ქართული ოცნება/Georgian Dream	189 000	480	July 6, 2022 – May 1 2023
ირაკლი კობახიძე / Irakli Kobakhidze	86 000	95	July 6, 2022 - May 1 2023
Irakli Garibashvili	433 000	490	February 25, 2021 – May 5 2023
ერთიანი ნაციონალური მოძრაობა • United National Movement	142 000	500	January 10, 2023 - May 5, 2023
Nika Melia / ნიკა მელია	232 000	400	November 21, 2021 – May 1 2023
Levan Khabeishvili	115 000	100	January 13, 2023 – May 1 2023

Table 5. The Georgian Dream: Codes and Subcodes

Code	Subcode
Us versus Them	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. GD – legacy of democratizer, UNM – legacy of autocratizer (Keywords: “Bloody Nine Years “) 2. GD – defender of Georgian interests and values, UNM – traitors (keyword: “fseudoliberals“, “liberal fascists“, “foreign agents“) 3. GD – peace, UNM - war (Keyword: “Global War Party“, “Second Front“)
Delegitimization	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. GD – abides democratic rules, UNM – assaults democratic institutions (keywords: “Radical Opposition“, “Revolutionary Agenda“) 2. GD – aims at moderation, UNM – refuses to cooperate. 3. GD describes itself as “good “, UNM – as “evil “. 4. GD accuses UNM of spreading fake news.
Hostility	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. GD demoralizes, derogates, or insults UNM. 2. GD participates in physical clashes, initiates aggressive interactions.

Table 6. The United National Movement: Codes and Subcodes

Code	Subcode
Us versus Them	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. UNM – legacy of democratizer, GD – legacy of autocratizer.2. UNM – legacy of modernizer, economic and cultural progress, GD – reactionary force, economic and cultural regress.3. UNM – defender of Georgian interests and values, GD – Agent of Russian interests (Keywords: “Russian Dream“, “Russian oligarch“, “Personal Prisoner of Putin“).4. UNM describes itself as “good“, GD – as “evil“.
Delegitimization	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. UNM – abides democratic rules, GD – assaults democratic institutions (keywords: “Oligarchy“, “Feudalism“, “Slaves of Oligarch“, “Servants of Oligarch“).2. UNM – guarantor of Georgia’s European integration, GD – disrupts Georgia’s EU/NATO integration (keywords: “sabotage“, “treason“).3. UNM accuses GD of spreading fake news.
Hostility	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. GD demoralizes, derogates, or insults UNM.2. UNM participates in physical clashes, initiates aggressive interactions.

4.2 The early beginnings of political polarization

The democratic transition in Georgia after the collapse of the Soviet Union was characterized by tensions between democracy and state-building, revolution and peaceful change, liberalism and conservatism, and modernism and traditionalism (Jones 2013, 26). Shortly after Georgia regained its independence in 1991, a civil war broke out between nationalist-populist president Zviad Gamsakhurdia and his opponents, who viewed him as a “fascist dictator,” leading to the ouster of the President, who died soon after in exile under suspicious circumstances (Nodia 1995, 107). The paramilitary organization’s rule was replaced in 1995 by the presidency of Soviet politician Eduard Shevardnadze, who succeeded in stabilizing the country and opening up for the media and civil society but was unable to combat mass corruption and crippling poverty (Fairbanks 2004, 113). After massive electoral fraud in the 2003 elections, Shevardnadze was ousted in November 2003 as a result of the peaceful Rose Revolution led by Mikheil Saakashvili, who won a 96 % victory in the 2004 elections with his United National Movement party (Levitsky and Way 2010, 225).

Saakashvili's nine-year presidency was characterized by accelerated state-building efforts and modernization reforms, neoliberal economic policies, and a determined orientation toward NATO and EU membership with the goal of building a "Switzerland of this region mixed with elements of Singapore" (Appendix 2, source 1). These aspirations were coupled with the President's public image as a strongman, an affinity for the disciplinary state, a personalistic style of decision-making, disconnectedness from citizens, suffocation of civil society, and massive human rights violations (Jones 2012; Levitsky and Way 2010, 222-228).

In 2012, Russian-made billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili founded a new political party, "Georgian Dream - Democratic Georgia," with a fundamentally different understanding of the legacy of the Rose Revolution (The New York Times 2012). Ivanishvili's election campaign was based on the promise to free the country from the consequences of the "failed" revolution and the effects of the "cynical social experiments," referring to Saakashvili's neoliberal and modernization reforms (Appendix 1, source 1).

After GD won a convincing victory in the 2012 parliamentary elections despite electoral intimidation from the state during the campaign, Saakashvili opted for a peaceful transfer of power, often described as a "new chance for Georgian democracy" (Fairbanks and Gugushvili, 2013). However, the initial conciliatory and unifying rhetoric still indicated restrained antagonism, with Saakashvili frequently emphasizing that he and Ivanishvili represented "two different versions of Georgia" (Appendix 2, Source 2). Similarly, Ivanishvili and his successor, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, regularly mentioned that GD had liberated the country from a "violent regime" whose democratic success was a "fiction" (Appendix 1, sources 2-3) and represented a "neo-Nazi formation" (Appendix 3, source 2).

According to McCoy and Somer (2019), pernicious polarization is more likely to emerge when polarizing strategies of political actors build on “formative rift” - deep divisions that emerge during transformative changes in society (237). After the GD came to power and the UNM became the first party in Georgian history to survive as a parliamentary opposition after electoral defeat, solving an issue of criminal accountability and abuse of power by UNM former officials, including President Saakashvili, was one of Ivanishvili’s main campaign promises (Appendix 1, source 4). However, the matter of “restoring justice” has become an unresolved formative rift as GD hastily initiated selective criminal proceedings against former state officials without implementing adequate judicial reform (Fairbanks 2014, 158). Without ensuring judicial independence, these criminal proceedings were perceived by the UNM and its constituents as selective political persecution, with President Saakashvili fleeing to Ukraine in 2015 and renouncing Georgian citizenship (Aljazeera 2014; BBC 2015).

Although resentment over the political persecution of fellow party members and suspicion of Ivanishvili’s Russian ties had penetrated deep into the UNM, the party remained true to its role as the main parliamentary opposition and participated actively in political institutions over the next few years (Appendix 1, source 5). Similarly, the GD, which occasionally pointed to the UNM’s “criminal” past and “radicalizing” political agenda, reluctantly put up with the troublesome opponent, confident in its dominant position (Appendix 1, source 5). In the 2016 parliamentary elections, a campaign of both parties still had a somewhat positive and issue-oriented tone, with UNM promising judicial independence, media freedom, rapid integration into NATO, tax cuts, and infrastructure modernization and GD’s focusing on agriculture, unemployment, health insurance, pensions, and other socioeconomic issues (Netgazeti 2016). According to the election results, GD received a majority of 48.7%, while the UNM remained the main opposition party in parliament with 27%, followed by the far-right party Alliance of

Patriots of Georgia with only 5% (Election Administration of Georgia 2016). Thus, although partisan competition has been consistently fierce, political polarization has become routinely embedded in the political system during the period of 2012-2016 and did not reach severe levels.

4.3 Unraveling the Vicious Spiral of Pernicious Polarization

Somer et al. (2021) argue that political polarization becomes pernicious when political actors begin to simplify political decisions, exploit pre-existing political divisions, and deliberately pursue polarizing strategies to advance their political interests (930). In the 2018 presidential election, GD decided to support a formally independent candidate, Salome Zurbishvili (Agenda.ge 2018). Initially, she seemed a good pick because she was female, descended from a prominent Georgian politician of the early 20th century, and had a long diplomatic career (Kadagidze 2018). However, she emerged as a controversial figure, repeatedly accusing Saakashvili of being responsible for the 2008 war of Georgia with Russia (Appendix 1, source 6). In response, Saakashvili, who actively participated in the UNM presidential campaign from Ukraine, accused Zurbishvili of “treason” (Appendix 2, source 3). Building on these disagreements, the presidential campaign became a major battleground between two incompatible worldviews. The GD came closest to losing its symbolic dominance after the first presidential round when Zurbishvili overtook the UNM candidate by only 0.9% (Election Administration of Georgia 2018). For the second round, the GD constructed its campaign solely on demonizing the UNM. In particular, the GD sought to mobilize fears in society by claiming that if the UNM had won, it would have overthrown the government, engaged in revanchism, retaliated, and persecuted both political opponents and ordinary citizens (Appendix 1, sources 7-9). After Zurbishvili finally won the second round of the presidential elections with 59.52%,

GD referred to the election as a “referendum” between truth and deception (Appendix 1, 10). Thus, GD relied on the polarizing rhetoric as a main strategy to win the parliamentary elections.

