



The Legitimizing Role of International Rankings: The Case Study of Georgia

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Abstract:

This paper examines how international indices can confer liberal democratic legitimacy on a hybrid, competitive authoritarian regime. By examining the case of Georgia and employing discourse analysis in the style of the Essex School, it demonstrates that reputed international organizations have depoliticized key concepts in their rankings to varying degrees across the spheres of budget transparency, economic freedom, corruption, and the rule of law. “Depoliticization” and “repoliticization” are understood in relation to “politics,” conceived as the power-laden nature of human relationships operating at the macro level of an entire regime. The paper outlines three modes of depoliticization – technicalization, economicization, and criminalization – and illustrates how these contribute to the construction of authoritative international indices. It then shows how, in certain instances, the Georgian government repoliticized the previously depoliticized concepts and used Georgia’s ranking achievements to assert its liberal democratic credentials. The paper argues that the legitimizing discourse surrounding international indices can take on a peculiar character, in which depoliticization leads to a powerful form of repoliticization, contradicting the original aim of international rankings to promote liberal democratic values and institutions. It concludes by discussing the implications of these findings for understanding the

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complex relationship between non-democratic regimes and the international liberal community, and suggests directions for future research.

Keywords:

international rankings, hybrid regimes, competitive authoritarianism, Georgia, depoliticization

1. Introduction

The authoritative rankings that compare countries on various political, economic, and social indicators, produced mainly by international organizations, have long been recognized for their potent role in international relations (Davis et al., 2012; Kelley, 2017). Due to their symbolic power in global and domestic politics, these international indices have been subject to fierce criticism from various perspectives, leading to abundant academic literature on the subject. For example, international rankings have been criticized for their methodological inadequacies and poor data collection practices (see Jerven, 2013; Cooley & Snyder, 2015; Firchow & Mac Ginty, 2017). It has been argued that these indices rely on specific conceptual frameworks influenced by particular economic, cultural, or ideological factors, resulting in biased and sometimes harmful outcomes (see Andersson & Heywood, 2009; Bhuta, 2015). As Zürn (2018) argued, international governmental and non-governmental organizations exercised their epistemic authority through international rankings, thereby creating specific governing regimes. It was even contended that international indices reinforced social hierarchies between nation-states (see Broome et al., 2018).

However, despite the extensive academic literature, the reactions of individual political regimes to international rankings have received relatively little attention. Particularly little attention has been paid to why and how various types of states can use their high positions in these rankings to their political advantage. This article analyzes the mechanisms by which international rankings can serve the legitimizing purposes of a competitive authoritarian regime. It highlights their complex impact on the nature of governance at global and local levels.

To drive home this point, the paper will approach a case study of Georgia using discourse analysis, primarily as it is pursued by the Essex School (see Laclau, 2005, 2007; Glynos & Howarth, 2007; Glynos et al., 2021). This approach will be used to investigate the complex discursive mechanisms through which the depoliticization of rankings is achieved in some of the spheres where Georgia has often been regarded as a high achiever – such as budget transparency, economic freedom, corruption, and the rule of law – and to demonstrate how various government actors have successfully repoliticized

these previously depoliticized terms or signifiers, thereby conferring liberal democratic legitimacy onto a competitive authoritarian hybrid regime.

The aim of this study is not to describe the overall legitimization discourse surrounding international rankings in Georgia, but rather to show which discursive mechanisms may be at play in some of the non-democratic regime's successful cases of legitimacy-building through international indices. For this reason, the selected cases are rather illustrative, rather than truly representative. The central argument of this article is that international rankings can be used effectively to legitimize a competitive authoritarian regime, thereby contradicting their original purpose: to promote liberal democratic values and institutions worldwide. Identifying cases in which the authors of international indices inadvertently undermine their own objectives – by creating conditions that allow non-democratic regimes to exploit the rankings to their advantage – is, in itself, a valuable finding.

In what follows, the paper will first offer a literature review on the inadequacies of international rankings and describe the theoretical orientation of this work. Second, the methodology employed in this study will be described. Then, it will be demonstrated how international indices pursued the three discursive modes of depoliticization, and how the Georgian government's repoliticization efforts were achieved. The paper will conclude by emphasizing the holistic nature of the legitimization discourse involving international indices, outlining the political and practical implications of this study, and providing general directions for future research.

2. Literature review

The methodological underpinnings of international rankings and the validity of data collection techniques and actual practices have been repeatedly scrutinized in the scholarly literature (see Andersson & Heywood, 2009; Jerven, 2013; Bhuta, 2015; Cooley & Snyder, 2015; Firchow & Mac Ginty, 2017; Broome et al., 2018). One notable strand of criticism concerns the conceptualization of the key variables (Knack, 2006; Lambsdorff, 2006; Andersson & Heywood, 2009). Furthermore, important methodological questions have been raised about whether aggregating different variables necessarily captures the essence of a given concept. The World Bank's now-discontinued Ease of Doing Business index is a case in point. Before the ranking was scrapped, an external panel review was initiated, resulting in an 84-page final report that found the index covered various indicators that often had "little meaning when aggregated with arbitrary weights" (Alfaro et al., 2021, p. 5). The criticism of the justifiability of aggregation can also be applied to many other rankings that use arbitrary weights to calculate scores for their main variables.

