



INFORMALITY AND INFORMAL PRACTICES IN THE TIME OF COVID-19: THE CASE OF GEORGIA

Special Editor: Tamar Tolordava (Ilia State University, Georgia)

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Informality and Informal Practices in the Time of COVID-19: The Case of Georgia

Introduction by Special Editor Tamar Tolordava (Ilia State University, Georgia)

Though the first case of COVID-19 in Georgia was confirmed only on 26 February 2020, the government of Georgia had already started work on combating the virus beforehand. On 28 January, Decree N164 'On the Approval of Measures to Prevent the Possible Spread of the Novel Coronavirus in Georgia and the Emergency Response Plan for Cases of Novel Coronavirus Disease' was issued. Moreover, an interagency coordinating council was established to lead the decision-making process regarding COVID-19. One of the first harsh decisions made was suspending air traffic with China. The government has realised that without making a rapid decision, the health system could collapse. Also, healthcare specialists were involved in the management process (Meister, 2020: 2). Establishing strict restrictions (i.e., lockdown, curfew) helped to hinder the spread of the virus, and Georgia was acknowledged as a success story by many. However, in a few short months, Georgia had transformed into a country that was poorly managing the pandemic crises. By September 2022, 1,735,683 cases had been confirmed and 16,889 people had died,¹ whilst only 33.96% of the population were fully vaccinated.²

More than two years have passed since the first case of coronavirus was confirmed in Georgia, and many questions have been raised regarding the decision-making and crisis management process and how it shaped Georgian society. Thus, this issue attempts to address, revise and analyse less-discussed topics—the rise of informality and informal practices in the time of the pandemic in Georgia, how the pandemic affected crisis management processes, and why the government of Georgia failed to continue to be a success story and failed at vaccinating at least 60% of the population (by September 2022).

From the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, Georgian opposition politicians started to discuss the growing corruption in Georgia. In May 2020, then Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia delivered a speech in the Parliament of Georgia regarding the Covid-19 crisis. 'Somebody did a favour to someone as happens among Georgians, but what corruption?!' was his response to a question on corruption asked by a representative of the opposition party. Irakli Korikua in his article addresses the exact issues by analysing two areas: (1) simplified state procurement procedures related to the healthcare sector and quarantine zones; and (2) the vaccine deployment process.

When speaking about the dissemination of information regarding the pandemic, it is important to address every citizen of the country. In Georgia, according to the 2014 census, 87% of the population are ethnic Georgians, while 13% of the population are members of other ethnic groups and may speak little to no Georgian (Amirejibi/ Gabunia, 2021). Rhiannon Segar in her article addresses how informal forms of social capital have impacted the dissemination of information during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Georgian-Armenian and Georgian-Azerbaijani ethnic minority communities.

Tamar Tolordava in her article underlines the importance of institutions (formal and informal) to help citizens learn about and internalise the newly established rules and restrictions important to defeating the pandemic. She analyses why and how governmental institutions on the one hand and one of the most powerful institutions, the Georgian Orthodox Church, on the other failed to play this role in the time of crisis and how they used informal practices to avoid those rules and influence the political process.

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1 'COVID-19 Coronavirus Pandemic', Worldometers.info. Available at: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/> (accessed 8 September 2022).

2 'Coronavirus (COVID-19) Vaccinations', Ourworldindata.org. Available at: <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations> (accessed 8 September 2022).

Opportunities for Corruption Created by COVID-19: The Case of Georgia

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000591398

Abstract

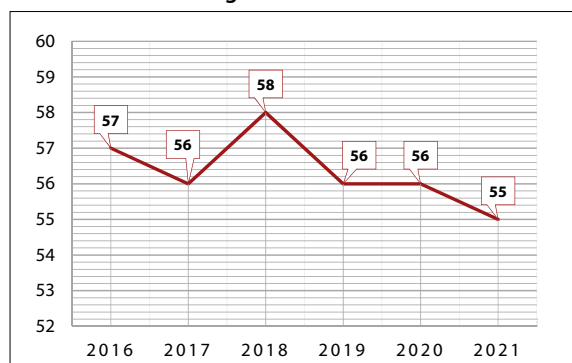
Georgia, once a successful example of how a newly independent state can fight corruption, has seen a rise in potentially corruption-related activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The main reasons behind that are weak democratic institutions and an unstable system of checks and balances. This article is concerned with two specific areas in which numerous reports have identified suspicious activities involving relationships between government officials and private companies. These two areas are (1) the simplified state procurement procedures related to the healthcare sector and quarantine zones and (2) the vaccine deployment process. Due to the absence of any full-scale investigation into the matter, the effectiveness of the Georgian government's anti-corruption measures cannot be determined. However, using simplified procurement procedure to transfer large sums of taxpayers' money to businesses connected with the Georgian ruling party as well as significant flaws in the COVID-19 National Vaccine Deployment Plan raises important questions that still remain unanswered.

'Opportunities to engage in corruption are particularly high in emergency contexts, where controls are weak, funding levels and media pressure are high'
(Schultz/ Søreide, 2008: 3)

Introduction

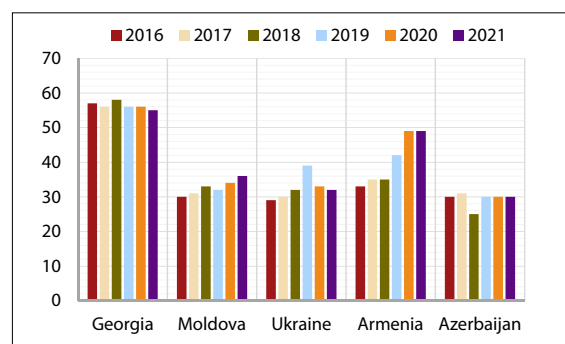
Over the last 30 years, Georgia has been called both one of the most corrupt states in Eurasia (Berglund/ Engvall, 2015) and 'the best corruption-buster in the world'.¹ Today it would be hard to put Georgia in either of those two categories. According to Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI)², Georgia's score worsened by one point in 2021 compared to 2020, dropping to the lowest point of the past five years. Georgia thereby ranks 45th out of the 180 states which are part of the CPI. However, despite the recent decline in the ranking, Georgia is still ahead of other post-Soviet states in the region.

Figure 1: Corruption Perception Index 2016–2021 for Georgia



The graph below demonstrates how Georgia's CPI values compared to Moldova, Ukraine, Armenia, and Azerbaijan between 2016–2021. As we can see, the only two countries that have experienced a significant improvement according to the CPI were Moldova and Armenia, which went from 30 and 33 points to 36 and 49, respectively. Azerbaijan's position remained relatively the same with the exception of the year 2018, when the score dropped from 31 to 25 in just one year. The closest country to Georgia out of those listed below is Armenia, which ranked 58th in 2021.³ Therefore, although Georgia is by far not the most corrupt state in the region, and indeed leads among the region's other post-Soviet countries, it still has a long way to go to establish itself as a frontrunner in the global fight against corruption.

Figure 2: Corruption Perception Index 2016–2021 for Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, Armenia, and Azerbaijan



See Table 1 on p. 7 for the data used for this chart.

1 'Lessons from Georgia's fight against graft', *The Economist*, 7 February 2012. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/eastern-approaches/2012/02/07/lessons-from-georgias-fight-against-graft> (accessed 8 September 2022).

2 The results are given on a scale of 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean).

3 'Corruption Perception Index 2021', Transparency International. Available at: <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021> (accessed 8 September 2022).

The global pandemic has affected not only the lives of ordinary Georgians, but also the ways political elites run the state and often abuse their power due to a lack of transparency and anti-corruption instruments. In Georgia, just like elsewhere, people were so thrilled in summer 2022 to be back to normal life that hardly anyone wanted to demand answers from the government on the questions of management that accumulated during the pandemic. This article examines two areas that have been the subjects of concern of the largest international organisations and NGOs operating in Georgia, namely simplified state procurement procedures and the COVID-19 vaccine deployment process.

Simplified State Procurement and Embezzlement of State Funds

The sudden emergence of the coronavirus pandemic, followed by often radical and large-scale measures from the authorities, had numerous consequences for societies across the world. Countries like Georgia, with relatively weak democratic institutions and an unstable system of checks and balances, often had difficulties understanding these risks and taking appropriate measures and strategies to address them (Lebanidze, 2017). Transparency International,⁴ the Council of Europe,⁵ and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2020), just to name a few, have highlighted the most common challenges that countries can face during times of crisis and given recommendations on how to avoid abuses of power. There are many existing best practices for delivering the needed services to citizens in times of crisis and state emergencies. However, the Georgian government, as it will be argued in this article, had its own ways of dealing with the global pandemic that greatly affected Georgia, rather than following international guidelines.