According to McCoy and Somer (2021b), the opposition can respond to the incumbent’s polarizing strategy with four different tactics - active or passive depolarization and transformative or reciprocal repolarization (14). With passive depolarization, the opposition attempts to reconcile with the incumbent by appealing to the already activated sociopolitical divisions without challenging them, whereas, with active depolarization, the opposition attempts to reconcile by reshaping the socio-political center around new issues and unifying messages (14). Transformative repolarization replaces the existing polarizing axes with polarization around democratic values, while reciprocal polarization means simply responding with similar demonization, delegitimization, and divisive rhetoric along the already existing polarizing axes (15).

After its defeat in the presidential elections, which the UNM perceived as a “stolen election” (Appendix 2, source 4), the party chose reciprocal polarization as its main political strategy. The UNM reinforced its own polarizing discourses, delegitimized the rule of the GD as an “oligarchy,” accused Ivanishvili and his party members of treason and collaboration with Russia, and described GD’s political mistakes as catastrophic while calling Saakashvili the “founder of the modern Georgian nation” (Appendix 2, sources 5-6).

This mutual hostility, antagonism, and “Us versus Them” mentality was taken to a new level in the 2020 parliamentary elections. The GD’s polarizing strategy involved questioning not only the UNM’s undemocratic commitments but also the manipulation of populist sentiments over the church and family and accusations of UNM’s attempts to destroy Georgian national identity and traditional values (Appendix 1, source 11). Reacting to this, Saakashvili responded with

populistic claims about his Christian commitments (Appendix 2, source 5), repeatedly announced his return to Georgia for the elections, and denounced GD as an illegitimate and treacherous political actor who was the “enemy” of the Georgian people (Appendix 2, source 7). In the heated competition, Georgian Dream received 48.22% and the UNM 27.18% (Election Administration of Georgia 2020). The UNM and other opposition parties had agreed on a collective boycott of the election results, claiming that the elections had been massively rigged (Appendix 2, Source 8). For this reason, the opposition parties did not campaign or participate in the second round, refused to accept the parliamentary seats, and demanded snap elections (Appendix 2, source 9). The political crisis was exacerbated by the GD’s further polarizing decision to storm the UNM headquarters and arrest the party chairman Nika Melia (The Guardian 2021; Appendix 1, source 12).

As political polarization reached a severe level of intensity and both sides were increasingly hostile, antagonistic, and irreconcilable, mediation talks were initiated by the European Council President Charles Michel (European Council 2021). After several attempts, the GD and opposition parties, except for the UNM, signed an agreement aimed at “ending the current political dispute and advancing Georgia’s democratic and rule-of-law agenda through political, judicial, and anti-corruption reform” (EU Neighbors East 2021). The agreement also stipulated the release of Nika Melia and a condition that snap elections would be held only if the GD had received less than 43% in the upcoming 2021 local elections (EU Eastern Neighborhood 2021). The UNM refused to sign the agreement despite the quick release of Melia because it was skeptical that the GD would implement the democratic reforms (Appendix 2, Source 10, 11). Although this move was indeed polarizing, as the UNM refused to compromise, it turned out to be right about GD’s lack of commitment to democratic reforms: a few months later, the GD declared that it would “annul” the agreement because the “radical opposition” was not

cooperating (Appendix 1, Source 13). After the GD pulled out, the UNM decided to sign the agreement so that “Western partners would not distance themselves from the Georgian people because of this unreliable government “(Appendix 2, Source 11). The tendency to disregard the interests of the other side, reinforce antagonistic political identities and vilify the opponent has intensified against the backdrop of the upcoming local elections, Saakashvili’s clandestine return to Georgia, and his imprisonment just days before the election (Appendix 2, Source 12; BBC 2021). Following the victory of the Georgian Dream in the 2021 local elections, the second round of which was completely boycotted by the UNM (Appendix 2, source 13), the reasons for Saakashvili’s imprisonment and his state of health have become the major axis of severe political polarization. In the following months, the main topic of partisan rivalry became whether Mikheil Saakashvili should have been transferred from prison to a civilian hospital and then from Georgia to a foreign country to receive better medical treatment and how serious his health condition actually was with the UNM accusing GD of Saakashvili’s deliberate torture and the GD claiming that he was ill due to futile hunger strikes and self-inflicted injuries (Appendix 1, sources 14-15; Appendix 2, sources 14-15).

After the invasion of Ukraine and Georgia’s application for EU membership, the old polarizing discourses about Saakashvili’s legacy of the “bloody nine years” and the “bombing of his people” on the one hand and the “Russian oligarchy” and Saakashvili’s health problem on the other were revived around foreign policy priorities. The DG went on the offensive against the UNM, accusing the “radical opposition” of being “foreign agents” of the US and other Western countries in order to open a “second front” in Georgia, profit from the chaos, and gain political power through “revolutionary” means. (Appendix 1, sources 16-17). The UNM, in turn, claimed that Saakashvili was poisoned in prison as “Putin’s personal prisoner” and that the

Georgian government's policy of appeasement toward Russia was dictated directly by Putin (Appendix 2, sources 16-17).

While both sides continue to this day to delegitimize each other by claiming that the adversary serves the interests of the foreign state and questioning the fundamental moral values of the other, both argue that they themselves are committed to democratic principles and can implement the democratic reforms necessary for country's successful transition (Appendix 1, source 18; Appendix 2, source 18). Thus, in the timeframe of 2018-2023, the Georgian political landscape exhibits full-fledged characteristics of pernicious political polarization, such as intragroup enmity, exclusionary strategic behavior, and mutually antagonistic treatment of opponents.

4.4 Conclusion

To sum up, this chapter demonstrated that the GD and UNM have deliberately pursued polarizing, antagonistic, and mutually exclusive political strategies against each other to gain political power. The defining divide on which their animosity is based is the unresolved formative rift over the issue of restorative justice, which has never been treated impartially but politicized by both sides to their own advantage, with GD claiming that the UNM is a totally authoritarian, destructive force on the one hand, and on the other, the UNM maintaining that it has modernized, democratized, and reshaped the modern Georgian nation, the legacy of which was overturned by the GD. The polarizing discourses are based on foreign policy priorities and superficial liberal/conservative diverging values that are deliberately fueled, especially by the incumbent. The opponents perceive each other as existential enemies and the main obstacles to the country's peaceful and democratic development. These antagonistic and exclusionary perceptions have been shaping up since the very beginning of GD's entry into the office but

reached the intensity of pernicious polarization only after the 2018 presidential election when political polarization has become a primary strategy for partisan competition.

Chapter 5. Evidence of De-Democratization of Georgia

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter established that Georgia has been experiencing signs of political polarization during the period of 2012-2018, reaching, however, its pernicious nature since the 2018 presidential elections. The following chapter aims to demonstrate that alongside the toxification of political polarization, the prospects of Georgia's democratization have steadily declined. Without going into the methodological discussion on the different measures of democracy (Kellstedt and Whitten 2018, 103-107), the chapter relies on the definition of electoral democracy and assesses the state of its two main components – free and fair elections and political rights – in Georgia. Additionally, the chapter focuses on a key component of liberal democracy – the rule of law.

5.2 Measurements of De-Democratization

The measurement of democratization or de-democratization is directly related to the “definitional consensus “on the concept of democracy (Coppedge et al. 2011, 248). This study follows Dahl's famous definition of democracy as a political system “completely or almost completely responsive to all its citizens “(1971,2), which is synonymous with the concept of “electoral democracy, “according to the Varieties of Democracy Institute's methodology (Teorell et al. 2016, 5). Dahl's formulation focuses on free and fair elections as the main indicators of democracy, combined with the accessibility of political freedoms as institutional guarantees that allow the opposition to meaningfully participate and compete in the election (1971, 3-5). While I acknowledge that this approach is generally far from capturing the full dimension of democracy since it does not include government effectiveness, minority rights, institutional checks, and balances - indicators that are used to measure liberal democracy - I believe that when it comes to understanding consequences of political competition between

political parties – as is attempted through studying pernicious polarization - focusing on electoral processes and democratic institutions that directly affect the nature of this competition has the greatest potential to provide useful insights. Therefore, this chapter analyses two key components of electoral democracy – elections and political liberties. Additionally, since democratic reform of the judiciary system and the issue of restorative justice have become a source of the formative rift from which pernicious polarization between the UNM and GD emerged, I expect that perniciously polarized incumbent should seek to consolidate power not only by controlling election results and limiting political rights of the opposition but also by capturing the judiciary as it can serve as an efficient legal tool to intimidate opponents. This expectation is also supported by academic literature on the nature of autocratization, which contends that seizing the judiciary reduces the “political costs of subverting elections “for the undemocratic incumbent (Maerz et al. 2020, 917) and helps to “delegitimize dissenters “(Bajpai and Kureshi 2022, 1380).

