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

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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=IwAR3R0XvS4vacXP2FQgnv9RjNXPRXbtj6vthFmP--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-dasakhlebash-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 'დაავარიმეს 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 შს-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-usakhllkarotadajarimeba> (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 ვკეიფობდი, 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 'შამო, ავიცრა? ექიმო, ვილოცო?' [Father, should I vaccinate? Doctor, should I pray?], *Radiotavisupleba.ge*, 17 March 2021. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3zjkjir> (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

About the Author

Tamar Tolordava studied Political Science and Soviet Studies at Ilia State University. In 2019, she continued her studies at the University of Glasgow, and in 2020 was awarded a Master of Science degree in Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies. She currently works as an assistant professor and researcher at Ilia State University. In autumn 2021, she was a CEES fellow at the University of Zurich.

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