A good example of this is the decision of the Georgian ruling party to choose so-called simplified state procurement procedures over more transparent and efficient

electronic tenders.⁶ Government officials did not provide any credible justification to explain why the simplified state procurements were chosen over more efficient electronic tenders, other than that all the measures were taken in the best interest of the Georgian population.⁷ Transparency International states that simplified procurement procedures not only eliminate fair competition and give advantages to companies with political connections, but they also make the services more expensive and reduce their quality.⁸

In 2020 and 2021, especially during the state of emergency that lasted from 21 March to 23 May 2020, there were a large number of suspicious and non-competitive state procurements between the ruling party 'Georgian Dream' and number of companies with owners known for being donors of the Georgian Dream party and/or linked to public officials (Koryakina/ Jolokhava, 2020). Between 1 June 2020 and 31 December 2021, Georgian government agencies signed around 21,000 large simplified public procurement contracts with a total value of about USD 627 million.⁹ Forty-two percent thereof, or around USD 263 million, was spent on simplified procurements for COVID-19-related needs (Koryakina/ Jolokhava, 2020). According to a report by Transparency International Georgia and the Open Society Foundations, USD 57.5 million of the USD 627 million in simplified procurements were obtained by major donors of the ruling party and its presidential candidate, Salome Zurbishvili. Another topic of concern for international organisations has been the obtaining of contracts by newly founded companies (companies registered for less than six months). More specifically, between 1 June 2020 and 31 December 2021, 192 newly founded companies were given contracts worth USD 3.3 million, of which 22 companies obtained contracts less than 10 days after they were founded.¹⁰

These procurements following simplified procedures were primarily distributed between procurements in the healthcare sector and procurements to establish and run

4 'Preventing Corruption During the Pandemic: Challenges and Recommendations', Transparency International, 20 May 2020. Available at: <https://transparency.ge/en/post/preventing-corruption-during-pandemic-challenges-and-recommendations> (accessed 8 September 2022).

5 'COVID-19 pandemic: GRECO warns of corruption risks', Council of Europe, 21 April 2020. Available at: https://www.coe.int/en/web/tbilisi/home/-/asset_publisher/oc8KQ78XEbs/content/covid-19-pandemic-greco-warns-of-corruption-risks?inheritRedirect=false&redirect=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.coe.int%2Fen%2Fweb%2Fbilisi%2Fhome%3Fp_p_id%3D101_INSTANCE_oc8KQ78XEbs%26p (accessed 8 September 2022).

6 'Public Procurement', Transparency International. Available at: <https://www.transparency.org/en/our-priorities/public-procurement> (accessed 8 September 2022).

7 Gogiashvili, M. (2020) 'COVID-19-related simplified procurements'. Georgia: TV 25. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I0x2zpkkL5o>.

8 'Public procurement', Transparency International. Available at: <https://www.transparency.org/en/our-priorities/public-procurement> (accessed 8 September 2022).

9 This article interchangeably uses U.S. dollars (USD) and Georgia Lari (GEL) as currency measures. The author uses current exchange rate throughout the article—*\$1 USD equals 2.71 GEL*.

10 'Simplified Public Procurement during COVID-19: The analysis of basic data and risks of corruption', Transparency International/ Open Society Foundation, 29 March 2022. Available at: <https://osgf.ge/en/simplified-public-procurement-during-covid-19-the-analysis-of-basic-data-and-risks-of-corruption/> (accessed 8 September 2022).

quarantine facilities. The detailed analysis of the simplified procurements in the healthcare sector carried out by Bellingcat (2020) and the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (2020) show that a large amount of state budget funds was transferred through the simplified procurements to the handful of companies who have either donated to the Georgian Dream party and/or are affiliated with high-ranking government officials. According to the report by the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (2020), simplified procurements in the healthcare sector caused a series of problems. The biggest one is the risk that the companies affiliated with the ruling party would receive the majority of state funds. Secondly, in the case of simplified procurements, it is often impossible to assess the quality of the product purchased because the product specification is not being documented. Although there is no hard evidence to say that these companies who signed the simplified procurement contracts did not fulfil their obligations outlined in the contracts, the lack of transparency in the process of procurement raises many questions. It is even more suspicious when a week-old company receives large sums of taxpayer money for services during a worldwide pandemic.

An agreement regarding quarantine sites, published on 20 March 2020, that obliged all citizens entering Georgia to be quarantined for two weeks under the supervision of doctors opened possibilities for yet another source of corruption. The Georgian National Tourism Administration signed contracts in the amount of about US \$8.5 million (Koryakina/ Jolokhava, 2020). Soon after that, a popular Georgia media project, Fact-Check.ge, which works toward measuring the factual accuracy of the public statements of politicians and verifies fake news, published detailed information on the aforementioned contracts.¹¹ The report was later followed by the investigation by Bellingcat (2020), which brought to light the same pattern of potential corruption schemes as with the procurements in the healthcare sector. Owners of many of those hotels which signed contracts with the government had donated significant amounts of money (about 500,000 GEL, or around US\$180,000) to either the Georgian Dream party or the president, Salome Zurbishvili between 2016–2020. Seemingly in return, these hotels secured contracts with a total value of over US\$1.3 million only in the period March–May 2020 (Koryakina and Jolokhava, 2020).

Another issue is the embezzlement of state funds by hospitals. Based on the findings of an investigation conducted by the Labour Inspection Service of Georgia, staff members of at least 86 of the 110 hospitals investigated (or 78%) did not receive raises from the government. On the other hand, it has been reported that several of these clinics' directors and deputy directors have increased their salaries by five to ten times through the illegal use of state funds. Zurab Azarashvili, Georgia's current Minister of Internally Displaced Persons from Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs, confirmed these violations.¹² Until the investigation has been completed, the Labour Inspection Service will not provide any additional information. According to the Labour Inspection Service, the hospital and individuals responsible will, however, face harsh penalties if found guilty as a result of an investigation and it is possible that hospitals will be required to return the funds to the state budget after the full investigation is completed.

Vaccine Deployment

The vaccine deployment process was another area of the fight against COVID-19 that allowed corruption to flourish in Georgia. The report on the lack of integrity and anti-corruption measures in Georgia's first COVID-19 Vaccine Deployment National Plan was published by Transparency International on 2 March 2021.¹³ The report outlined several key flaws in the first iteration of the National Plan. The main issue with this document was the complete absence of any corruption-related risk assessment or safeguards against dishonest actions. Additionally, the report found that the vaccine deployment plan, as it was related to such a sensitive topic, should have included a section on prevention, detection, and response to abuses of delegated authority by the state to those individuals and institutions involved in the immunization process (for example, municipal bodies, vaccinators, mobile crews, healthcare centres, etc.).

There are three primary reasons for this absence:

- The vaccine (at least in Spring 2021) was a product that was difficult to obtain while the demand remained high.
- The scale of immunisation made it necessary to distribute authority to many individuals and institutions with a weak system of checks and balances, thus increasing the risk of corruption-related violations.

11 'ტურიზმის ეროვნულმა ადმინისტრაციამ, მოქალაქეების საკარანტინო სივრცეებში განთავსების მიზნით, კომპანიებთან 26 432 000 ლარის ღირებულების ხელშეკრულებები გამარტივებული წესით გააფორმა' [The European Tourism Administration has signed contracts with companies worth GEL 26,432,000 for placement of citizens in quarantine areas in a simplified manner], FactCheck.ge, 13 May 2022. Available at: <https://factcheck.ge/ka/story/38456> (accessed 8 September 2022).

12 'შემოწმებული კლინიკების 78%-ში პერსონალისთვის გამიზნული დანამატი არ გაუციათ' [In 78% of hospitals staff members did not receive additional funding], netgazeti.ge, 6 May 2022. Available at: <https://netgazeti.ge/life/609257/> (accessed 7 October 2022).

13 'Georgia's National Plan for COVID-19 Vaccine Deployment Lacks the Integrity Component', Transparency International, 2 March 2021. Available at: <https://transparency.ge/en/blog/georgias-national-plan-covid-19-vaccine-deployment-lacks-integrity-component> (accessed 8 September 2022).

- The need to involve additional external individuals in the immunisation system to meet the set goal of immunising 60% of the population by the end of 2021. At the beginning of the immunisation process, the Georgian healthcare sector did not have enough trained staff. This was necessary to administer the number of vaccines per day required to reach the 60% mark. With all these risks in mind, the first version of the National Plan made no mention of corruption, integrity, or response to violations whatsoever. Although there was a hotline, its only function was to provide information, rather than serving as a platform for reporting violations and dishonest actions. Since the report by Transparency International went public, the Georgian government updated the National Plan twice. The second iteration of the report, published on 12 April 2021, immediately addressed several shortcomings of the earlier document by including a chapter titled 'Corruption Prevention Measures'. For example, the aforementioned hotline could now be used to report violations.