Democratization, in its broad sense, is understood as “any change in the direction of more democracy, no matter how small “(Bogaards 2010, 476). Therefore, de-democratization can be measured as a distancing from democracy or a reversal of the democratization process. These changes can be measured either by categorizing transitions into different regime types (476) or by changes in the scores of established measures, such as Freedom House scores (477). Most of the academic literature on Georgia’s democratization focuses on Georgia’s transition or prospects for the transition from one regime type to another. For example, shortly before the Rose Revolution, Carothers (2002) argued that Georgia, which was considered to have made a successful transition from Communist heritage to electoral democracy due to some formalistic reforms, was, in fact, at risk of state failure (18). McFaul (2005) asserts that Georgia, along with Serbia and Ukraine, is one of the cases of “successful democratic breakthroughs² from

semi-authoritarian regimes because the peaceful revolutions were followed by democratic reforms (6). Mitchell (2012) describes Saakashvili's presidency as the "freest semi-authoritarian regime" in the post-Communist space and presents the upcoming 2012 elections as a potential source of democratization (103). Cecire (2013) views the 2012 parliamentary elections and a peaceful transfer of power as a positive sign for a genuine democratization of Georgia (233). Magyar and Madlovics (2020) note that Georgia transitioned from conservative autocracy to patronal democracy in 2012 (670), with measurements focusing on the degree of informality in the political system but otherwise similar to the concepts of competitive authoritarianism and electoral democracy (66). Since Georgia did not experience regime-type change and remained a "transitional or hybrid regime" (Freedom House 2022) during the period under study (2018-2023), my analysis relies on a qualitative assessment of de-democratization tendencies based on the changes in Freedom House scores for elections, political rights, and the rule of law.

5.3 Elections

Georgia's Freedom House score in electoral processes declined from 3.5 out of 7 in 2015 to 3.0 in 2021, showing that the quality of the elections was steadily deteriorating. OSCE's International Observation Mission for 2016 parliamentary elections reported that the elections were conducted in accordance with fundamental human rights and existing legal framework (OSCE 2017, 1). The election campaign was competitive and "largely calm" but both competitors dealt with each other in a "confrontational" manner (16) and there were allegations that the incumbent exerted pressure on public servants and misused administrative resources (12). Overall, the elections were free and fair, but the OSCE stressed that several legislative changes were needed to improve the legal framework, such as stricter norms against misuse of administrative funds and more transparent financing rules (32).

In the case of 2018 presidential elections, OSCE Observation Mission noted that overall, the elections were competitive and free (OSCE 2019, 1). However, the recommendations to improve the legal framework regarding campaign financing and the misuse of administrative resources were only partially addressed (3). The problem of the use of administrative resources and support of GD officials for the formally independent presidential candidate Salome Zurbishvili “blurred the line between the state and the party” (12). In addition, the GD, and to some extent the UNM, intimidated voters and collected their personal information (12). The tone of the campaign was also overwhelmingly negative, hostile, harsh, and polarized, leaving “almost no opportunity for election programs and issue-oriented debate“, which limited chances for voters “to make an informed choice“ (26).

According to the OSCE observation mission for 2020 parliamentary elections (2021), previous recommendations to improve campaign conduct, financing and election administration were only partially and incoherently considered (8) and for those recommendations that were considered, implementation efforts were superficial (3). Allegations of voter intimidation, vote-buying, and misuse of administrative resources by the ruling party was “pervasive“ and damaged public confidence in the outcome (2), which was later reflected in the decision of eight opposition parties to boycott the second round of elections. The tone of the campaign remained to be “confrontational“ and dominated with two-sided accusations (4). Cases of gerrymandering and unequal distribution of voters among constituencies were also reported (7). Opposition parties frequently complained of instances of intimidation of their supporters and staff by law enforcement agencies (17), but investigation of complaints was often delayed and inefficient (20). Overall, the elections were mostly free and competitive and consistent with basic human rights but, the fairness of its results was widely questioned because of the unjustifiable advantage of the ruling party over its opponents.

Local elections in Georgia are generally not as politicized as parliamentary and presidential elections. However, 2021 local elections had added significance because the Agreement reached with the mediation of Charles Michel stipulated that the GD would have held snap parliamentary elections if it had received less than 43 percent of the vote in the 2021 local elections. Although the GD withdrew from the agreement and, stating that it would depend on GD's "goodwill" whether they call snap elections (Appendix 1, source 13), the elections continued to be perceived as a "referendum"(15). These attitudes were also captured by OSCE's Observation Report (2022), which underlined that national issues were prioritized over local issues (2). The election was fiercely competitive between the GD and UNM, exacerbated by the detention of Saakashvili shortly before election day (2). Election campaigning and voting were marked with "widespread and consistent" allegations of vote-buying, voter intimidation, misuse of administrative resources, voters' "fear of retribution" for their electoral choices and excessive imbalance of financial resources in favor of the incumbent (3). The "deep polarization" following the 2020 parliamentary election was cited as one of the main drivers of the campaign. Thus, although the elections were competitive and in essence representative of voters' choices, the electoral process was unfairly dominated by the incumbent.

To conclude, the trend from 2016 parliamentary elections to the 2021 local elections demonstrates that the quality of elections is steadily deteriorating, as incumbent increasingly employed vote buying, voter intimidation and misuse of state resources to secure the victory.

5.4 Political Rights

After the peaceful transfer of power in 2013, opposition political parties and their supporters had a broader scope of freedom to participate in politics. Freedom House (2017) notes that Georgians can form political parties and run for political office "with little interference. "However, the actual potential of opposition political parties to influence political processes is

somewhat limited, as the billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, although formally retired from politics, still exerted his informal influence on his party's members (Freedom House 2017). This perception solidified after Ivanishvili returned to the party leadership in 2018 for a limited time (Freedom House 2019). Moreover, the legal framework has not been favorable to small parties, which hindered the development of political pluralism in the country (2017).

Political freedom was significantly impaired in 2019 after the GD violently dispersed peaceful demonstrations in Tbilisi held to protest the appearance of the Russian politician in the Georgian parliament, failed to implement the publicly promised fully proportional electoral system, and filed criminal charges against one of the opposition politicians shortly after he announced a formation of a new opposition party (Freedom House 2020). After the opposition boycotted the results of parliamentary elections in 2020, the GD enforced novel restrictive legislative changes against the boycotting MPs, used excessive force to crackdown opposition protests, jailed UNM leader Nika Melia amid a political crisis, and intimidated former Prime Minister Gakharia's newly formed political party, "For Georgia" (Freedom House 2022). The imprisonment of former president Mikheil Saakashvili shortly before Election Day further limited the ability of the opposition to run freely and equally against the incumbent (Freedom House 2022). The detention of Nika Gvaramia, the executive director of the UNM-affiliated television station, whose release has been repeatedly called for by Reporters Without Borders, has further curtailed political liberties (RSF 2022). The recent attempt to enact a "Foreign Agents Law" against civil society organizations receiving funds from abroad, described as "incompatible" with human rights and freedom of expression standards by Human Rights Watch (2023), further demonstrates the steady deterioration of Georgia's political freedom record.

To sum up, the government adopted a liberal stance toward opposition groups and critical civil society groups in its first years in office, but it became increasingly harsh, hostile, and

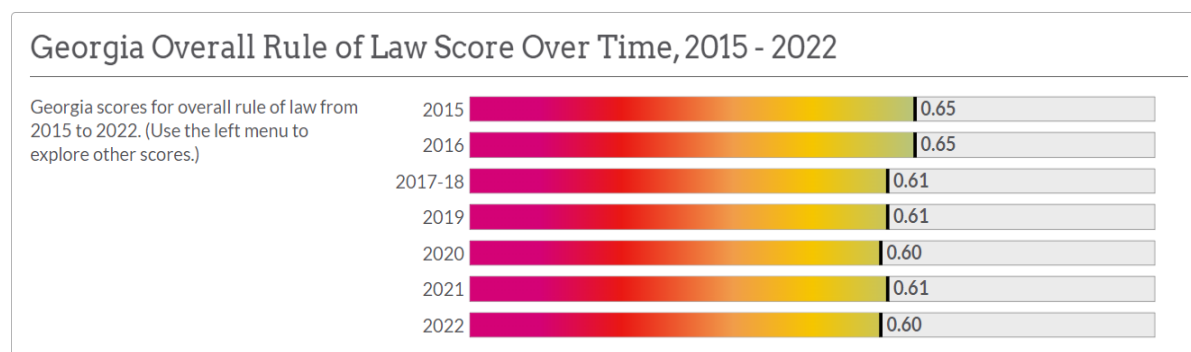
restrictive, using excessive police force, political persecution, and legal manipulations to curtail political freedom of opposition groups, especially the UNM. This steady deterioration of political rights is reflected in the decline of Freedom House's political rights overall score from 27 in 2017 to 22 in 2022.