The flawed methodological underpinnings of international rankings are not

simply a matter of scientific accuracy. Specific international indices have an authority over how to define accepted norms and behavior, and for this reason, their flawed methodology inevitably has a political dimension. As Zürn (2018, pp. 51-52) argues, we can distinguish between two types of authority: the authority to make decisions and the authority to offer interpretations. The former is a form of direct political authority, while the latter is epistemic. Drawing on Peter Haas's ground-breaking work, Zürn (2018, pp. 53-54) provides two defining features of epistemic authority. First, it is based on expert knowledge and moral integrity. For this reason, its positions are considered impartial and grounded in relevant knowledge. Second, epistemic authority is not based on its argumentative prowess or on its ability to convince people with relevant facts and arguments. Instead, there is a common epistemological framework that enables such an authority to legitimize knowledge inequality. For this reason, the reputation of a particular person or organization is essential for exercising epistemic authority. Drawing on Zürn's work, Kelley and Simmons (2021, p. 170) show that global performance indicators (GPI), defined as a "named collection of rank-ordered data that purports to represent the past or projected performance of different units," such as international rankings, exercise their epistemic authority by, among other things, presenting their data as "truth," avoiding public contestation.

The epistemic authority of international rankings can have various harmful effects on the liberal and democratic nature of the international system. For example, Broome et al. (2018) contend that, by employing poor scientific practices, specific international rankings reproduce social hierarchies between nation-states by appealing to the epistemic authority of rational-scientific expertise that underlies these indices. Some critics argue that the mere fact that rankings produce politically authoritative appraisals, detached from actual political processes, is problematic because it banishes legitimate public debate over political concepts and ideas from the public sphere (see Beaumont & Towns, 2021, p. 1472).

Thus, the existing literature challenges the epistemic authority of international rankings regarding the nature of international regimes. Nevertheless, there is little understanding of the political implications of how epistemic authority is exercised by the indices for individual political regimes. While it has been argued that the individual governments can take advantage of the rankings by playing "the ranking game" (Rosga & Satterthwaite, 2008; Schueth, 2015), the political implications of this for the nature of individual political regimes have been critically underexplored. Based on the case study of Georgia, this paper will argue that rankings can be employed to justify the non-democratic character of the entire regime, rather than to facilitate or justify specific non-democratic practices. As will be shown, a non-democratic regime can exploit rankings to confer itself with liberal democratic legitimacy. Moreover, the paper will elucidate the specific mechanisms by which the rankings' epistemic authority can be used for non-democratic purposes.

3. The case of Georgia

The paper will rely on the case study of Georgia's competitive authoritarian regime under the ruling party, Georgian Dream (GD), from 2012 to 2023. Borrowing from Levitsky and Way (2010), "competitive authoritarianism" is defined as a non-democratic form of governance in which the political playing field is skewed in favor of the incumbent, who uses state institutions and resources to their advantage. Competitive authoritarianism, as used in this article, will be regarded as a subcategory of the so-called "hybrid" regimes. GD's governance during this period can be characterized as a regime in which opposition forces were systematically disadvantaged relative to the incumbent (see Lebanidze & Kakachia, 2017, 2023; Aprasidze & Siroky, 2020; Cassani & Natalizia, 2023). As Aprasidze and Siroky (2020) demonstrate, despite Bidzina Ivanishvili's retirement from the prime minister's post in 2013, he retained effective control over Georgia's governing institutions, maintaining an oligarchic rule. However, during this time, Georgian Dream's continued hold on power did not categorize the country as a fully consolidated authoritarian regime; according to Lebanidze and Kakachia (2023), the Georgian opposition could still win elections. Therefore, the ruling party needed to build its legitimacy in the eyes of the electorate.

In the process of building its legitimacy, the paper argues that in certain instances, the GD ruling party exploited international rankings to its advantage by flaunting its purported liberal democratic credentials. To unravel the exact mechanisms at play, the study examines the discourses of both governments and the rankings' authors, treating them as a unified whole. This overarching discourse of legitimation revolved around discursive processes of depoliticization (primarily pursued by international indices) and repoliticization (undertaken mainly by the Georgian government) of the data of the international rankings. In this context, the "political" is understood as denoting the power-laden nature of human relationships operating at the macro level of an entire regime. While politics is said to be everywhere, including in family and social circles, this paper focuses primarily on the political regime as a whole and the distinctions between democratic and non-democratic forms of governance. In view of the foregoing, depoliticization of the rankings data involved stripping particular concepts of their intrinsic connection to the nature of a particular political regime, whereas repoliticization involved reactivating this connection.

The paper shows that despite the mutual contradiction between the two discursive movements involving international rankings – depoliticization and repoliticization – the former process reinforced the latter. Specifically, on the one hand, the authors of the rankings depoliticized the indices to varying degrees and in various ways, granting Georgia's competitive authoritarian regime high scores. On the other hand, in particular instances, the Georgian government repoliticized the rankings by attributing political

meanings to their primary signifiers – the names of the rankings or sub-rankings.