Most of the newly added chapters, however, remained vague and transferred responsibility to different government agencies without specifying if any new measures had been taken or if the personnel had been properly trained to appropriately address possible violations. Even the latest version of the National Plan, published on 24 April 2022, did not address several recommendations outlined in the Transparency International Report such as 'adding the integrity component to the training program provided for by the immunization plan'.¹⁴ This component should have been based on assessing corruption risks and training participants on how to act if they encounter a violation. Secondly, the national plan still did not adhere to the principle of complete transparency: most of the contracts related to vaccination have not yet been published. However, on a more positive note, the information on the vaccinated population, daily vaccines distributed and other relevant details are to this day constantly being updated on the National Center for Disease Control and Public Health website.¹⁵

It is hard to assess the effectiveness of those changes made in the 2nd and 3rd iterations of the National Plan, as no significant corruption scheme related to the vaccination deployment has been uncovered. However, several individuals have been charged for selling fake COVID-19 'Green Passports' to non-vaccinated individuals, as

well as using forged certificates of negative test results of COVID-19 laboratory examination.¹⁶

Conclusion

'Corruption's such an old song that we can sing along in harmony'

Hamilton: An American Musical

Due to the lack of transparency and anti-corruption instruments, numerous reports have identified simplified procurement and vaccine deployment as two possible sources of corruption. As has been demonstrated above, most questions when it comes to simplified procurements arise from suspicious activities in the healthcare sector and quarantine zones. Due to the decision of the Georgian government to choose simplified procurement procedures over online tenders, a large amount of Georgian taxpayer money went to companies which had donated large sums to the ruling Georgian Dream party, or candidates supported by them.

Another significant opportunity for corruption was the COVID-19 vaccination deployment process. The first version of Georgia's COVID-19 Vaccine National Deployment Plan became a subject of criticism soon after it was published. The reason: an absence of an anti-corruption component in the document, thus leaving open the possibility that future corruption cases would go unreported. While the next two updates of the National Plan included several recommendations made by international organisations, they did not fully adhere to international practices and guidelines.

Overall, due to the absence of any full-scale investigation into the possible corruption cases related to either simplified procurements in the healthcare sector, quarantine zones, or the COVID-19 vaccine deployment process, it is hard to assess the effectiveness of the mechanisms put in place by the Georgian government. What has been similar between the simplified procurements and vaccine deployment process: no investigation has been carried out with regard to the involvement of high-ranking government officials or state agencies in the corruption schemes, despite the numerous warnings by the international organisations as described above (or at least there is no information publicly available about them). However, that is not surprising given that the ruling party in Georgia is still in control of the three branches

14 'Georgia's National Plan for COVID-19 Vaccine Deployment Lacks the Integrity Component', Transparency International, 2 March 2021. Available at: <https://transparency.ge/en/blog/georgias-national-plan-covid-19-vaccine-deployment-lacks-integrity-component> (accessed 8 September 2022).

15 See: <https://vaccines.ncdc.ge/statistics/>.

16 'The Prosecution Service indicts 12 persons for making and using forged COVID-passports and forged certificates of negative results of COVID laboratory examination', Prosecutor's Office of Georgia, 26 October 2021. Available at: <https://pog.gov.ge/en/news/prokuraturam-yalbi-kovid-pasportebis-da-koronavirusis-laboratoriuli-kvlevis-uaryofiTi-shedegebis-ams> (accessed 7 September 2022).

of government, including the judiciary.¹⁷ Therefore, this article could go only as far as collecting all the investigation reports published by the largest international organisations and NGOs operating in Georgia. What all these reports show is the absence of anti-corruption instruments and the decision of Georgian Dream to follow their own, often less-transparent agenda, rather than international guidelines and best practices.

To predict whether these developments will result in more corruption or not have any significant long-term effects, we need to consider the state of Georgian democratic institutions. In particular, Georgia's closest allies, the United States and the European Union, are often

deeply critical of its weakened system of checks and balances and captured judiciary system (Lebanidze, 2017).¹⁸ Georgia is, of course, not the only country in the world where the ruling party engages in suspicious economic and political activities, enacting unjustified regulations and then use them to their advantage. However, in the absence of necessary democratic reforms to strengthen state institutions, the events of the past 2–3 years may create a dangerous precedent that future governments and influential individuals may be able to use to undermine anti-corruption mechanisms and destroy decades of effort Georgians have invested in fighting corruption.

About the Author

Irakli Korkia holds a joint Master's degree in Central and East European, Russian and Eurasian Studies from the University of Glasgow (UK), Jagiellonian University in Cracow (PL), and Tartu University (EE) and a Bachelor's degree in International Relations from the Free University of Tbilisi. Irakli is a Research Fellow at the Europe-Georgia Institute in Tbilisi.

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Table 1: Data for Figure 2 on p. 3: Corruption Perception Index 2016–2021 for Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, Armenia, and Azerbaijan

Year	Georgia	Moldova	Ukraine	Armenia	Azerbaijan
2016	57	30	29	33	30
2017	56	31	30	35	31
2018	58	33	32	35	25
2019	56	32	39	42	30
2020	56	34	33	49	30
2021	55	36	32	49	30

17 'Is Georgia a Captured State?', Transparency International, 11 December 2020. Available at: <https://transparency.ge/en/blog/georgia-captured-state> (accessed 20 July 2022).

18 'კელი დეგნანი – სანამ არ იქნება რეფორმები სასამართლო სისტემის გასაუმჯობესებლად, მოსამართლეების დანიშვნის პროცესი უნდა შეჩერდეს' [Kelly C. Degnan—The process of appointing judges should be halted until reforms are implemented aimed at enhancing the judiciary system], InterPress News, 22 June 2021. Available at: <https://www.interpressnews.ge/ka/article/662048-keli-degnani-sanam-arikneba-reformebi-sasamartlo-sistemis-gasaumjobeseblad-mosamartlebis-danishvnis-procesi-unda-shecherdes> (accessed 7 October 2022).

The Importance of Informal Ties: COVID-19 Vaccination Uptake within Ethnic Minority Communities in Georgia

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000591398

Abstract:

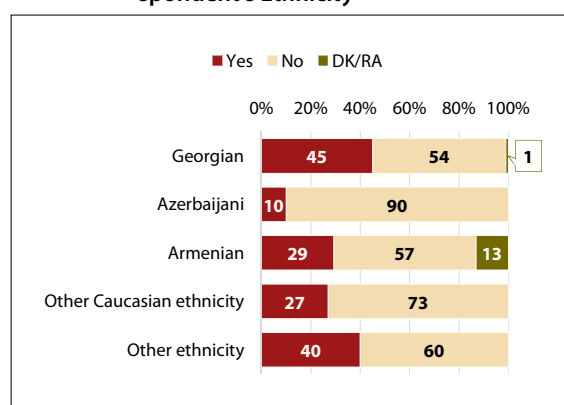
The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the multifarious roles of information. While the interconnected nature of the globe has seen the rapid transmission of knowledge, disinformation has continued to spread in parallel. In Georgia, the transfer of information is distinguished by high levels of ‘bonding’ social capital within society. The prevalence of informal networks—characterised by the dual-phenomenon of close in-group ties and out-group mistrust—has deeply impacted Georgians’ attitudes and practices throughout the pandemic, from issues including compliance with regulations to beliefs regarding the severity of the virus itself. As such, this article examines the role of these informal forms of social capital and their impact on the dissemination of information during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing particular attention on community-level mechanisms in two ethnic minority communities: (1) the Georgian-Armenian community of Samtskhe-Javakheti and (2) the Georgian-Azerbaijani community of Kvemo Kartli.

Introduction: Information, Informality and Vaccination Hesitancy

As of October 2022, only 34.4% of Georgia’s total population has been fully vaccinated (Ritchie et al., 2022). The issue, however, is not one of vaccine capacity—currently, the Pfizer, AstraZeneca, Sinopharm and Sinovac vaccines are all available to the public. Instead, the issue is one of information. As of July 2021, a Caucasus Research Resource Centers/ National Democratic Institute survey found that only 42% of Georgians knew how to register for vaccination (CRRC, 2021). These figures are even starker when broken down by ethnicity: only 29% of ethnically Armenian respondents and 10% of ethnically Azerbaijani respondents stated they knew how to register (Figure 1). At the same time, there also seems to be a dual perception of information as being *too* readily available, thus overwhelming those hoping to find (what they accept as) credible information. These issues are seemingly exacerbated among ethnic minority communities living in remote areas of the country, where gaining access to both resources and information becomes a much more complex process. Therefore, two questions must be asked: How do marginalised communities gain information about the vaccine? And how do these communities identify which information to trust? The answer to these rests in part with the widespread prevalence of informality.

Often considered from a purely economic standpoint, informality is a multifaceted concept that equally finds its place in the social realm through informal networks. In Georgia, these socially-grounded informal practices have evolved, particularly in reaction to the negative perceptions attached to informality in more recent years. Institutional reforms, particularly under former Pres-

Figure 1: KNREOPC19V: Do You Know or Not How to Register on the Online Platform for COVID-19 Vaccination?* by ETHNIC: Respondent’s Ethnicity**



* Question text: If you had the need, do you know or not how to register on the online platform for COVID-19 vaccination?