5.5 Rule of Law

As noted above, the establishment of an independent and impartial judiciary was a key endeavor for the Georgian Dream to undertake following its victory in the 2012 parliamentary elections, with a view to ensuring the country's proper democratic development, as the courts were subjected to political pressure during Saakashvili's tenure and local NGOs frequently alleged the existence of political prisoners (Freedom House 2010, 227). Prospects for transformative judicial reform began to wither as early as 2013 when the GD government began to selectively press criminal charges against former UNM officials (Freedom House 2013, 2). Although some improvements have been made in subsequent years, most have been administrative in nature and have not solved the issue of politicized judiciary: Freedom House (2017) notes that "interference in the judiciary remains a substantial problem," most notably manifested in the Supreme Court's decision to transfer ownership of the UNM affiliated TV channel Rustavi 2 to its former owner, who was close to the GD. The appointments of the allies in the High Council of Justice and the Supreme Court were described as "opaque" and raised questions about the impartiality and qualifications of the appointees (Freedom House 2020). In April 2023, the US State Department imposed individual sanctions on three senior judicial officials for their involvement in "significant corruption related to their current and former judicial positions, "which "undermined "the rule of law and democratic processes in Georgia"(US Embassy Tbilisi 2023). The given graph visualizes that the promise of the rule of law and independent

judiciary was gradually abandoned over the years, resulting in the instrumentalization and capture of the judiciary by the incumbent.

Figure 3. The downward trend in the impartiality and independence in judiciary (World Justice Project)



5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has shown that Georgia saw positive developments in key measures of electoral democracy – elections and political freedoms – and some administrative improvements in the judiciary after the GD took over the legislative and executive branches in 2012. However, over the years, elections gradually became unfair to opposition parties, and the GD increasingly restricted the political rights of the opposition, especially in 2019-2022. With regard to the rule of law and judiciary, the courts became further politicized and instrumentalized for intimidating political opponents after the momentum of transformative democratic reforms had disappeared in 2013. As a result, the democratization process in Georgia stalled or reversed, as evidenced by the decline in the Freedom House score for freedom in the world from 64 in 2018 to 58 in 2022.

Chapter 6. Discussion: Causal Link between Pernicious Polarization and Democratic Decline

6.1 Introduction

The previous two chapters established that Georgia had experienced pernicious political polarization since 2018, alongside a gradual decline in key elements of democratic development: free and fair elections, political freedom, and the rule of law. These findings suggest that, like the majority of the countries that have experienced severe political polarization, Georgia has witnessed a deterioration in democratic quality (McCoy and Press, 2022). The following chapter aims to establish a causal relationship between the already demonstrated pernicious polarization (cause) and the democratic decline (effect) by using McCoy and Somer's theoretical considerations about the underlying logic.

6.2 Causal Logic of Pernicious Polarization

Before testing a causal mechanism, several notions about establishing causality should be addressed. First, one should bear in mind that studying causal mechanisms requires tracing a micro-level development of the process at the within-case level of analysis in light of the theorized expectations – an endeavor primarily taken through the method of process tracing (Collier 2011, 823). While this research does not use process tracing as a method for “mechanism-centered explanation” (Gerring 2010, 1500), as it does not incorporate rival explanations, counter-factual outcomes, or different test strengths through which evidence is categorized (Ricks and Liu 2018, 842-845), it still relies on the main principles of studying causal mechanisms employed in process tracing research. Second, as Gerring (2010) notes, studying causal mechanisms is always associated with “some degree of uncertainty” (1508), aggravated by various challenges such as omitted factors, the complexity of the relationship

that involves multiple conditions difficult to set apart, and different, even opposite to theorized, interrelationships between cause and effect (1511). For this reason, the establishment of causal inference can rarely have definitive nature; however, once the homogenous covariational relationship is established, following the “more permissive understanding of the causal mechanism, “as recommended by Beach and Pedersen (2019, 50), allows to make an inference about the existence of causal mechanism if “it transfers some form of causal forces “from the cause to the outcome (50). Also, traced causal mechanism does not have to be neither necessary or sufficient pathway of the causal relationship between X and Y (Beach and Pedersen 2019, 50)

Since it has already been established that Georgia exhibits causal homogeneity (experiences both pernicious polarization and democratic decline similar to tested cases), a more context-nuanced yet theory-driven causal mechanism can be unpacked. According to Somer and McCoy (2019), there are three different causal pathways of pernicious polarization that lead to three different outcomes for democracy: 1) gridlock and careening; 2) democratic erosion or collapse under new elites; 3) democratic erosion or collapse with the return of old elites; 4) democratic reform – the latter possible only in few cases such as South Africa during Mandela’s presidency (17-18).

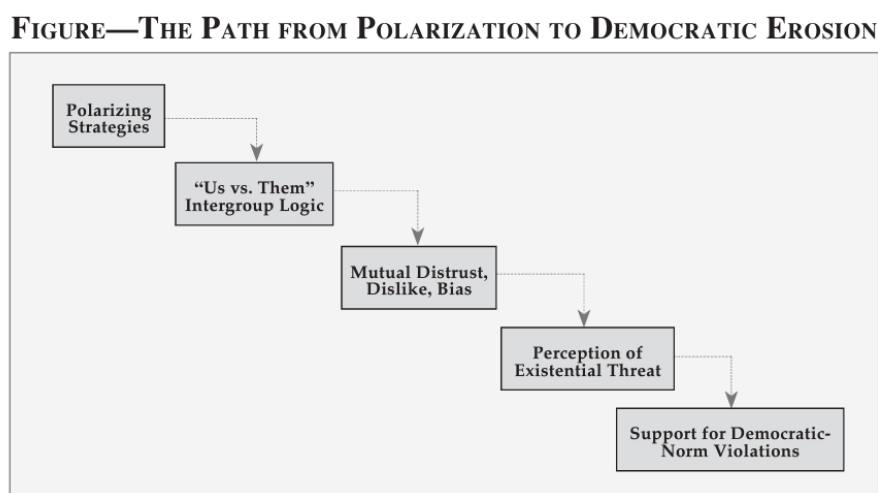
As discussed in the third chapter, pernicious polarization begins when one of the political actors, primarily the incumbent, sees the pursuit of a polarizing strategy as electorally advantageous. The polarizing strategy manifests itself in employing hostile rhetoric towards opponents and in opting for irreconcilable policy decisions. It is generally based on manipulating and artificially instigating pre-existing socio-political differences and/or unresolved formative rifts.

Crucial to the destructive consequences for democracy is whether the opposition responds with the same polarizing move. If opposition exhibits depolarizing and constructive behavior, the causal path to democratic decline might be halted in the beginning. However, when faced with antagonistic treatment by the opponent, the opposition is naturally tempted to respond with similar behavior, as a polarizing strategy has an electoral utility to repel the incumbent's attack and to delineate partisan differences. Therefore, a further step through which the causal pathway toward democratic erosion proceeds is a polarizing response from the opposition, which enables to start building "Us versus Them" group division.

After the second step takes place, both sides communicate primarily through polarizing means and feed antagonism, distrust, and incivility against each other. One should note here, however, that while the first and second steps might happen quickly, the third step is generally more gradual and stretched in time, as it builds up through a repetitive polarizing interaction. Following this, as a next step, full-fledged exclusionary blocs emerge that perceive each other as existential enemies. Because of the emergence of the "Us versus Them" group identities and perception of the opponent as an existential enemy, both actors, who might not necessarily have authoritarian intentions in the beginning, start practicing undemocratic behavior. The reason behind this transformation is that once ordinary political opponents become existential enemies, political actors perceive democratic politics as a zero-sum game in which the logic of the "winner takes it all" prevails. In such a scenario, electoral defeat or a setback in a symbolic power struggle is perceived not just as a temporary misfortune but as a crushing devastation that threatens ontological and physical security. Similarly, the winner does not just accept political victory and offers noble and conciliatory treatment to the defeated opponent but takes full advantage of the triumph and seeks to completely subjugate the rival. Therefore, amid pernicious polarization, the normal democratic competition turns into an existential battle with

overwhelmingly far-reaching consequences for both sides. When so much is at stake in the political struggle, political actors are willing to use all their options, including non-democratic political strategies, to maintain their power. The incumbent, who has the upper hand as they have all the executive and legislative mechanisms, and sometimes even the links to the judiciary, is tempted to abuse its powers against the opponent because they are enemies with whom peaceful political coexistence is impossible. Another incentive for abusing political institutions against the opposition is the polarizing rhetoric itself employed by the incumbent as they feel confident that the demarcation of lines with the opposition, demonizing and delegitimizing strategies against them is convincing enough for the electorate to tolerate the incumbent's undemocratic turn. Under these circumstances, the incumbent confidently assaults democratic institutions to make sure that the opposition is weak enough not to challenge his power.