While the discourses of repoliticization tended to be relatively homogeneous, various degrees of depoliticization in the rankings were achieved through discursive processes that, in this article, are termed “technicalization,” “economicization,” and “criminalization.” Technicalization involved focusing solely on the formal, procedural, or “mechanical” characteristics of phenomena, disregarding the underlying substantive power relations across the entire regime. Economicization involved prioritizing strictly economic or financial aspects of political practices, such as freedom, while neglecting their political dimensions. “Economy” here is understood in a non-political sense, as referring to the factual distribution of material resources, irrespective of the power relations that undergird them. For instance, from an economic point of view, a rich slave who is allowed to enjoy a luxurious way of life by the master is free, but from a political point of view, this is obviously not the case. Finally, criminalization entailed defining criminal phenomena in a country, such as corruption, without considering the broader political or power relations at a macro, regime level. For example, a grossly authoritarian and repressive political regime may also crack down hard on ordinary crime, falsely portraying itself as the guarantor of order and security. From a political perspective, because the government itself is criminal, it does not make much sense to assess the criminal situation in a country without accounting for the nature of the regime as a whole.

4. Methodology

To develop the main argument of this article, discourse analysis is employed in the style of the Essex School. This approach is deemed particularly suitable for two main reasons. First, it embraces the concept of “radical undecidability,” which asserts the incomplete nature of the systems of meaning (see Laclau, 2007, p. 53). Such a perspective suggests that political concepts are not inherent but are constructed through complex discursive processes. Second, theorists of the Essex School not only analyze discourses as fluid structures of meaning formation but also seek to uncover underlying logics within discursive formations (see Laclau, 2005; Glynos and Howarth, 2007; Glynos et al., 2021). Similarly, this article aims to illuminate the hidden logics of discursive processes involving international rankings, explicitly focusing on depoliticization, repoliticization, and their interaction.

Three main ontological premises underpin this study. First, a distinction is drawn between “signifiers,” or terms or concepts, and “signifieds,” or phenomena. For example, “freedom” is a signifier, but it can describe a variety of phenomena, such as the absence of physical barriers, political rights, inner feelings, or religious experiences. When we say that freedom means any of the above-mentioned or other things, we

associate the signifier “freedom” with particular phenomena or “signifieds”. Thus, meaning implies a connection between a signifier and a signified. Second, no signifier can be unequivocal. Each signifier can refer to different phenomena for different persons, cultures, or collectivities. Third, there are special kinds of signifiers whose interpretations are not fixed, as various opposing forces constantly give them content. These are called “floating signifiers” (Laclau 2007, pp. 94-95). For example, “freedom” is a floating or an empty signifier that political actors heavily contest. Even though this term is always subject to competing interpretations, it remains perennially “empty,” allowing different actors to appeal to it by filling it with their preferred meanings.

The paper is concerned with how key signifiers of international rankings are deprived of or granted political meanings, or, in other words, how they are depoliticized and repoliticized to varying degrees. In view of this, the pertinent signifiers are floating ones, as their contents change in response to the “inputs” of different contending actors. The difference between one kind of meaning that involves depoliticization and the other that involves repoliticization is understood in this article as the degree to which they refer to politics from a macro perspective of the whole political regime. Thus, politicized concepts define particular phenomena in terms of the state’s macrostructures as a whole. For example, “freedom” may describe an ability to make free decisions in particular situations, even in extremely totalitarian societies. It can be said to be depoliticized in this case. A repoliticization of the concept “freedom” occurs when it again refers to the conditions (or their lack) created by a country’s particular political regime.

While most traditional positivist approaches in the social sciences strongly caution against selecting only successful cases – or, in causal analysis, selecting on the dependent variable – this study deliberately does so. In qualitative research, such selection can be justified for various reasons, as has been extensively argued in the methodology literature (see Collier & Mahoney, 1996; Gerring, 2006; Goertz & Mahoney, 2012). The main reason for this choice lies in the study’s research goal. This paper does not aim to describe the overall nature of the studied discourse. Instead, it aims to showcase specific mechanisms through which legitimation discourses operate – namely, to demonstrate how, in particular cases, selected purposefully, international rankings inadvertently help a non-democratic regime build its legitimacy.

The data for this study were collected through the following steps. The initial phase involved identifying successful instances of GD flaunting its liberal democratic credentials by citing international indices. The above was done using conventional Internet search engines and by consulting Georgian fact-checking websites such as FactCheck.ge. Four spheres were analyzed to illustrate GD’s use of international indices: budget transparency, economic freedom, corruption, and the rule of law. These are areas in which rankings and other authoritative sources have often cited Georgia as a high achiever. For each sphere, one influential international ranking positively cited by

the Georgian ruling party was selected. In the sphere of budget transparency, International Budget Partnership's Open Budget Survey was selected, as this is the ranking in which Georgia achieved the spectacular number one position in the world (International Budget Partnership, 2021). In the sphere of economic freedom, the Heritage Foundation's Index of Economic Freedom, and in the sphere of corruption, Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index were selected for analysis due to Georgia's historically high rankings in these indices (The Heritage Foundation "Georgia", 2024; Silagadze, 2025). Moreover, in the sphere of the rule of law, the World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index was selected for its recent role in justifying the Georgian government's rift with its traditional ally, the United States (see Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, 2023).

In the following sections of the article, the paper examines several methods by which international rankings sought to depoliticize indices to varying degrees and in different ways. It describes three discursive processes of depoliticization – technicalization, economicization, and criminalization – and discusses how each was implemented and subsequently countered by repoliticization efforts from the Georgian government. Finally, the paper aims to demonstrate how these counter-discourses contributed to an overarching discourse of legitimization, where depoliticization reinforced repoliticization.