** Question text: There are a number of ethnic groups living in Georgia. Which ethnic group do you consider yourself a part of? Note: Question was recoded. Answer options ‘Kurd or Yezidi’ and ‘Russian’ were added to other.

Source: NDI, Public attitudes in Georgia, July 2021; retrieved from <http://caucasusbarometer.org>

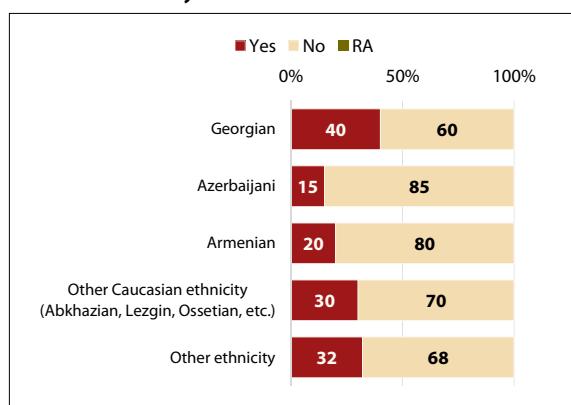
ident Mikheil Saakashvili, sought to eradicate informality throughout Georgia (Aliyev, 2014; Rekhviashvili, 2015). Yet, while these reforms were able to lessen the role of reciprocity-driven informality within the formal sphere (i.e., corruption), they failed to eradicate the deep-rooted practices of informal networking.

As marginalised groups living on the peripheries of the ethnodoxy-driven conception of the Georgian Self, ethnic minority communities have developed forms of symbolic resistance through informal practices to remain resilient in the face of inadequacies within

the formal sphere (Aliyev, 2015b; Curro, 2017; Polese/Rekhviashvili, 2017). This article examines vaccination uptake among two communities: the (1) Georgian-Armenian community of Samtskhe-Javakheti region and (2) Georgian-Azerbaijani community of Kvemo Kartli. This research was carried out in parallel with the 'Mobile Booths for Vaccination Project' led by Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (CIPDD) and supported by the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation.

The project sought to support the vaccination process against COVID-19 for those living in rural areas of Georgia, focusing on communities with significant ethnic and religious minority groups where vaccination uptake was particularly low. Over the 6-month project period, the CIPDD managed to vaccinate nearly 700 residents from the Georgian-Azerbaijani community of Kvemo Kartli. By contrast, only six people were inoculated from the Georgian-Armenian community of Samtskhe-Javakheti. Several lessons were drawn through focus groups with community volunteers working on the project and interviews with civil society actors. Each lesson points to the imperative function of informality in the dissemination of information among ethnic minority communities in Georgia.

Figure 2: C19GTVAC: Did you get vaccinated against COVID-19?* by ETHNIC: Respondent's Ethnicity**



* Question text: Did you get vaccinated against COVID-19?

** Question text: There are a number of ethnic groups living in Georgia. Which ethnic group do you consider yourself a part of? Note: Answer options 'Russian', and 'Yezid or Kurd' were grouped to 'Other'.

Source: NDI, Public attitudes in Georgia, July 2021; retrieved from <http://caucasusbarometer.org>

The Dual Effects of Bonding Social Capital

In its most basic terms, social capital is a conceptual tool which describes the value of social relations, paying

particular attention to the actual or potential resources accessed through group membership (Bourdieu, 1986). From studies of resilience, there has been an inference that higher levels of social capital correlate to a higher capacity to cope with trauma, tragedy and disasters, as stronger community ties can lead to easier transmission of resources and information (Adger, 2003; Nakagawa/ Shaw, 2004). However, further research has shown that social capital may lead to both 'strong benefits and equally strong negative externalities' (Aldrich, 2012: 1) due to the complex nature of the different types of social capital: the so-called 'Janus-faced' effect (Aldrich, 2012; Aldrich/ Meyer, 2015; Fraser et al., 2022).

Informality relates to social capital through the notions of 'bonding' ties. First coined by Putnam (2000), bonding—and its alternative, 'bridging'—describes different ties between individuals. Ethnic minority communities in Georgia often demonstrate high levels of 'bonding' social capital, referring to the close ties among homogeneous individuals, such as family members, close friends and, in some cases, neighbours (Putnam, 2000; Woolcock/ Narayan, 2000). By contrast, bridging social capital—ties between 'broader identities' across cleavages (Putnam, 2000: 23)—tends to be lower. These different ties work in unique ways in moments of crisis or increased stress. For example, bridging social capital ties different communities together, thus playing a positive role in long-term solutions, by improving information and resource dissemination. Bonding social capital may see communities 'band together' in moments of crisis (Aldrich/ Meyer, 2015). However, it may also isolate communities further when resources deplete, meaning they may struggle with long-term recovery strategies.

Building Informal-Formal Bridges

Bridging social capital between informal and formal spheres was found to be weak among the two ethnic minority communities in focus. This is primarily on account of clear ethnolinguistic boundaries—although integration policies, such as the '1+4'¹ affirmative action policy, do appear to be aiding the closing of this gap in more recent years ('The positive side started from 2010 when this 1+4 programme started'²). Low levels of Georgian language knowledge pose a significant barrier to the integration of ethnic minorities in Georgia, especially in relation to communication between non-Georgian speaking minorities and state institutions (Wheatley, 2009).

This boundary between state and ethnic minorities is exacerbated within tight-knit communities, where

1 Introduced in 2010, the 1+4 programme allocates a quota for non-Georgian-language students to pursue their chosen undergraduate course upon completion of a one-year Georgian language programme (Tabatadze/ Gorgadze, 2017).

2 Murad (M-21, i.e., male, 21-years old), Georgian-Azerbaijani, Kvemo Kartli.

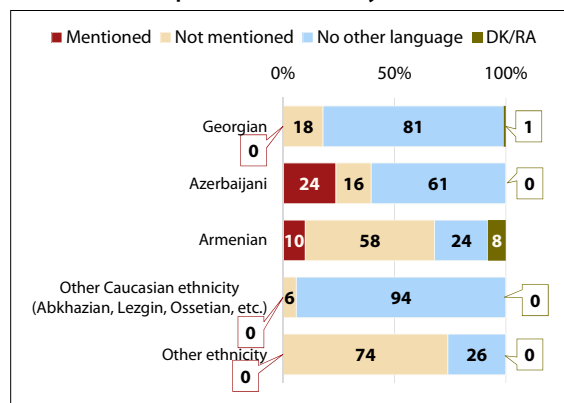
there is little interaction with Georgian speakers on a day-to-day basis ('I can say that I had problems with not knowing the state language. When I did not speak Georgian, it was very difficult for me to interact with state institutions, documentation. I did not watch Georgian TV channels and was almost unaware of what was happening inside the country'³). In turn, these minority communities exhibit a strong form of bonding ties, in which their homogeneity is reinforced through their knowledge — or lack thereof — of certain languages (Nahapiet/ Ghoshal, 1998; Putnam, 2000).

At the earliest stages of the pandemic, the two communities found themselves in an information vacuum due to a lack of resources available in their respective mother tongues ('Most of [the Georgian-Armenian community] didn't understand anything'⁴). Indeed, surveys conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO) found that a lower risk perception was evident among ethnic minorities in Georgia as a result of the low level of information available in Azerbaijani and Armenian (WHO, 2021). While government-led efforts to tackle this gap in non-Georgian language resources were made by late 2021, the widespread presence of disinformation had already bolstered fears of the vaccine, rendering these attempts insufficient. Given these weak direct links, the CIPDD chose to 'stagger' its approach to its vaccination project by connecting with local organisations, who were then able to connect with local community volunteers. This grassroots approach, in turn, transformed the relatively weak direct link between the formal and informal spheres into an indirect link via several stronger direct connections.

These findings support previous research, which has found that NGOs within Georgia regularly rely on informal networking as a resilience-making tactic (Aliyev, 2015a). As a formal organisation, the CIPDD was also able to collaborate with other organisations within its network, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). As a result, the UNDP provided mobile vaccination booths to these communities, which had previously had more limited access to the vaccination process due to their rurality/remoteness.

Generational differences also prove critical to vaccination uptake at a community level. As the most vulnerable strata of society to the adverse health effects of COVID-19, elderly citizens count among the most vital members of society to vaccinate. Many respondents pointed to the elderly as being some of the least informed members of their communities during the pandemic due to their low levels of Georgian language knowledge

Figure 3: SECNDLANGKA: Second Language Used in Everyday Life—Georgian* by ETHNIC: Respondent's Ethnicity**



* Question text: What other languages other than /interview language/ do you use in your everyday life, such as to talk with your family members, friends and neighbors, or to do business?—Georgian

** Question text: There are a number of ethnic groups living in Georgia. Which ethnic group do you consider yourself a part of? Note: Answer options 'Russian', and 'Yezid or Kurd' were grouped to 'Other'.