Figure 4. Causal pathway through which pernicious polarization harms democratic institutions (Mccoy and Somer 2021b, 11).



According to this figure, after political actors employ polarizing strategies, they build exclusionary “us-versus-them” identities, which then feed into increased positive bias against

one's own group and negative bias against the other group, elevating into the perception of each other as existential enemies. Since this enmity and antagonism are mutual, political actors find it justifiable to opt for non-democratic political measures against their opponents, as existential enemies deserve to be treated more harshly than normal democratic opponents.

While this causal mechanism is highly abstract as it is developed as part of macro-level theory building, it is expected that a similar sequence, although possibly with some minor contextual changes, will be found in the microlevel analysis of the Georgian case.

6.3 Causal Mechanism of Pernicious Polarization in Georgia

Out of the three above-mentioned possible pathways, Georgia represents a case of democratic erosion under new political elites, and the development of the causal mechanism is fully consistent with the logic outlined in the previous subsection.

As Chapter 4 showed, although the UNM reluctantly accepted the election results and relinquished control over political institutions after the GD's victory in the 2012 parliamentary elections, UNM distrusted the GD's political agency and sought Ivanishvili's ties to Russia, while Ivanishvili dismissed Saakashvili's political legacy as wholly authoritarian and destructive to the country. However, in the first five years, these profound differences remained within the boundaries of normal political competition, as GD's domination over the political spectrum was unquestioned. The UNM, which was a rare case of the former incumbent surviving as an opposition party, was still too weak to challenge GD's position of power and focused its energies on bringing GD's mistakes and policy failures to light through legislative proceedings and occasional peaceful demonstrations. Therefore, in 2013-2018, the relationship between the GD and UNM, while confrontational, remained within the normal bounds of

democratic competition and did not resemble the exclusionary “Us versus Them” group identities characterized by pernicious polarization.

The picture changed significantly during the 2018 presidential elections when it almost lost its dominance after Salome Zurbishvili had to run in the second round against the UNM candidate. To help its candidate win the election, the GD pursued a deliberately polarizing strategy to distinguish itself from the UNM: The polarizing rhetoric described the UNM as a completely destructive, authoritarian, wicked force, while the GD was portrayed as a completely democratic, progressive, and benevolent actor that could have saved Georgia from the UNM’s possible violent takeover of democratic institutions. This polarized rhetoric was consistent with the GD’s increased use of electoral manipulation, as shown in Chapter 5. As expected by theory, political polarization sets in as one of the political actors found it politically advantageous and exploited pre-existing grievances, as GD did over the UNM’s authoritarian legacy.

The UNM, which came closer than ever to winning the election in 2018, responded to the GD’s accusations of authoritarian tendencies and of provoking Russia into the raging war against Georgia by uncompromisingly questioning the GD’s democratic aspirations and accusing it of complicity with Russia. The UNM’s polarizing strategy intensified after Zurbishvili finally won the elections, as the UNM saw her victory as undeserved due to GD’s engagement in election manipulation and intimidation. Thus, the GD’s polarizing strategy was countered with a similar polarizing strategy by the UNM, and the actors subsequently began building “Us vs. Them” identity blocs across party lines, matching the second causal step. Distrust, accusations, and harsh interactions characterized GD-UNM relations in 2019-2020, during which the GD occasionally used excessive force to break up peaceful protests and pressed charges against the

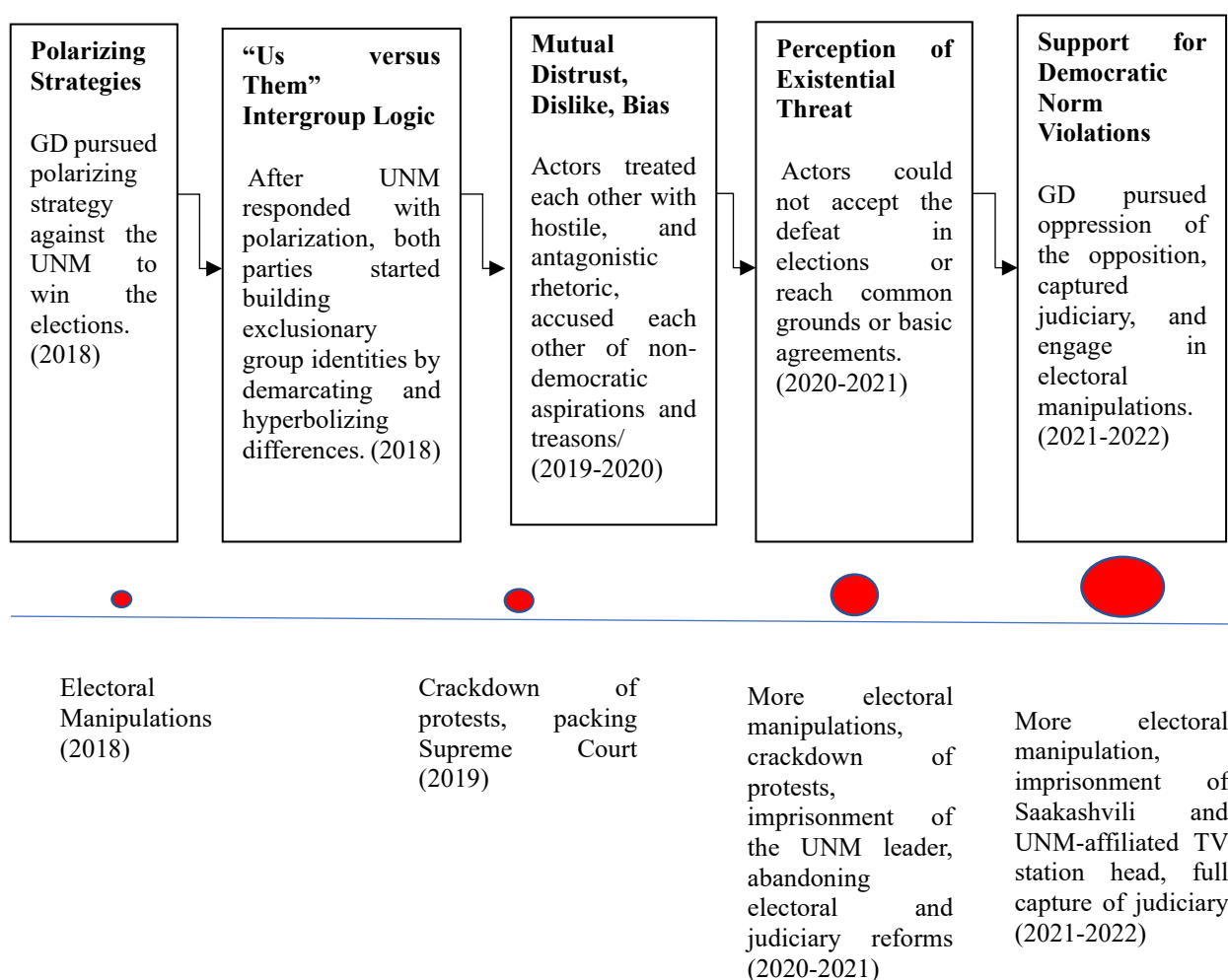
opposition leaders. Thus, both sides engaged in fueling distrust, accusations, and biases against each other over the course of 2019-2020.

The establishment of exclusionary group identities elevated in the perception of each other as existential enemies prior to the 2020 parliamentary elections, when GD used an even greater degree of electoral violence and intimidation of the opposition combined with the vilification of the UNM as an undemocratic, radical, and destructive force more consistently. Although the 2020 parliamentary elections were still representative of the overall choice of the electorate, the polarized opposition, who also saw the opponent as an existential enemy, was unwilling to accept the election results and refused to enter parliament. The polarized GD was also unwilling to compromise and responded to the boycott with repression: It raided the UNM headquarters, imprisoned its chairman Nika Melia, and introduced legislative changes that restricted the rights of boycotting MPs. This move demonstrated that the perception of the opposition as an existential enemy pushed GD to employ undemocratic norms of behavior. The imprisonment of Saakashvili prior to Election Day and crystalizing the influence over the judiciary through hasty and undemocratic reforms further provide evidence of GD's increasing authoritarian tendencies, which are built on the perception of the opponent as political enemies.