5. Analysis and results

5.1. Depoliticization through technicalization

The most elementary form of depoliticization was at play in constructing and interpreting the International Budget Partnership's (IBP) Open Budget Survey. The IBP describes itself as "the world's leading nonprofit organization promoting more responsible, effective, and equitable management of public money" (International Budget Partnership, 2024b). The IBP Open Budget Survey, first launched in 2006, measures the "essential aspects of governance and accountability" through three "essentials": Participation ("Are there formal and meaningful opportunities for the public, including the most disadvantaged, to engage in the national budget process?"), oversight ("Are oversight institutions – the legislature, the national audit office, and independent fiscal institution(s) – in place and enabled to function properly?") and transparency ("Is comprehensive budget information from the central government available to the public in a useful time frame?") (International Budget Partnership, 2024a). As can be seen, transparency is understood in its technical sense, as the public availability of the eight key budget documents that reveal how public resources are raised, planned, and spent during the given budget year (International Budget Partnership, 2024a). In this context, "public availability" merely means that documents

are published online promptly and include all necessary and valuable information (International Budget Partnership, 2024a).

What the IBP does, not just with the floating signifier “transparency” but with all alleged “essential aspects of governance and accountability,” is what can be called depoliticization through “technicalization.” In particular, formal mechanisms of participation, oversight, and transparency are given the upper hand over definitions that reflect the nature of the entire political regime. The Open Budget Survey does not suggest that the budgets of authoritarian or hybrid regimes achieve complete transparency, as characterized by the absence of corruption, nepotism, clandestine transactions, or the misuse of public funds. Instead, the ranking merely measures whether specific formal mechanisms are in place to ensure transparency. In view of this, it should come as no surprise that the IBP’s 2021 Open Budget Survey produced somewhat unusual results. For example, in the Public Participation Ranking, not only did hybrid regimes (Georgia and Ukraine) occupy fourth and fifth places, respectively, outperforming most consolidated democracies, but also solidly authoritarian countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo and Russia had considerably higher scores than mature liberal democracies such as Germany or Sweden (International Budget Partnership, 2021). In the “Budget Oversight” ranking, similar peculiarities abounded, such as Vietnam and Russia outperforming liberal democratic countries like Portugal, the United Kingdom, and Spain (International Budget Partnership, 2021). Furthermore, in the Transparency Ranking, Georgia ranked first and was considered to have the most transparent budget in the world (International Budget Partnership, 2021).

The Georgian government quickly seized on the opportunity to depoliticize the term “transparency” through the IBP and attempted to confer liberal democratic legitimacy on itself by highlighting Georgia’s spectacular ranking achievement. For example, in March 2023, Prime Minister Garibashvili, in an interview with the pro-GD TV channel Imedi, defended the ruling party’s initiative to introduce the “foreign agents’ law” in Georgia by citing Georgia’s supposed “achievements” in transparency (Radio Tavisupleba, 2023). The proposed law required individuals, civil society organizations, and media outlets that received at least 20% of their funding from foreign sources to be registered as “agents of foreign influence” with the Georgian Justice Ministry (Cordell, 2023). After thousands of Georgians protested against the law in the streets, leading to dramatic clashes with the riot police and Georgia’s international partners strongly condemning the government’s actions, GD temporarily dropped its proposal on March 9th (Kirby, 2023). Garibashvili attempted to justify the ruling party’s effort to pass the law in the parliament in an interview with Imedi TV that took place on March 12th by stating the following:

“These NGOs call upon us every day and demand more transparency, which is, of course, good. Our government is regarded as one of the most transparent in the world and a frontrunner among democracies. For example, according to budget transparency

[ranking], we are number one in the world” (Radio Tavisupleba, 2023).

In this context, Garibashvili imbued the floating signifier “transparency” with a meaning that referenced the nature of the entire political regime. Clearly, the NGOs that criticized the Georgian government were demanding greater transparency in the sense of the government's democratic accountability to its citizens. Garibashvili invoked the data of the ranking – that is, Georgia's leading position in the world – to drive home the point that GD was indeed transparent in the sense that the NGO's, such as Transparency International and others, employed this term, claiming that Georgia was a “frontrunner among democracies.” This, of course, directly contradicted how the IBP construed its Open Budget Survey in a strictly technical sense, as can be seen above.

It is noteworthy that the Georgian government was not deterred from exploiting the ranking's depoliticized nature even after the IBP clarified its position, emphasizing the index's essentially technical character. On March 14th, 2023, in response to Garibashvili's statements, the IBP published an official note “on recent events in Georgia” on its website to underscore the formal nature of its ranking once again, following the forceful efforts to repoliticize it on behalf of the Georgian government. In the note, the IBP expressed “disappointment” about the Georgian prime minister's words and argued that Garibashvili misconstrued Georgia's ranking in the Open Budget Survey to justify the proposed controversial law. The IBP contended that the Open Budget Survey measured “transparency, oversight, and formal public participation in national government processes,” rather than the extent to which the Georgian government was entirely “transparent, accountable, and inclusive with its public outside the budget process” (International Budget Partnership, 2023a). To put it differently, the organization juxtaposed two distinct meanings of the floating signifier “transparency”: The one that described the extent to which the political regime was really transparent, accountable, and inclusive with its citizens – or what we may call “transparency” in a political sense, and the other that merely measured formal mechanisms in place that were meant to ensure transparency – what in this article is dubbed a “technical” meaning of the term. In this note, the IBP unequivocally endorsed the second meaning of the concept when granting Georgia first place in their rankings, also citing Transparency International Georgia's study about the alleged increase in high-level, “political” corruption in the country (International Budget Partnership, 2023a).