Source: NDI, Public attitudes in Georgia, July 2021; retrieved from <http://caucasusbarometer.org>

('It depends on who has the accessibility to what. For example, grandma and grandpa can listen to Georgian TV channels, but they have no level of language'⁵). Ties with formalised institutions—such as local government, NGOs, and the national government—were weakest among the elderly population within these communities.

By contrast, the younger generations were found to be better equipped to traverse these social boundaries. While Georgian language acquisition remains low overall in both communities, programmes such as the '1+4' are causing a shift. In addition, young people tend to have greater access to social media—a crucial space for information proliferation ('[I]f they did not have [Facebook], for example, the older generation, we [...] read to them, and share this'⁶). The combination of linguistic barriers and Internet literacy had the largest impact on the vaccine registration process, which could only be completed via a Georgian-language online portal (Sichinava, 2021; Jikidze, 2022). By recruiting locals to help with this online registration process, the CIPDD was able to blur the boundaries between the informal and the formal, whereby the young volunteers worked as a bridge between the target communities and formalised structures.

Building Trust through In-Group Behaviour

Despite enlisting local voices, the results of the CIPDD vaccination project varied significantly between the two

3 Anahit (F-28) Georgian-Armenian, Samtskhe-Javakheti.

4 Tamaz (M-25), Georgian, Samtskhe-Javakheti.

5 Murad (M-21), Georgian-Azerbaijani, Kvemo Kartli.

6 Ali (M-19), Georgian-Azerbaijani, Kvemo Kartli.

communities. Several influencing factors may account for the complex story around vaccination uptake. Border-crossing habits undoubtedly influenced a higher uptake of vaccines among the Georgian-Azerbaijani community of Kvemo Kartli, who needed to vaccinate in order to cross the Georgian-Azerbaijani border what they usually do during the winter period. Government-led financial incentives⁷ also played a significant role in bolstering uptake among the elderly in both communities, yet these incentives alone had only marginal results in raising vaccination rates among these communities more widely (“They gave money to those who were vaccinated, etc., but this did not change anything”⁸). Furthermore, disinformation regarding Western vaccines appeared more pervasive among the Georgian-Armenian communities, who were cited as being more heavily reliant on Russian sources (“There were [...] many discussions about Sputnik, the Russian vaccine, and these ethnic minorities were telling us that if the vaccination is good enough, why don’t we have Sputnik? They really trusted the Russian Federation”⁹). What these insights show is that the disparity in vaccination uptake cannot be explained by one factor alone. However, the most pervasive factor underlying any decision whether to vaccinate is the concept of trust.

While alternative influences cannot be dismissed, a strong contributing factor in the effectiveness of the CIPDD project was the different nature and quality of relationships between the volunteers and their target communities (Nahapiet/ Ghosal, 1998). Here, the vital role of social capital in vaccination uptake cannot be overlooked as vaccination uptake appeared to closely correlate with the level of trust each volunteer group held within their community. Although the CIPDD collaborated with volunteers from the Georgian-Azerbaijani minority group in Kvemo Kartli, the volunteers from Samtskhe-Javakheti stood out as being ethnically Georgian—and therefore, not members of the Georgian-Armenian minority community. Despite the efforts of the volunteers in Samtskhe-Javakheti, the lack of shared understandings and language resulted in the volunteers being unable to build the required trust and in-group norms that would encourage vaccination uptake.

Consequently, the volunteers in Samtskhe-Javakheti did not have strong access to informal spaces of information dissemination, primarily due to their ‘outsider’ status within the community. The use of informal practices, such as birzha¹⁰, proved imperative to quickly spreading information within these communities. Despite this, the volunteers in Samtskhe-Javakheti regularly encountered issues when trying to engage the Georgian-Armenian communities through birzha (“I had a case when someone was really interested but, if in the birzha [...], someone would start to have some ironic discussion with us [and] if anybody had a question, they [became] shy because of this”¹¹). In this way, in-group norms led to a chain reaction, which one medical professional working on the project referred to as ‘ts’amkheduri’¹²—understood as the act of being a ‘copycat’. This led to the proliferation of anti-vaccination tendencies among the Georgian-Armenian population. Factors behind this include higher levels of mistrust toward Georgian formal institutions and the prevalence of anti-Western disinformation from Russian sources among Georgian-Armenian communities.

However, this chain reaction had the opposite effect in scenarios in which the dominant member of a social group held pro-vaccination attitudes. For both groups, birzha and similar informal spaces were fundamental strategic mechanisms (“[B]irzha was one of our key locations”¹³ “The most acceptable way for [the older] generation was neighbours, birzha and tea houses”¹⁴—“chaykhana”¹⁵). However, the most significant difference was that the volunteers from Kvemo Kartli were well-integrated into their community as Georgian-Azerbaijani citizens, resulting in higher levels of trust and shared cultural codes. Their robust knowledge of their community also allowed the volunteers to successfully draw upon shared attitudes, beliefs, and cultural codes. This difference was also acknowledged by one of the project officers at the CIPDD: “We had a more established partner there. [T]hey had been working there by that time for six years and they had already gained some, you know, trust—the [social] capital—trust among the population.”¹⁶

7 The most successful scheme was announced on 8 November 2021 and posited that pensioners who received the vaccination before 1 January 2022 would receive a 200 GEL bonus. This scheme saw a 38% increase in vaccinations for those over the age of 60 (Lebanidze/ Kandelaki, 2021).

8 Anahit (F-28), Georgian-Armenian, Samtskhe-Javakheti.

9 Tamro (F-24), Georgian, Samtskhe-Javakheti.

10 Birzha refers to the practice of groups of male teenagers or young men who meet regularly in open spaces but is used more flexibly among focus group participants to refer to any form of informal male street socialisation (Curro, 2015).

11 Tamro (F-24), Georgian, Samtskhe-Javakheti.

12 Davit, (M), Medical Professional.

13 Tamro (F-24), Georgian, Samtskhe-Javakheti.

14 Chaykhana describes the practice of meeting over tea seen throughout Central Asia, Iran and Azerbaijan, usually taking the form of an informal space where men gather and exchange ideas over tea.

15 Murad (M-21), Georgian-Azerbaijani, Kvemo Kartli.

16 Manana, (F), CIPDD Representative.

In addition, it is worth noting the influence of gender. In Samtskhe-Javakheti, all but one volunteer were women; by contrast, the vast majority of volunteers in Kvemo Kartli were men. Both *birzha* and *chaykhana* are strongly tied to honour culture and notions of brotherhood (*dzmak'atsoba*), which are regulated by several norms, such as unconditional trust, loyalty, reciprocity and 'manliness' (Curro, 2017; Frederiksen, 2013; Zakharova, 2010). As previously demonstrated, the Samtskhe-Javakheti group discussed their struggle with being accepted within informal spaces of street socialisation. While the in-group/out-group dimension was discussed in relation to their ethnic identities—that is, the volunteers were ethnically Georgian rather than Armenian—another contributing factor may have been gender. The masculine nature of these informal spaces means that it is much easier for men to enter them, likely aiding the success of the male-dominated Kvemo Kartli volunteer group.

The Home: Private Informal Spaces

Finally, a common theme was the reliance on close personal relations in obtaining information about the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the most important factors that spurred the high levels of vaccinations within Kvemo Kartli was the use of tight-knit family networks ('When Aslan, my brother, got vaccinated, at home, there was a fight about this. But then, I just gave them my COVID pass, meaning I did already this without any consideration.'¹⁷). Similarly, many focus group participants cited close friendship networks as having an integral function in encouraging vaccination willingness ('If we decided to get vaccinated at home, our parents had questions: "Why did you decide to do this?". And then I answered them: "Aslan and Murad already got vaccinated, why not us?"'¹⁸). These friendship networks also

included neighbours, often seen as key sources of 'expertise'¹⁹ about the pandemic situation.

These networks of trust are based upon higher degrees of intimacy than other interpersonal relations, usually displaying a level of rigidity in their membership, rendering them difficult to enter from the outside. As such, it was vital that volunteers had access to these closely bonded networks to have success during the CIPDD project. Indeed, the very fact that the Kvemo Kartli volunteers were so integrated into these communities proved to be the ultimate factor in the large number of vaccinations seen in Kvemo Kartli. By contrast, the rigid in-group structure meant it was near-impossible for the ethnically Georgian volunteers to gain sufficient levels of trust to access the private spheres of Georgian-Armenian kinship and friendship networks.

Conclusion: Informality as a Resilience-Making Practice

Long viewed in solely negative terms, informality is a resilient mechanism in and of itself. As such, informality persists today among minority communities in Georgia as a 'private safety net', particularly in times of increased vulnerability, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Aliyev, 2015c). In the two communities in focus, informality works through strong 'bonding' ties such as close-knit kinship and friendship networks to proliferate information among their communities about the COVID-19 vaccine. In this way, informality should not be viewed as wholly negative, but rather as a neutral phenomenon that may make possible both positive and negative outcomes (Horak et al., 2020; Rekhviashvili, 2015). However, in order to encourage these positive outcomes, future civil society actors and policymakers must pay close attention to this dual effect when creating grassroots-led community-level strategies.