While the UNM, as an opposition party, through its refusal to compromise after the 2020 parliamentary elections and consistent use of antagonistic rhetoric and delegitimization of the incumbent as the "Russian Dream," contributed to the formation of existential enmity between the exclusionary blocs, the GD, through its multifaceted strategies of defaming the UNM as a public threat to the country and using this polarizing discourse as the main source of justification for its repressive treatment of the opposition, was a main driver of pernicious polarization detrimental for democracy. Moreover, the polarizing discourse not only served as a rhetorical justification but also reinforced the government's own identity vis-à-vis the UNM,

as the fear of a UNM comeback contributed to the government's transformation into an authoritarian actor, leading it to gradually abandon the democratic commitments and become more reluctant to share power. The fertilization of pernicious polarization, therefore, led the GD to pursue non-democratic norms of behavior, as evidenced by the capture of the judiciary, the restriction of the opposition's political rights, and the manipulation of elections.

Figure 5. Juxtaposition of the theorized causal mechanisms above the traced causal mechanism in case of Georgia, red line specifying the GD's increased assault on democratic institutions (own compilation)



This visualization demonstrates that the logic of causal mechanism theorized by McCoy and Somer has been repeated in the case of Georgia: establishment of the exclusionary identity and consequential perception of political opponents in “Us versus Them” lenses push the incumbent to the undemocratic treatment of the opposition and assaulting democratic institutions. Micro-level contextualization, however, shows that the causal pathway is not as linear as it is theorized on a macro level: Although political polarization precedes in time and triggers motivations for undemocratic behavior, intensification of polarization and erosion of democratic institutions reinforce each other: incumbent exhibits undemocratic tendencies over time along with becoming more polarized. Therefore, once exclusionary identities and existential enmity start to come about, signs of undemocratic tendencies also emerge.

These findings reflect the complexity of political polarization and democratic backsliding as both shapes gradually, and once polarization reaches pernicious nature, they start to feed each other. An analytical examination of political sequences in light of the theorized mechanism, however, proved that the theorized causal logic has homogenously unfolded in the case of Georgia.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter has explained a causal mechanism between pernicious polarization and democratic erosion and, in line with theoretical expectations, found that the main logic driving the process is the mutual perception of opponents as existential enemies, i.e., the pernicious polarization that leads political actors to commit democratic transgressions for the sake of retaining power.

When analyzing the causal relationship between pernicious polarization and democratic decline, one should note that although the emergence of political polarization precedes democratic decline, as it serves as the main incentive for political actors to evade democratic

obligations to defeat the political enemy, the actual political processes with their complexity do not always follow the deterministic and consistent nature as described in social science research, since both the emergence of pernicious polarization and the decline of democracy are gradual processes and their chronological developments often reinforce each other. For this reason, sometimes the causal mechanism might not be perfectly linear as expected; however, the evidence for the main causal logic behind this relationship, which is the formation of antagonistic group identities that transcend the boundaries of normal democratic competition and push actors to erode democracies – is confidently established in the case of Georgia.

Conclusion

This research examined the causal relationship between political polarization and democratic decline. Particularly, the thesis tested a theory of pernicious polarization proposed by McCoy and Somer (2019) in a previously unexamined case in Georgia. According to this theory, political polarization becomes pernicious to democratic institutions when political actors begin to use it as a political strategy against the opponent and build exclusionary group identities that fuel antagonism, political intolerance, and undemocratic treatment of opponents who are portrayed as existential enemies. This enmity causes democratic backsliding in established democracies and a reversal in the democratization of transitional regimes like Georgia. The research first established that Georgia had experienced pernicious polarization and de-democratization and then applied the theorized causal mechanism to understand how pernicious polarization leads to democratic erosion. Findings showed that while the Georgian case exhibits the underlying logic of theorized causal mechanism, an actual pathway is not always straightforward as undemocratic norms of behavior often show up not necessarily consequently but along with an intensification of the political polarization. However, in essence, the

emergence of pernicious polarization sequentially precedes and incentivizes the full-fledged undemocratic behavior of the incumbent, resulting in democratic erosion.

The in-depth study of the Georgian case has shown that the Georgian incumbent initiated political polarization as an electoral strategy to defeat its opponent in 2018. However, as the latter responded with reciprocal polarization, the polarized strategies became internalized in the long-term political processes, which manifested itself in the vicious circulation of the demonization, delegitimization, and irreconcilable and uncooperative treatment of the other, transformed political adversaries into retaliating existential enemies and established a fertile ground for trespassing democratic norms of behavior. While the opposition contributed to the creation of pernicious polarization, the incumbent had the leading role in using polarization both as a legitimation tool and political strategy to suppress the opposition and capture the judiciary. Also, as the incumbent began to perceive the opposition as an existential enemy, it also became more willing to hold on to power by foregoing democratic reforms and using illegitimate methods to win elections.

By tracing the evolution of political polarization and its consequences on democracy in Georgia, the research showed that political polarization played a potent role in reversing democratizing processes. Severe political polarization motivated the Georgian Dream to consolidate power and not undertake democratic reforms. Moreover, it showed that the peaceful transition of power in 2012 without reconciliatory and democratic commitments of both parties was not sufficient for sustained democratic development.

By successfully testing a theory of pernicious polarization, the research contributed to strengthening its validity and generated novel insights into the relationship between political polarization and democratic erosion. First, the Georgian case showed that political polarization

is not a structural but an agent-driven phenomenon. While the GD and the UNM had represented different political visions since the very beginning, severe political polarization started to emerge after both sides refused to engage in constructive political relationships and hyperbolized their partisan differences. This finding indicates that overcoming political polarization requires a mutual willingness from political actors to reconcile. Second, while conventional thinking about political polarization expects that polarization emerges on the actual socioeconomic cleavages or substantial differences in political ideologies, the Georgian case demonstrates that this is not a necessary condition – poles of antagonism can be aligned solely with the group identities without having a real discussion about policy preferences. Even more, a lack of ideological commitments and issue-oriented thinking gives both parties a further incentive to fuel polarization to establish their political identity vis-à-vis the opponent. This finding shows that in young democracies with less institutionalized parties and insufficient political culture, political actors have more incentive to initiate political polarization; therefore, polarization is highly likely to emerge in transitional regimes. Third, while political polarization fuels democratic erosion, polarization can itself be emerged as a consequence of an undemocratic or insufficiently democratic system: GD built its polarizing strategy on the constant revitalization of the UNM's authoritarian legacy, and UNM did not attempt to reconcile with GD as it had been subjected to criminal persecution in the first years of GD's term. Therefore, both parties had a justification for their polarizing behavior grounded in the undemocratic decisions of the other side. This observation proves the argument that political polarization and democratic erosion have a somewhat cyclic relationship, as resentments over the lack of democracy fuel polarization, which, in turn, reinforces the subversion of democracy. Lastly, following the political development of the Georgian case showed that severe political polarization has the potential to take over the macropolitical political spectrum: it transcends most of the political processes and is internalized in the normal behavior pattern of political

actors. Therefore, it is highly likely that sustained political polarization can fuel major democratic transgressions or even physical violence between the opponents, especially if the incumbent is not constrained by weak political institutions.

Since Georgia represents a typical case for pernicious polarization, it is expected that in countries where minimal democratic competition and political rights are protected but liberal democratic institutions are not fully established, that is, electoral democracies and transitional hybrid regimes, political polarization with detrimental effects for the existing democratic settings are highly likely to emerge. Moreover, a political system, which encourages majoritarian and winner-take-all politics, can serve as a contributing factor. If polarizing actors start to manipulate macropolitical issues and national-level controversies, similar to the issue of restoring justice in Georgia in 2012, it is more likely that political polarization will be maintained over a long period of time.

While this research focused primarily on the behavior of political parties, which was justified by the theoretical premise that political parties are the main drivers of political polarization, to get a complete picture of social and political consequences of pernicious polarization, voter attitudes, public opinion, and media environment should also be examined. Testing whether voters have similarly antagonistic perceptions of opponents as their representatives will generate particularly new insights into whether pernicious polarization is a characteristic of elite power struggles, or it is a social phenomenon. Given that both parties have maintained stable electoral support over the years, it is reasonable to assume that voters, at least tacitly, tolerate antagonistic and undemocratic politics; however, more accurate and insightful results can be potentially obtained by conducting focus groups or survey studies.