Garibashvili was not deterred from flaunting Georgia's leading position in the IBP's Open Budget Survey, despite the organization's efforts to endorse a technical and non-political meaning of the key signifier “transparency.” For example, in May 2023, during the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Budapest, Garibashvili reiterated that, according to the 2021 survey, Georgia ranked first among 120 countries worldwide in terms of budget transparency (First Channel, 2023b). The background context of this statement was clearly political, as it served to build liberal democratic legitimacy for the state, as Garibashvili cited the ranking to substantiate his claim that

Georgia was as close as ever to becoming a full member of the family of European nations, thanks to large-scale government reforms. Moreover, according to the Georgian prime minister, Georgia was historically driven by the ideal of freedom to achieve this goal (First Channel, 2023b).

To conclude, the technicalization of the signifier “transparency” by the IBP resulted in an extraordinary symbolic success for Georgia, placing it at the top of the world in the Open Budget Survey. By repoliticizing the term “transparency,” GD used the rankings’ results to advance its own political agenda and confer liberal democratic legitimacy on its competitive authoritarian regime. Thus, the depoliticization of the ranking led to its potent repoliticization. As we will see in the following sections, the Georgian government achieved fruitful repoliticization of the rankings’ primary signifiers in other ways as well.

5.2. Depoliticization through economicization

Another potent mode of depoliticizing the primary signifiers of the rankings is what can be called “economicization.” By the latter, the paper understands the process of giving priority to strictly economic or money-related aspects of a phenomenon, while ignoring the decisive importance of political factors determined by the nature of a particular political regime.

To understand how the economicization of floating signifiers may work, let us consider a hypothetical scenario. Imagine an authoritarian regime in which individuals and businesses possess a considerable ability to pursue market operations, thanks to extremely low taxes, minimal regulatory oversight, an open economy, and minimal government intervention in economic affairs. Nonetheless, the judiciary lacks independence and occasionally delivers highly biased judgments in economic disputes. Policymakers and government regulators are also known to be impartial, and their decisions are arbitrary and unpredictable. In such a scenario, from an “economic” point of view, the market appears to operate freely, as more money is left to private individuals and businesses and less to state coffers. However, it is questionable to what extent we can assert the presence of “economic freedom” in a political sense, given the essentially non-democratic nature of the political regime and its ability to curtail any liberties at any time once deemed desirable by the ruling political party.

From a political perspective, “freedom” implies the presence of power and some predictable scheme by which this power is attributed to individuals and organizations within a given governing regime. In this sense, citizens in liberal democratic states have *pro tanto* “economic freedoms” – that is, they have the power to hold private property and undertake market transactions within the framework of obligatory, state-imposed economic restrictions, thanks to the overall power arrangements. Consequently, we can compare the economic freedoms of, say, Swedes with those of Americans and assign relative values to them. However, the citizens of non-democratic states do not possess

“economic freedoms” in such a sense. Even if ordinary citizens in a non-democratic regime were able to undertake market transactions freely and accumulate substantial wealth, this does not mean that their freedoms are guaranteed in a political sense; clearly, political circumstances may have unfolded differently or could change at any moment, potentially resulting in severe restrictions on their ability to own private property or engage in market activities. Due to the absence of adequate constitutional protections, no ordinary citizen is protected from the arbitrary deprivation of fundamental economic freedoms in non-democratic regimes.

The globally authoritative ranking, the Heritage Foundation’s Index of Economic Freedom, partially depoliticized the political aspects of economic freedom – the ones that pertain to the actual political power citizens have to engage in market activities freely – and emphasized the economic aspects. This is not to say the ranking did not measure political aspects of freedom. It did, but as one of the components of economic freedom rather than as a defining feature. For example, in calculating scores for its index, the Heritage Foundation employed a set of equally weighted factors including rule of law (property rights, government integrity, judicial effectiveness), government size (government spending, tax burden, fiscal health), regulatory efficiency (business freedom, labor freedom, monetary freedom), and open markets (trade freedom, investment freedom, financial freedom) (The Heritage Foundation, 2025). While some of the above-mentioned variables were primarily economic (e.g., government size, tax burden, trade freedom, and monetary freedom), others were distinctly political (e.g., government integrity, judicial effectiveness, and property rights). Due to the equal weight assigned to all variables, the floating signifier “economic freedom” partially assumed an economic meaning. In other words, it was partially depoliticized.