Note

All focus groups and interview participants have been given pseudonyms in order to protect their anonymity. Full participant information found in: Segar, R. (2022). *The Value in Those You Know: Dimensions of Social Capital in COVID 19 Vaccination Uptake among Ethnic and Religious Minority Groups in Georgia* (Master's thesis). University of Tartu, Tartu, Estonia. Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10062/86753> (accessed 25 October 2022).

About the Author

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17 Huseyn (M-20), Georgian-Azerbaijani, Kvemo Kartli.

18 Ali (M-19), Georgian-Azerbaijani, Kvemo Kartli.

19 Ketil (F-21), Georgian, Samtskhe-Javakheti.

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The Race Against Restrictions: How Institutions Failed to be a Role Model for Georgian Society

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000591398

Abstract

As in many other countries, COVID-19 became a litmus test for government efficiency in Georgia. The pandemic has influenced the daily life of Georgian society and shaped not only state-citizen relations, but politics as well. Citizens have experienced profound and sometimes rapid changes, from the initial curfew to the eventual lockdown. It also raised questions about how the 'Georgian Dream'-led government made decisions and established new rules. Managing the pandemic-related crisis in Georgia demonstrated that decision-makers, the political elite, and powerful institutions such as the Georgian Orthodox Church used their power to avoid formally established rules and/or used informal practices to influence the process. Thus, this article aims to analyse the informal practices and the role of informality in the process of adopting and implementing the COVID-related regulations, as well as how it affected the quality of crisis management.

Introduction

The emergence of COVID-19 and the deadly spread of the virus not only endangered public health, but also worsened the socio-economic conditions of citizens and affected the political landscape worldwide. The situation was far more challenging in countries with fragile economic and political systems. Georgia was amongst them. As dealing with the pandemic was something new for scientists and governments, solving the problem demanded 'governmental intervention... regulations, orders, rules and the like' (Ewert, 2021: 47) and consequently led to limits on fundamental rights, such as freedom of speech and rights to public assembly, protection of personal data and freedom of religion, access to healthcare, free travel, etc. (Kazharski/ Makarychev, 2020: 6; Burkadze, 2021: 139).

In countries like Georgia, with transitional or hybrid regimes (Freedom House, 2022) on the one hand and

a high poverty rate on the other, crises can become fertile ground for informality and informal practices. Informal practices can help to avoid established rules and restrictions, and can be used to 'skew the field of political competition in favour of incumbents' (Burkadze, 2021: 139).

It is important to underline how I see the difference between informality and breaking the law while discussing the Georgian case. According to the report provided by the Institute for Development of the Freedom of Information (IDFI), by March 2021, 8,737 cases of violating the rules of the state of emergency, 10,431 cases of violation of the rules of isolation and quarantine, and 181 cases of violation of Covid regulations by economic entities were detected. The imposed fines amounted to over GEL 50 million¹ during the pandemic (Davituri 2021: 3–4). Whilst journalists could not obtain information from the Labour Inspection Office whether the ruling party members and their family/friends were

¹ Up to 18 million euros according to the National Bank of Georgia official rate as of November 30, 2022.

fined. Thus, I will argue that ruling party members used their political power that was granted to them by the people informally to avoid consequences. The difference between transitional or hybrid regimes and democratic countries is clear too—for example, former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson was fined for breaking lockdown rules and apologised for going to a party,² whilst ruling party members in Georgia were not fined and seemed to believe they had done nothing wrong.³

On the one hand, Georgian ruling party members and their family members/friends avoided established new rules and restrictions using their political power. According to Radio Liberty, official bodies did not investigate the cases when public officials and politician of the ruling party violated covid-related regulations;⁴ on the other hand, in some cases, as discussed below, those same officials allegedly established a curfew to prevent demonstrations planned by the opposition. Moreover, the government was focused on parliamentary elections in October 2020 and local elections in October 2021; thus, even though Georgia was through the entire period in the ‘red zone’ of virus spread and the vaccination process was failing, they decided to avoid strict regulations, most probably because of the fear of losing voters.

It is difficult to say that informality and informal practices are either fundamentally damaging or beneficial: the term ‘informal’ can be ‘equally positive, neutral, or negative’ (Ledeneva, 2012: 375–376). The reason behind using informality and informal practices can be determined by the thirst not only for material gain, but also for winning elections, as well as access to political offices and power (Aliyev, 2017: 15) and/or to have an influence on countries’ political and socio-economic affairs. Informality in the post-Soviet space can have some positive characteristics, being used for achieving social safety, providing access to better health care, and more (Aliyev, 2017: 6). Thus, in Georgia, during the COVID-19 crisis, informal practices could have had

a positive influence on promoting the new habits established through the pandemic and also raise trust in the vaccination process (see Rhiannon Segar’s contribution in this special issue). But the examples from Georgia discussed below paint the opposite picture.

As mentioned above, management of the COVID-19 crisis required the establishment of new rules, restrictions, and codes of conduct (such as quarantine, curfew, social distancing, using face-masks, etc.). People had to acquire new habits that would be ‘helpful in combating the disease’ (Bentkowska, 2021: 730). In this case, government officials, politicians, and medical personal as well as members of the Georgian Orthodox Church (hereafter GOC)⁵ are those who should have led by example, following the newly established rules and forming new habits useful for society and the country. But analysing the last two years illustrates that the government led by ‘Georgian Dream’ (hereafter GD) used its power and established some restrictions (for example, by declaring a curfew after the opposition scheduled demonstrations in November 2020) to influence the political processes while simultaneously themselves avoiding those very same restrictions. Furthermore, the GOC, which is often referred to as a ‘state within the state’ (Socialjustice.org.ge, 2020a),⁶ used the pandemic to once again demonstrate its ambitions and ability to change the direction of the social and political processes as it wishes.

Though at the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, Georgia was praised as a success story and while speaking to the Washington Times, then Vice Prime Minister Maya Tskitishvili underlined that making decisions early, listening to healthcare professionals, and having responsible citizens were the key to successful management of the virus.⁷ By August 2021, Georgia ranked fifth on the list of the countries with the worst covid spread dynamics (based on number of cases and deaths) (Silagadze, 2021). Thus, it is interesting to ana-

2 ‘Boris Johnson resigns: Five things that led to PM’s downfall’, *bbc.com*, 7 July 2022. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-62070422> (accessed 23 October 2022).

3 For example, Member of Parliament Anton Obolashvili, while answering a journalist’s questions regarding his birthday party, said that it [people criticising him on Facebook] was ‘somewhat heart-breaking because it was my birthday ... I was not going to celebrate my birthday but my friends visited me ... Do you ask the guest if s/he has one-time pass?’ ‘“ოცნების” დეპუტატი განმარტავს, რატომ აღნიშნა შებღუდვების დროს დაბადების დღე’ [“Dream” deputy explains why he celebrated his birthday amid restrictions], *Negazeti.ge*, 28 February 2021. Available at: <https://batumelebi.netgazeti.ge/news/331222/> (accessed 26 November 2022).

4 ‘როცა ჩინოვნიკი თავის დადგენილ წესს არღვევს და არ ისჯება – სად რა ფასს იხდის ძალაუფლების ბოროტად გამოყენებისთვის?’ [‘When an official violates his established rule and is not punished—what is the price paid for abuse of power in different countries?’], *Radio Liberty*, 2 March, 2021. Available at: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31129724.html> (accessed 26 November, 2022).

5 According to the public opinion survey ‘Residents of Georgia’ from February 2021, 79% of respondents view the Georgian Orthodox Church favourably (among institutions, second only to the Army), whilst the head of the Georgian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Ilia II, is the most favourably viewed person in the country. Available at: https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/legacy/iri.org/iri_poll_presentation-georgia_february_2021_1.pdf (accessed 21 October 2022).

6 ‘დისკუსია – პანდემია და ეკლესია’ [Discussion—Pandemic and Church], *Socialjustice.org.ge*, 16 April 2020. Available at: <https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/diskusia-pandemia-da-eklesia> (accessed 8 September 2022).

7 ‘Coronavirus success story: The nation of Georgia. Vice Prime Minister Maya Tskitishvili explains why’, *Washington Times*, 22 April 2020. Available at: https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/apr/22/coronavirus-success-story-the-nation-of-georgia/?fbclid=IwAR3R0XvS4v4cXP2FQgnv9RjNXPRXbtj6vthFmP--AQJtQ4_222N1PVTbeg (accessed 8 September 2022).

lyse the main reasons for Georgia's transformation from a success story to a country that poorly managed the pandemic. My intention is not to discuss every aspect of this, as there are other researches focusing on different dimensions of the COVID-related crisis management process, but rather to investigate: (1) the government's attitudes towards established COVID-related rules and restrictions and how these were used to influence political processes; (2) how one of the most powerful institutions in Georgia, the GOC, used the pandemic to demonstrate its own power and how those issues affected the covid management process and public health; and (3) how and why the government and GOC failed to become role models for the citizens and to contribute to ending the pandemic with the least harm possible.