Similar to the most research that attempts to analyze causal mechanisms, the major limitation of this thesis is the uncertainty as to whether the cause actually produces the outcome through the tested mechanism, especially when both polarization and democratic backsliding are multi-layered, gradual phenomena that develop over a long period of time. However, this research does not argue that the theorized causal pathway is the only way through which polarization and democratic erosion interacts. Rather, it is one of the possible explanations for the relationship. The logic behind the examined causal mechanism is empirically supported and homogenous to the other tested cases, which makes it a convincing and valid claim. Therefore, one can live with the inevitable, yet reasonable uncertainty.

As an ending note, I am tempted to make recommendations for overcoming pernicious polarization and putting an end to its detrimental effects on democracies, as McCoy and Somer (2021b) attempt to do, but consistent with the findings of this work, which has shown more than anything that political polarization is driven by political actors and has the potential to transform their democratic commitments into authoritarian ones, I am urged to bear the weight of pessimism and consciously refrain from this well-intentioned yet unpromising endeavor.

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Annexes

Annex I. Quotes from Georgian Dream used in the main body

#	Quotes	Author	Date	Source	Type of Data
1	<p>“The “Rose Revolution“ of 2003, despite its initial successes, failed to live up to the expectations of most of the society.“</p> <p>“The reforms, which the government constantly talks about, have long taken on the character of a cynical experiment on the people. “</p>	Bidzina Ivanishvili	2011	https://shorturl.at/vwMT3	Speech
2	“Democracy during these nine years was illusory and talking about the achievements of democracy in our country only served to blind the West. “	Bidzina Ivanishvili	2013	https://shorturl.at/glwCJ	Open letter
3	<p>They remain in the ideology of lies.</p> <p>“The whole world knows that without Saakashvili's immature actions, Russia could not have committed those terrible actions. If it were not for the provocation that Saakashvili and his team, we would not have received the occupied territories. This war and calamity would not have happened if they had a little intelligence and patience. “</p>	Bidzina Ivanishvili	2013	https://shorturl.at/qzEO0	TV Interview
4	“Restoring justice means holding the representatives of the previous government accountable for the crimes committed in full compliance with all due legal procedures, but it also means that we must retain the thousands of dedicated public servants who served under the previous government. “	Bidzina Ivanishvili	2013	https://shorturl.at/AHUX2	Speech
5.	“For me, Saakashvili, his government and his leaders are represented by this masked man who rapes people in these videos - this is their symbol, of this organization. “	Irakli Garibashvili	2015	https://tinyurl.com/45j5u4kp	Speech

6.	“Following the provocation and starting a massive bombardment on your territory, your population, what is this called - recklessness, the whim of a crazy president, or something strange and incomprehensible deal with our age-old enemy? “	Salome Zourabichvili	2018	https://shorturl.at/mBR3	Speech
7	“On October 28, there are two sides of the scale: deception and truth, aggression dictated by the desire to disguise one's own crimes and dignity strengthened by a clean past, irresponsibility towards the country and love for the homeland, the desire to return to the troubled past and development for a better future, “National Movement“ and “Georgian Dream “, “National Movement“ and Mrs. Salome Zourabichvili. “	Irakli Kobakhidze	2018	https://bit.ly/3Itwb6W	Press Release
8	“Georgian Dream “is responsible to our population that the National Movement will never return to power and will never again pose a threat to the peaceful development of our country, Georgian democracy, Georgian society, Georgian media and most importantly, the territorial integrity of Georgia.“	Georgian Dream	2018	https://bit.ly/3pYRfMs	Press Release
9	“We are sure that in the second round, when two poles have been clearly defined, when a choice has to be made between lies and truth, violence and freedom, maximum concentration will take place and together we will surely win the presidential elections and most importantly, together we will surely overcome all challenges.“	Kakha Kaladze	2018	https://bit.ly/3IsTvSj	Press Release
10	“Today's election was not only a presidential election. It was a kind of referendum where the voters once again gave a clear and loud rejection to lies, hatred and violence and supported the political power for which the human being is the highest value and the protection of his dignity is the main priority“	Georgian Dream	2018		Press Release
11	“We will always remember the sick thirst to distort the Georgian traditional way of life, erase our cultural identity and rewrite	Bidzina Ivanishvili	2020	https://bit.ly/3BILTrm	Speech

	the history of Georgia, the furious attack on the phenomenon of the family, one of the pillars of Georgian statehood, the constant attempts to harass and destroy the Orthodox Church of Georgia.“				
12	“Today's radical opposition had been rigging elections for 9 years and even earlier. It is categorically unacceptable for us to be in a defensive position with these people and make excuses about not falsifying the elections. Their propaganda talks about so-called voter bribery and the use of administrative resources without evidence or arguments. That is why the radical opposition has so far avoided all our offers regarding the verification of the election results and the debate on this topic.“	Irakli Kobakhidze	2020	https://bit.ly/3MK4iKk	Press Release
13	“It is unfortunate that the radical opposition did not sign the April 19 agreement within 100 days, thereby undermining the document's goal of reducing political polarization and promoting healthy political competition and cooperation between political parties. However, as they say, some plagues are beneficial. With the annulment of the April 19 agreement, the country has returned to the constitutional framework and political processes will continue in accordance with the constitutional order in force in Georgia “	Georgian Dream	2021	https://tinyurl.com/2edhx2vr	Press Release
14	“Saakashvili has been in a privileged position throughout his custody, not to mention any improper conditions. He unlike other prisoners who may have more severe health conditions, is not in a penitentiary, but in a medical facility. The only thing you actually want Saakashvili's freedom for is your last hope to create the chaos in the country.“	Irakli Kobakhidze	2022	https://tinyurl.com/bdfkpz6u	Parliamentary Session
15	“Prisoner Saakashvili and his family are responsible for the self-inflicted injuries, who brought the food with inappropriate calories to the prisoner.“	Irakli Kobakhidze	2022	https://tinyurl.com/264b7tkb	Speech

16	„Nobody cares about Saakashvili at all. Their only interest is to change the government and open a second front.“	Irakli Kobakhidze	2022	https://tinyurl.com/2p9v6293	TV interview
17	“If the plan outlined by them at the famous Bakuriani meeting had been implemented, there would have been a coup d'état in June of last year, and we declare with full responsibility - today Russian tanks were stationed in Tbilisi. They would lead Russian tanks into Georgia in exactly the same way as they did in August 2008.“	Irakli Kobakhidze	2023	https://tinyurl.com/mwc4eae	Speech
18	“The goal of the radical opposition is not to receive the status of a candidate, war in the country, our goal is economic development, stability and peace.“	GD	2023	https://tinyurl.com/dr3bwv2c	Speech

Annex II. Quotes from United National Movement used in the main body

#	Quote	Author	Date	Source	Type of Data
1	“We are the Switzerland of this region with elements of Singapore.“	Mikheil Saakashvili	2010	https://shorturl.at/wRY45	Speech
2	“Prime Minister Ivanishvili and I - we are from different planets. We represent two different versions of Georgia. And I claim that he represents the Georgia of the past, and I represent the Georgia of the future together with you.“	Mikheil Saakashvili	2013	https://shorturl.at/kmsGL	Speech
3	“The ground must be burning under the feet of this woman, she is a clear traitor. The messages voiced by this woman are what will make it easier for Russia to legalize the seizure of Georgian territories. This is a classic betrayal of Georgia. A classic scheme of the enemy and all Georgian patriots, regardless of political views, I call on all Georgian patriots, regardless of political views, not to allow this woman to even campaign	Mikheil Saakashvili	2018	https://shorturl.at/AJLQ8	Statement

	freely in Georgia, not to mention electing her as a president.”				
4	“After the stolen, rigged elections, the authorities restricted the constitutional rights of Georgian citizens, including freedom of movement, freedom of speech and freedom of assembly.”	Grigol Vashadze	2018	https://shorturl.at/drENU	Speech
5	<p>“I am the creator of Georgian statehood. Let's put other politicians aside.”</p> <p>“Oligarch Ivanishvili is waging a war against his own people. Every day their presence in power is a mortal danger. “</p> <p>“I am Orthodox Christian. I built 600 churches. Ivanishvili despises the church.”</p> <p>“I will return and I and the Georgian people will defeat Ivanishvili. The enemy will not let us wait until 2020. Events are accelerating by themselves. Georgia is full of Russian garbage.”</p>	Mikheil Saakashvili	2019	https://tinyurl.com/5byyz2w6	TV Interview
6	<p>“Nobody respects Georgia today. During my time, Georgia was declared as Switzerland and Singapore. Now it is declared as Sachkhere and Tchorvila.”⁵</p> <p>“The choice between me and Ivanishvili is clear: Ivanishvili is not a patriot. He is a classic carrier of colonial politics. And my ideology is the ideology of David the Builder.”⁶</p> <p>“The issue concerns the presence or absence of Georgia. The point is that Georgia can disappear from the map, because this is Ivanishvili's announced program of genocide against the Georgian people “</p>	Mikheil Saakashvili	2020	https://tinyurl.com/ycy3ma4s	TV interview

⁵ Tchorvila is a village in small town of Sachkhere, which is Ivanishvili's birthplace.