The Georgian government fully repoliticized the Heritage Foundation’s ranking, arguing that Georgia’s favorable positions in the index indicated that, politically, economic freedoms were protected in the country. For instance, in 2015, during the Georgian-Estonian Business Forum, Prime Minister Garibashvili made a sweeping declaration: “We created a free, fair, and transparent business environment, and this is reflected in the international indices” (Irakli Garibashvili, 2015). Garibashvili further referenced the ranking of the “globally authoritative analytic center,” the Heritage Foundation, which placed Georgia in 22nd place on the list of the world’s “free economies” (Irakli Garibashvili, 2015). Thus, the Georgian government imbued the floating signifier “economic freedom” with a political dimension by arguing that Georgia’s overall political environment for businesses could be characterized as “free, fair, and transparent.” However, because the Heritage Foundation only partially depoliticized the ranking, Garibashvili’s assessment stood in stark contrast to the organization’s grim outlook. In fact, in 2014, when looking at clearly political aspects of “economic freedom”, the Heritage Foundation considered property rights to be “repressed” in Georgia (The Heritage Foundation’s Country Profile “Georgia,” 2025). Moreover, it regarded Georgia’s government integrity as “repressed” (The Heritage

Foundation's Country Profile "Georgia," 2025). Essentially, the Georgian prime minister approvingly cited the international index, which could suggest the allegations of corruption and mistreatment of private enterprises by his government. However, as can be seen, he took advantage of the fact that the ranking aggregated all relevant aspects of "economic freedom" into one overall score, partially depoliticizing the meaning of the concept and allowing him to argue that the business environment created by GD's political regime was overall "free, fair, and transparent."

On another occasion, GD officials repoliticized the Heritage Foundation's ranking to their own advantage in an even more pronounced fashion. In March 2021, Mamuka Mdinaradze, the chairman of GD's parliamentary faction, presented his version of the Heritage Foundation's data during an official press conference. He reiterated the ruling party's past statements, asserting that "according to the indicators published by the fund, in our country, business is free, and the investment climate is attractive" (The Parliament of Georgia, 2021). Mdinaradze further repoliticized those aspects of "economic freedom" that are more economic in nature to argue for GD's alleged support for free and fair political institutions. For example, he claimed that "Georgia has made progress on all measures of economic freedom," thanks not only to the government's economic initiatives (such as the simplification of tax regimes or free trade agreements) but also political reforms (such as the establishment of an "effective and impartial judiciary") (see Devadze, 2021).

In reality, once again, GD's claim that Georgia excelled in both the economic and political dimensions of "economic freedom" was contradicted by the Heritage Foundation's own assessments. While Georgia did achieve its second-best overall score (77.1) in 2020, followed by its best score (77.2) in 2021 (The Heritage Foundation's Country Profile "Georgia," 2025), the qualitative assessments of key measures related to the political dimensions of "economic freedom" – for example, the independence and impartiality of government institutions – had only slightly improved. For instance, in 2020, based on the clearly political indicator – the respect for "property rights" – the Heritage Foundation ranked Georgia among the countries that were only "moderately free," even falling short of those economies that were labeled as "mostly free." The same non-favorable qualitative assessment, i.e., "moderately free," was given to Georgia, based on another political aspect of "economic freedom" – "government integrity" (The Heritage Foundation's Country Profile, "Georgia," 2025).

In conclusion, the Heritage Foundation's consistent pursuit of the partial economicization of the term "economic freedom" led to Georgia's remarkable success in the rankings. Despite the unfavorable evaluations of the political dimensions of "economic freedom" in Georgia, the Georgian Dream party still re-politicized its ranking. It showcased Georgia's accomplishments in the index as proof of its liberal democratic credentials. Similar to the process of depoliticization through technicalization, in this instance too, the discursive act of depoliticization reinforced re-

politicization, culminating in the development of an overarching discourse of legitimization for a competitive authoritarian regime.

5.3. Depoliticization through criminalization

Perhaps the most common form of depoliticization observed in the international rankings is what can be described as “criminalization.” To understand what it means, two broad categories of illegitimately coercive behavior should be distinguished: The one solely coercive by virtue of its criminal nature and the other that, in addition to this, is undertaken by the whole political regime. For instance, consider a scenario where an individual judge accepts a bribe in a country in which the justice system is legally and practically independent from the other branches of the government. While such an act constitutes a criminal offense and can be considered an act of domination upon the individual(s) undertaken by the judge, such domination does not need to be exercised by the whole political regime. To put it differently, a liberal democratic regime can, to a certain extent, have a corrupt judiciary without necessarily being non-democratic. From the opposite side, one can observe that a non-democratic regime can have a judiciary whose members do not accept bribes but are tightly controlled by the authoritarian center of the political regime. In contrast to the previous liberal democratic case, in this instance, macro-level political domination is *a priori* already present and exercised by the judiciary and other institutions tasked with upholding the rule of law.

As we shall see below, some of the most authoritative international rankings – Transparency International’s (TI) Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) and the World Justice Projects (WJP) Rule of Law ranking – partially depoliticized the meanings of such signifiers as “corruption” and “rule of law.” They did this predominantly by criminalizing terms with strong political connotations, understood as referring to the nature of the entire political regime. For its part, GD leveraged its favorable positions in these rankings by reintroducing political dimensions into the partially depoliticized signifiers.

5.3.1. Corruption perceptions index (CPI)

According to the CPI 2022, Georgia ranked 41st globally (Transparency International, 2022a), boasting a higher score (56) than many EU nations, including Poland (55), Slovakia (53), Cyprus (52), Greece (52), Malta (51), Croatia (50), Romania (46), Bulgaria (42), and Hungary (42). Additionally, Georgia shared the same score as those regimes that are, more or less, uncontroversially considered liberal democracies, such as Czechia and Italy. Hence, Georgia’s Foreign Minister Darchiashvili’s assertion that the country was the “leader in the Eastern Europe and Central Asia Region” was partially substantiated (see Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, 2023). While Georgia did not stand alone as the leader in the region, alongside Czechia, as there were Eastern European countries with higher scores, such as Estonia (74), Lithuania (62), and Latvia

(59), it was indeed among the frontrunners in Eastern Europe (Transparency International, 2022a).