Partying during Curfew

On 6 April 2020, Scotland's chief medical officer, Dr Catherine Calderwood, resigned after making non-essential trips to her second home during the state-imposed coronavirus lockdown. First Minister Nicola Sturgeon underlined while commenting on Dr Calderwood's resignation that her mistake 'risks distracting from and undermining confidence in the government's public health message at this crucial time. That is not a risk either of us is willing to take'.⁸ It appears that the members of the Georgian ruling party and government officials do not think so. During the first infection wave, the curfew started on 31 March and lasted until 23 May 2020.⁹ A second curfew was put in place on 9 November 2020 and ended on 1 July 2021.¹⁰ Moreover, according to Ordinance No. 322 of the Government of Georgia 'On the Approval of Isolation and Quarantine Rules', social gatherings (such as weddings, celebrations, funerals, etc.) of more than 10 people were banned. For violation of this rule private entities would be fined GEL 2000,¹¹ legal entities 10,000 GEL.¹² The cases discussed below dem-

onstrate examples of how GD leaders violated the rules established by the government they approved.

Case Number One: On 27 February 2021, the government-critical TV channel *Mtavari Arkhi* streamed a video showing GD members and leaders and their friends/family members having a party on 23 February during the curfew at GD Member of Parliament (MP) Anton Obloashili's house. Allegedly, they were celebrating the arrest of the opposition leader, United National Movement (UNM) chair Nika Melia, who had been detained that same day. But in his interview with *Mtavari Arkhi* TV, MP Obolashvili said that they were celebrating his birthday.¹³ According to the website of the Parliament of Georgia, Anton Obolashvili was born on 1 March 1974.¹⁴

Case Number Two: On 27 February 2021 at 22:10, a friend of MP Anzor Bolkvadze's family went live on Facebook (a voice clearly saying 'we are live'). In the video, one could see people (among them Anzor Bolkvadze) dancing. The video was soon deleted, but member of UNM Misha Bolkvadze managed to download the video. MP Bolkvadze stated that it was an old video from his grandson's birthday party celebrated one year prior.¹⁵

Case Number Three: In February 2021, public relations manager of the National Center for Disease Control and Public Health Nino Mamukashvili posted pictures on her Facebook profile. From the pictures, it was obvious that she was preparing for a celebration. After receiving a call from Radio Liberty, she deleted some pictures from the album. While making comments she said that it was a small (15-person) celebration of her son's wedding. 'There are 1000-person weddings in Ambassador [Hotel in Georgia]. Why is 15 people a problem?', she commented to journalists, and underlined that the media 'knew better'.¹⁶ Indeed, on 30 January 2021, *Formula* TV reported that Anuki Areshidze, the wife of Tbilisi Mayor Kakhi Kaladze, was attending the afore-

8 'Coronavirus: Scotland's chief medical officer resigns over lockdown trips', BBC, 6 April 2020. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-52177171> (accessed 8 September 2022).

9 'დეპუტატის წვეულება პანდემიის გამო დაწესებული შეზღუდვების ფონზე' [MP partying in light of the recent COVID restrictions], *Negazeti*.ge, 28 February 2021. Available at: <https://batumelebi.netgazeti.ge/news/331222/> (accessed 8 September 2022).

10 'Georgia to Lift COVID-19 Curfew Starting July', *Civil Georgia*, 22 June 2021. Available at: <https://civil.ge/archives/428638> (accessed 8 September 2022). During the first wave, a 9-hour curfew (21:00–06:00) was announced on 31 March 2020 and lasted until 23 May. The second curfew (22:00–05:00) started on 9 November 2020 and lasted until 1 July 2021. From 28 November 2020 to 17 May 2021, the nationwide curfew started at 21:00 and lasted until 05:00. From 17 May, the curfew started at 23:00.

11 709.32 euros according to the National Bank of Georgia official rate as of November 30, 2022

12 'Transfer, concession of space for social events prohibited in Georgia amid rising Covid-19 cases', *Agenda*.ge, 8 April 2021. Available at: <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2021/931> (accessed 8 September 2022).

13 'წვეულება მილიონერთა დასახლებაში – ნიკა მელიას დაკავება "ოცნებამ" მდიდრული ზეიმით აღნიშნა' [Celebration in the settlement of millionaires—the arrest of Nika Melia was celebrated by 'Georgian Dream' with a lavish celebration], *Mtavari*.tv, 27 February 2021. Available at: <https://mtavari.tv/news/34057-cveuleba-milionerta-dasakhlebashi-nika-melias> (accessed 8 September 2022).

14 See 'Anton Obolashvili', available at: <https://parliament.ge/en/parliament-members/7132/biography> (accessed 8 September 2022).

15 'დეპუტატის წვეულება პანდემიის გამო დაწესებული შეზღუდვების ფონზე' [MP's party amid the restrictions imposed due to the pandemic], *Negazeti*.ge, 28 February 2021. Available at: <https://batumelebi.netgazeti.ge/news/331222/> (accessed 8 September 2022).

16 'NCDC-ის პიარ-მენეჯერმა შვილის ჯვრისწერა, შეზღუდვის მიუხედავად, წვეულებით აღნიშნა' [NCDC's PR manager celebrated her son's wedding with a party despite restrictions], *Radiotavisupleba*.ge, 8 February 2021. Available at: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31092066.html> (accessed 8 September 2022)

mentioned wedding in violation of the COVID-19-related regulations.¹⁷

The news outlet *Batumelebi* contacted the Labour Inspection Office (LIO) and asked if members of the parliament, public officials, and their family members were fined; in the received answer LIO described the main functions of the office but the response did not contain information as to whether a fine had been imposed.¹⁸ From these examples, it is clear that those who have political power and were responsible for managing the COVID-19 crisis and minimising the death toll and socio-economic impact on the population used their power to avoid the restrictions and enjoy parties with their friends, at the same time police were fining homeless people for being outdoors during the curfew.¹⁹ Institutions that were calling citizens to follow rules, stay at home and protect everyone's life failed to become role models. While curfews and strict rules affected many citizens' social conditions, political actors were using their power to avoid the rules they themselves put in place.

Restrictions as a Political Tool?

On 26 July 2021, Prime Minister (PM) Irakli Garibashvili commented on the increased number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 and blamed demonstrations that were conducted to protest the death of the Pirveli TV cameraman Lekso Lashkarava.²⁰ Protesters were demanding the resignation of PM Garibashvili.²¹ This was a direct attempt to demonise the citizens who were exercising their right to assemble and make them accountable for the spread of the virus, while in two weeks PM Garibashvili attended the gathering to celebrate the victory of Georgian Olympic athlete Lasha Bekauri at the Summer Olympic games in Tokyo, despite this being a violation of the COVID regulations.²²

Allegedly, COVID restrictions were used as a political tool during the elections. On 31 October 2020, parliamentary elections took place in Georgia which were followed by demonstrations as opposition declared that election was rigged and announced 'to hold protests until a new election [was] called'.²³ One of the most important public gatherings was planned for 9 November. On 6 November, due to the dramatic worsening of the epidemiological situation, PM Garibashvili announced a tightening of restrictions. Even though he underlined that this would not affect the freedom of expression, the next day the Government of Georgia declared enforcement of a curfew in seven large cities starting on 9 November. Consequently, people who were participating in the demonstrations were fined (Davituri, 2021: 47–48). Even though it is difficult to prove that the main reason behind imposing a curfew was disruption of the planned demonstrations, it is clear that the GD-led government intervened and the right to assembly was violated.

On 24 June 2021, PM Gharibashvili announced an initiative to waive the COVID-related fines. The offered amnesty was a big relief for citizens struggling financially, but was problematic in two regards. On the one hand, it was perceived by some opposition politicians as bribing of voters²⁴ and a tool for a political manipulation. According to the watchdog organisation IDFI, this decision allegedly was made only because of 'upcoming local self-government elections or other political goals'.²⁵ On the other hand, amidst the rise in COVID deaths and low rate of vaccination, it gave a precedent that undermined the rules. Describing these examples, once again, demonstrates how institutions failed to become role models for citizens and successfully manage the pandemic.

17 'შაბათის ფორმულა: აკრძალვების ფონზე კალაძის ცოლი ქორწილში იყო, დეპუტატი კი დაბადების დღეზე' [Saturday's formula: amid the bans, Kaladze's wife attended the wedding, and the MP birthday], Formulanews.ge, 30 January 2021. Available at: <https://formulanews.ge/News/44470> (accessed 8 September 2022).

18 'დააჯარიმეს დეპუტატები ხალხმრავალი წვეულებების გამო? – რას ამბობს შრომის ინსპექცია?' [Were MPs fined for crowded parties?—What does the Labour Inspection Office say?], Netgazeti.ge, 7 April 2021. Available at: <https://batumelebi.netgazeti.ge/news/338596/> (accessed 8 September 2022).