⁶ David IV the Builder is considered as one of the biggest Georgian kings.

7	<p>“Georgia has no government; it is completely illegitimate. I do not recognize for a second its legality, nor the legality of the situation that exists in Georgia now. We were an exemplary country, and now Ivanishvili has cut us off forever, at least while he is there. My fight will be very decisive. Someone likes it, someone doesn't like it, someone wants me to be on the front line or not, I will be on the front line, and I promise you that I will be with you, hand in hand, in October on the front of defeating Ivanishvili and on the front of saving Georgia. This lawlessness and illegitimacy must end. Do not treat them as if they were ordinary politicians. These are a group of bandits, they are the enemies of Georgia, who are controlled by Russia, fulfilling direct assignment from Putin to destroy Georgia.”</p>	Mikheil Saakashvili	2020	https://tinyurl.com/4f9nvuw6	Speech
8	<p>“The oligarch is stealing our country, robbing our future, and doing all this in front of our eyes. We declare Ivanishvili's regime as an illegitimate government. We say no to fraudulent elections. We reject the results written by him. Ivanishvili, you are a usurper. and usurpers must leave. All the ways for retreat are blocked.”</p>	Nika Melia	2020	https://tinyurl.com/5ap3y69m	Speech
9	<p>“It was very important that now practically no one entered the parliament. It is even more important that the person who illegally entered the parliament and stole the will of the Georgian people and the elections be removed from there on time, and that Georgia has a legitimate government, a legitimate parliament, and that Georgia continues to develop and solve the worst crisis that is now in our country!”</p>	Mikheil Saakashvili	2020	https://tinyurl.com/5y6svjr4	Facebook post
10	<p>“I didn't obey to illegality because I didn't turn a blind eye to injustice so that later someone or I would have to pay a</p>	Nika Melia	2021	https://tinyurl.com/vdfe38u3	Facebook post

	<p>ransom for my freedom?! This is unacceptable to me!</p> <p>First, I was imprisoned and then they started trading my freedom. What will be the result of the “freedom “ obtained in this way - pardoned violent officials and policemen.</p> <p>And in the background that the necessary political goal for the country is unattainable and there is no real way to overcome the crisis.I cannot and will not enter this deal! This is my firm position. “</p>				
11	<p>“We may not have liked the agreement of April 19, and we never hid it. And why did we not like it? Because we did not believe. We did not believe that oligarch Ivanishvili would implement any serious reforms, we did not like the unjust amnesty law, etc. We, the National Movement, sign an agreement so that the dream of the Georgian dream does not come true and Western partners do not distance themselves from the Georgian people because of this unreliable government, which will ultimately only harm the country.“</p>	Nika Melia	2021	https://tinyurl.com/4udea4ds	Speech
12	<p>“You cannot imagine what happiness after 8 years, to see all this.“</p>	Mikheil Saakashvili	2021	https://tinyurl.com/y6k77e65	Speech
13	<p>“Elections in the country have been annihilated, the fight will be uncompromised.“</p>	Nika Melia	2021	https://tinyurl.com/3mysmayr	Speech
14	<p>“The only solution is to transfer Saakashvili abroad for treatment. We have entered the culminating phase, when the judge must decide whether to give Mikheil Saakashvili life or the death sentence.“</p>	Nika Melia	2022	https://tinyurl.com/6y6z2v7s	Speech
15	<p>“The pro-Russian government is killing the country's third president in custody.“</p>	UNM	2022	https://tinyurl.com/yjfe ws9v	Speech

16	“It is unthinkable that while the US openly talks about the clannish, corrupt judicial system, that Putin's personal prisoner President Saakashvili, tried by this system, continues to be in such torture.“	Levan Khabeishvili	2023	https://tinyurl.com/3md8jj4u	Speech
17	“Mikheil Saakashvili was awarded the prize of Norwegian politician Shur Linderbreke — the award was symbolically received by the family members of the third president. This award proves that President Saakashvili is a personal prisoner of Putin and Ivanishvili.“	Levan Khabeishvili	2023	https://tinyurl.com/5axr2ndd	Speech
18	„Ivanishvili's “Russian Dream “ is trying to take away our future and European perspective, but they never succeed, because the guarantor of Georgia's freedom and independence is our people. Our goal is to turn Georgia into a developed, promising, European state.“	UNM	2023	https://tinyurl.com/yaffs4yr	Speech

Annex III. Exemplary coding of United National Movement statement

<p>A year has passed since Mikheil Saakashvili was held captive by a Russian oligarch. Why and why did the Russian dream capture Mikheil Saakashvili?</p> <p>Even the child knows that if they did not stop him for crossing the border. Neither for expensive costumes nor for buying a wreath to put on Kaczynski's grave. Nor for using the discretionary right of the president - pardon. Nor is he locked up in prison for mistakes or misdemeanours that happened during his time in power. He was arrested for the courage to create an independent state from Russia and for the courage to return to protect the Georgian people and protect this state, which Ivanishvili and his criminal gang have been destroying so diligently for ten years. The Russian Dream made him answer precisely because he, Mikheil Saakashvili, created a threat to the imperialist dream of Russians and the interests of Russia by creating a modern Georgian state.</p> <p>Punished for being the first to dare to stand up to Putin's hordes. For this he is punished by the people without homeland! Now it is clear to the whole world that Mikheil Saakashvili is a personal prisoner of Putin. Mikheil Saakashvili can be released from captivity in the only case - if we save this state from the hands of the Russian oligarch, that is, Russia. We must be courageous, we must not obey the circumstances, we must save the state from the oligarch - this is salvation of Mikheil Saakashvili too. The path to his freedom is the country's freedom and liberation from Russia and the Russian government.</p>	<p>GD as an agent of Russia, UNM – defender of Georgia.</p> <p>UNM – abides, GD – assaults democratic rules.</p> <p>UNM as a modernizer.</p> <p>UNM – good, GD – evil.</p>
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Appendix IV. Exemplary coding of Georgian Dream statement

<p>Today marks 11 years since the establishment of "Georgian Dream". On April 21, 2012, Mr. Bidzina Ivanishvili presented our political team to the public for the first time. This event became the beginning of the most important processes in Georgian political and public life.</p>	<p>GD – defender, UNM – traitor of Georgian national interests and values.</p>
<p>Let's remember that this was the most difficult period in the recent history of Georgia. The anti-national, anti-state and anti-European regime has turned fear, terror, oppression, and violence against its own citizens into the main weapon of politics. Not only the democratic development of the country, but also the life, dignity and freedom of each person was at risk. A regime treacherous to its own people sought to maintain power - even at the cost of destroying the country. We must admit - many did not see a way out of this situation.</p>	<p>GD – good, UNM – evil.</p>
<p>It was under these conditions that "Georgian Dream - Democratic Georgia" was created under the leadership of Mr. Bidzina Ivanishvili. This was a significant turning point in the path of our state development. From today's perspective, we are once again convinced that with this key decision, our country was saved from complete destruction. Today, in the background of the current events in the region, there is no doubt that under the conditions of the bloody, anti-national regime, Georgia would have turned into a second war zone.</p>	
<p>With the support of the vast majority of the population of Georgia, we peacefully replaced the anti-state regime and immediately after coming to power, we started to pursue national policy - strengthening sovereignty, ensuring peace and stability, freedom of citizens. After the restoration of independence of Georgia, this is the only period of uninterrupted peace, which allows us to devote all our efforts to the development of all areas. Today we are witnessing significant progress in all directions - welfare, social justice, and democracy.</p>	<p>GD – peace, UNM – war.</p>
<p>I would especially like to highlight the greatest progress on the path of European integration - with the association agreement, the agreement on a deep and comprehensive free trade area with the European Union, visa-free travel and now, by the European Union giving Georgia a European perspective, the process of our joining the family of free European nations has taken an irreversible form. All these achievements would not have been possible without the dedication and hard work of every member and supporter of "Georgian Dream". I thank all of them.</p>	<p>GD – legacy of democracy, UNM – legacy of autocracy.</p>
<p>Summing up the past years, our motivation is the same - we must continue to pursue national policy with even more attitude, take care of everything that is the basis of our identity and strength, - strengthening the country's sovereignty, ensuring peace, economic revival, protection and development of our culture, faith, traditions, government and with the unity of the people - progress towards the main dream and goal of every Georgian - a united, free and strong Georgia.</p>	