However, in this case as well, the explanation for Georgia's extraordinary success lies in the way the CPI partially depoliticized the floating signifier "corruption", this time by criminalizing the term. To start with, the CPI 2022 aggregated data from 13 different sources, including the WJP's Rule of Law Index Expert Survey, the World Bank Country Policy and Institutional Assessment, and the Varieties of Democracy survey (Transparency International, 2022a, p. 15; 2022c). The data sources were standardized on a scale of 0-100, where 0 equaled the highest levels of corruption. A country's score was calculated as the average of all standardized scores available for that country (Transparency International, 2022c). Non-political questions about corruption as a criminal offense and questions about political governance were grouped together and weighted equally (see Transparency International, 2022b). For example, from the World Bank Country Policy and Institutional Assessment, those sections were selected in which experts were asked to assess the explicitly political aspects of transparency, accountability, and corruption in the public sector. These included the evaluations of "the extent to which the executive can be held accountable for its use of funds and the results of its actions by the electorate and by the legislature and judiciary" (Transparency International, 2022b, p. 2). The query at hand concerned the political dimension of corruption, addressing horizontal accountability between different governmental branches and the nature of a political regime at the macro level. In parallel, non-political or merely "criminal" aspects of corruption were also considered on an equal footing. For example, the following question was drawn from the World Economic Forum Executive Opinion Survey: "In your country, how common is it for firms to make undocumented extra payments or bribes connected with the following: a) imports and exports; b) public utilities; c) annual tax payments; d) awarding of public contracts and licenses; e) obtaining favorable judicial decisions?" (Transparency International, 2022b, p. 15). In this latter case, the inquiry concerned less the manner in which power is structured within a country but more the prevalence of individual criminal conduct (which may or may not be associated with the type of political regime, as argued above).

The practice of weighting equally political and non-political aspects of corruption partially depoliticized the CPI ranking. For, if the signifier "corruption" had political and non-political – in this case, criminal – meanings in equal measure, hypothetically, liberal democratic but corrupt countries could receive scores equal to, or even lower than, those of non-democratic but relatively corruption-free regimes. Indeed, this is what happened in reality, as seen in Georgia.

The Georgian government fruitfully seized on the opportunity to use the CPI data to portray itself as a liberal democratic regime (Government of Georgia, 2023; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, 2023). The above happened despite the fact that since 2019, TI began emphasizing macro-level political factors in the assessment of

corruption, such as the “excessive concentration of power in the hands of a single political group,” “a growing trend of state capture,” “political interference in the functioning of the judiciary,” and “governmental pressure on media with critical editorial policies” (Transparency International, 2020b; Transparency International Georgia, 2021). But even though TI further repoliticized the ranking, the latter still remained partially depoliticized. Georgia still ranked 45th in the CPI 2020, surpassing liberal democratic countries such as Czechia, Italy, and Greece (Transparency International, 2020a). This discrepancy was not lost on a prominent member of the ruling party, Irakli Kobakhidze (Bogveradze, 2020). Kobakhidze pointed out that the CPI ranking was self-contradictory because, on the one hand, Georgia was portrayed as a clear leader in the region in terms of its anti-corruption credentials. On the other hand, the TI’s report mentioned the concept of “state capture,” which indicated the fundamentally corrupt nature of the whole regime (Bogveradze, 2020). Such ambivalent assessments of corruption in Georgia were, in fact, due to the CPI’s partially depoliticized character.

The TI further emphasized the political dimension of corruption in Georgia by publishing a dedicated blog post on the country, highlighting such significant political concerns as “state capture” and “undue influence” (Transparency International, 2021). However, continued damning assessments of the political situation in Georgia could not change the fact that the country persistently achieved high scores in the CPI rankings. For this reason, GD leaders, despite being dissatisfied with the TI’s assessments, continued to approvingly present the CPI data before both domestic and international audiences to emphasize the liberal democratic nature of their government (Janashvili, 2021; First Channel, 2023a). GD’s efforts to rely on the CPI to portray itself as a liberal democratic regime were especially pronounced in its response to the US sanctioning a group of Georgian judges in 2023. The Georgian Foreign Minister, Iliia Darchiashvili, wrote an official letter to the US Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, expressing discontent about the sanctions imposed on members of the Georgian judiciary. He emphasized that according to the CPI 2022, Georgia was the leader in the Eastern Europe and Central Asia region, and for the first time in the index’s history, it ranked among the top 20 countries in Europe and ahead of 11 EU member states (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, 2023). In this manner, the Georgian government consistently repoliticized the floating signifier “corruption” in the CPI ranking, taking advantage of the fact that Georgia achieved high rankings due to TI’s partial depoliticization of the term.

5.3.2. The rule of law index

The World Justice Project’s (WJP) Rule of Law Index claims to be the “world’s leading source for original data on the rule of law” (World Justice Project, 2024). In its 2021 edition, Georgia had a similar score (0.61) to that of clearly more liberal democratic regimes, such as Greece and Croatia (World Justice Project, 2021). In the 2022 edition,

Georgia's score was slightly lowered, placing it 48th globally at 0.60, but its position in the ranking remained very close to the two liberal democracies mentioned above (World Justice Project, 2022). So, how can Georgia's achievement be explained?