19 'EMC მოუწოდებს შსს-ს შეწყვიტოს კომენდანტის საათის დროს ქუჩაში მცხოვრებ უსახლკაროთა დაჯარიმება' [EMC calls on the Ministry of Internal Affairs to stop fining homeless people living on the streets during curfew], Socialjustice.org.ge, 13 November 2020. Available at: <https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/emc-moutsodebs-shss-s-shetsqvitos-komendantis-saatis-dros-kuchashi-mtskhovreb-usakhlkarotadajarimeba> (accessed 8 September 2022).

20 On 5 July 2021, during the anti-Tbilisi Pride demonstrations, far-right homophobic groups physically assaulted journalists from multiple media outlets. Pirveli TV cameraman Lekso Lashkarava was amongst them. On 11 July, Lashkarava was found dead.

21 'პრემიერის თქმით, ქვეყანაში ახალი ლოკდაუნი არ იგეგმება' [According to the Prime Minister, no new lockdown is planned in the country], Netgazeti.ge, 26 July 2021. Available at: <https://netgazeti.ge/news/556170/> (accessed 8 September 2022).

22 'შერე რა, რომ ვკვიდობდი, დანაშაულია კეიფი? – ღარიბაშვილი' [So what if I was partying, is partying a crime?—Garibashvili], Netgazeti.ge, 8 August 2021. Available at: <https://netgazeti.ge/news/558396/>

23 'Ruling party in Georgia wins parliamentary vote, opposition protests', Reuters.com, 31 October 2020. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-georgia-election-idUSKBN27G0CY> (accessed 20 October 2022).

24 'ჯარიმების გაუქმება არასამართლიანია მათთვის, ვინც უკვე გადაიხდა – დამენია' ['Eliminating of fines is unfair to those who already paid—Damenia'], Netgazeti.ge, 24 June 2021. Available at: <https://netgazeti.ge/news/550242/> (accessed 26 November 2022).

25 'IDFI Negatively Assesses the Suggested Amnesty for Violations of Covid-related Regulations', IDFI.ge, 24 June 2021. Available at: https://idfi.ge/en/idfis_statement_on_amnesty_announced_for_violations_of_covid_regulations (accessed 24 October 2022).

State within the State

Over the last few years, the GOC has demonstrated that it can influence the political and social process in the country²⁶ and thus '[become] a source of political legitimacy for Georgian governments' (Chitanava, 2015). During the outbreak of the pandemic, the GOC was stubborn and non-compliant with the pandemic-related rules established by the government. They continued religious services in the temples during the lockdown, and moreover, did not change the practice of sharing spoons for communion, which may have contributed to the high spread of the pandemic. The government abstained from fining priests or church members, which once again showed their weakness and proved how powerful the GOC is and how it can use its power informally to threaten public officials. According to the U.S. Department of State 2021 Report on International Religious Freedom, Georgia's 'Laws and policies grant the GOC unique privileges' which during the pandemic was manifested in 'informally' granting GOC members with COVID-19 curfew exceptions, while members of other religious groups were asked to apply their rules to existing restrictions (U.S. Department of State, 2022).

On 20 March 2020, the GOC Synod decided to prioritise internal Church rules and practices, such as religious services that are attended by parish members and sharing spoons for communion, over the quarantine measures enforced by the government. On 23 March, the government prohibited gatherings of more than 10 persons (Machitidze/ Temirov, 2020: 84), while the GOC was against closing the church. The crisis between the government and the church escalated as Easter approached. Though at the beginning of the pandemic the government was saying that everyone had to follow the established rules, on 14 April then-PM Giorgi Gakharia declared that he could not call citizens not to go to the church for Easter prayers, but neither could he call them to break the laws. He also underlined that he hoped citizens would take responsibility (and would not go).²⁷ In the end, the Easter liturgy was indeed held.

Another case in which the GOC demonstrated its power was its resistance of the vaccination process, sharing disinformation amongst its members and opposing the government's efforts. High-ranking clerics from the GOC disseminated disinformation about vaccination, which was referred to as a 'devilish act' and an attempt to enslave and subjugate people.²⁸ Archbishop Davit Isakadze stated that RFID (radio-frequency identification) chips could be inserted in COVID-19 vaccines and that the vaccine consisted of cell lines from an aborted embryo (Talakhadze, 2021). In March 2021, then Director General of the National Center for Disease Control and Public Health Amiran Gamkrelidze appealed to the patriarchate to stand by them and asked for special cooperation in the vaccination process, as the 'population believes in you very much'. 'The church cannot take responsibility for the propaganda of vaccination, as the above is the competence and responsibility of health workers' was the answer of Andria Jagmaidze, Head of the Public Relations Department of the Patriarchate.²⁹ After around 8 months, the GOC issued a statement declaring that 'it is unacceptable for clergymen to prohibit believers from being vaccinated for religious reasons'.³⁰ But it was too late; the damage was done.

The Georgian government's decision to start negotiations with GOC representatives, grant them exclusive privileges and allow parishioners to attend the Easter Vigil during the curfew while restricting the right of movement for other religious organisations are all examples of how the GOC can abuse power informally to achieve its aims. Moreover, this compromise made the clerics believe that they could have influence on other pandemic-related issues (for example, the vaccination process). On the other hand, it demonstrated that while making decisions, the interests of minority groups are not always considered, as they are not members of the dominant religious groups³¹ and are not powerful enough.

Conclusion

The outbreak of COVID-19 forced states and their governments to act in times of uncertainty. They had to

26 For example, GOC member clergies' involvement in GD elections campaigns; priests who participated in the attack on gay right activists on 17 May 2013 have been acquitted; the GD-led government negotiated with the GOC over adopting anti-discrimination laws and also, the GOC influenced the process of amending the constitution to define marriage as a union between a man and a woman.

27 'დაავარიმეს დეპუტატები ხალხმრავალი წვეულებების გამო? – რას ამბობს შრომის ინსპექცია?' [Were MPs fined for crowded parties?—What does the Labor Inspection Office say?], *Netgazeti.ge*, 7 April 2021. Available at: <https://batumelebi.netgazeti.ge/news/338596/> (accessed 8 September 2022).

28 'Anti-Vaccine narratives in Georgia', *Crpe.ro* Available at: <https://crpe.ro/eapfakes/countries/georgia/anti-vaccine-narratives-in-georgia/> (accessed 23 October 2022).

29 'მამო, ავიცრა? ექიმო, ვილოტო?' [Father, should I vaccinate? Doctor, should I pray?], *Radiotavisupleba.ge*, 17 March 2021. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3zjkjlr> (accessed 23 October 2022).

30 'Georgian Church: it is unacceptable for clergymen to prevent believers from getting vaccinated', *Jamnews.net*, 29 November 2021. Available at: <https://jam-news.net/georgian-church-it-is-unacceptable-for-clergymen-to-prevent-believers-from-getting-vaccinated/> (accessed 23 October 2022).

31 'რელიგიური ორგანიზაციები მთავრობას: უმცირესობაში ყოფნა არ უნდა იყოს დაკნინების საფუძველი' [Religious Organizations to Government: Being in a minority should not be grounds for humiliation], *Formulanews.ge*, 1 December 2020. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3N8KT16> (accessed 23 October 2022).

make difficult decisions affecting the lives of their citizens and establish new rules and push people to acquire new habits. As discussed above, formal institutions, and sometimes informal ones as well, can have a positive influence on citizens in times of crisis. The Georgian case demonstrates that governmental officials on the one hand and the GOC on the other failed to set an example for their citizens. They not only attempted to sidestep the

established restrictions, but they also used their power to affect political and social processes. One of the reasons why Georgia morphed from a success story to a country that had handled the pandemic poorly may well be that the elite failed to become role models for society. Furthermore, there is a high chance that the poorly handled pandemic is the reason why 52% of respondents rate the performance of the government as ‘bad’ or ‘very bad’.³²

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32 ‘RATEGOV4: How would you rate the performance of the current government?’, *Caucasusbarometer.org*, February 2022. Available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/nf2022ge/RATEGOV4/> (accessed 8 September 2022).

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The Caucasus Analytical Digest (CAD) is a bimonthly internet publication jointly produced by the CRRC-Georgia (<http://crrc.ge/en/>), the Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen (www.forschungsstelle.uni-bremen.de), the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich (www.css.ethz.ch), the Center for Eastern European Studies (CEES) at the University of Zurich (www.cees.uzh.ch), and the German Association for East European Studies (DGO). The Caucasus Analytical Digest analyzes the political, economic, and social situation in the three South Caucasus states of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia within the context of international and security dimensions of this region's development. All contributions to the Caucasus Analytical Digest undergo a fast-track peer review.

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Layout: Cengiz Kibaroglu, Matthias Neumann, and Michael Clemens

ISSN 1867 9323 © 2023 by Forschungsstelle Osteuropa, Bremen and Center for Security Studies, Zürich

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