The analysis of the table of the variables that were used to construct the WJP's Rule of Law index shows how the partial depoliticization of the primary signifier "rule of law" was achieved. On the one hand, the first component of the WJP's index measured explicitly political determinants of the "rule of law." For example, it contained questions about the political independence of the judiciary or the degree to which government power was distributed (World Justice Project, 2023, p. 2). Moreover, most questions related to the section "fundamental rights" had a clearly political bent (World Justice Project, 2023, pp. 18–26). This was because, from a political point of view, liberal democracies tend to be more respectful of their own constitutions, which confer civil and political rights on citizens and prohibit discrimination based on race, ethnicity, religion, gender or similar characteristics. However, there were many remaining variables that gauged the concept of the "rule of law" not as influenced by political determinants but rather in relation to criminal circumstances within a particular country.

To start with, in the section on corruption, "the absence of corruption" was measured by asking crime-related questions about factors such as the frequency of individuals or corporations making illegal payments to high-ranking government officials (World Justice Project, 2023, 7-8). Moreover, the second section, "Order and Security," contained variables dedicated entirely to non-political or ordinary crime, such as questions about neighborhood safety or the homicide rate (World Justice Project, 2023, pp. 26–27). Most of these variables were non-political, as they were not concerned with the nature of a given country's political regime and were generally neutral toward the distinction between democratic and non-democratic states. The same held true for some questions in some other sections as well, such as the "Regulatory Enforcement" and "Criminal Justice" (World Justice Project, 2023, pp. 30-51).

By aggregating the political and non-political criminal determinants of the "rule of law," the WJP partially depoliticized the ranking, allowing a competitive authoritarian regime, such as the Georgian government, to achieve scores similar to those of liberal democracies. Moreover, some markedly authoritarian countries, such as Singapore and the United Arab Emirates, clearly outperformed liberal democracies in the same index (World Justice Project, 2024).

The Georgian government promptly exploited the partial depoliticization of the ranking. For example, in the letter addressed to the US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken to defend the US-sanctioned Georgian judges, Georgia's foreign minister Darchiashvili argued that the Georgian judiciary was perceived as "one of the most advanced" by Georgian citizens and by "international research." He contended that thanks to the "[Georgian] government's ten-year work and implemented reforms,"

Georgia ranked high in international rankings. To substantiate his claim, Darchiashvili specifically cited WJP's 2022 Rule of Law index (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, 2023). In October 2023, Prime Minister Garibashvili, further escalating the rhetoric to defend the sanctioned Georgian judges and his government's reputation, argued that in a rule of law ranking, Georgia was ahead of even "EU and NATO member states," and this was "an answer to an anti-Georgian campaign that claimed that there is no independent judiciary [in the country]" (Tkemaladze, 2023). Garibashvili also noted that he was delighted by the positive evaluations of Georgia made by the "most authoritative organizations" (Tkemaladze, 2023). In this manner, by fully repoliticizing the floating signifier "rule of law," the Georgian government portrayed its own political regime as a liberal democracy.

6. Concluding remarks

Based on the analysis of the discursive patterns of depoliticization and repoliticization conducted in this paper, it becomes evident that the legitimizing discourse involving international indices in a non-democratic regime can take a peculiar form, in which either full or partial depoliticization leads to potent efforts at repoliticization. To elaborate, in certain instances, the overarching discourse of legitimation for the Georgian competitive authoritarian regime involving international rankings operated as follows: First, Georgia attained relatively high or sometimes top-tier rankings in the indices due to the depoliticization of key concepts such as "transparency," "economic freedom," "corruption," and "rule of law" by international organizations. Second, the country's favorable positions in the rankings were leveraged by the ruling Georgian Dream party to confer liberal democratic legitimacy on its non-democratic, competitive authoritarian regime, enabling the Georgian government to deflect criticisms of its non-democratic rule from both domestic and international stakeholders.

While this study demonstrates that the depoliticization of indices can lead to their successful exploitation by a non-democratic regime, it does not claim that the entire legitimation discourse surrounding international rankings exhibits this character. For that, representative cases would have needed to be selected. Instead, the paper shows that a depoliticized ranking can be repoliticized to serve as a powerful legitimation tool for a non-democratic regime, which could mean that the international regimes created by intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations might not only be governed by epistemic authorities – creating a hierarchical order among international entities, as described by Zürn (2018) and others (see Broome et al., 2018; Kelley & Simmons, 2021) – but that such authorities can also inadvertently reinforce non-democratic forms of governance at the national level. Thus, not only can states game the system of rankings, as described by Schueth (2015), Cooley and Snyder (2015), Rosga and Satterthwaite (2008), and others, but they can do so to a particular political end.

Concerning the specific objectives of this paper, there are important methodological avenues for future research. To start with, a more nuanced discourse analysis of international rankings can be undertaken to unravel the nature of pertinent discourses in non-democratic regimes. To this end, the representative cases need to be selected. Moreover, going beyond discourse analysis in the style of the Essex School and also utilizing other qualitative methods that can better engage with the discourses as a whole might be necessary.

Furthermore, it should be noted that, by shedding light on the specific aspects of this intriguing phenomenon – the use of international rankings by non-democratic regimes to build a liberal democratic legitimacy – the paper may have only scratched the surface of a potentially vast field of discursive practices. Based on the foregoing, the broadest objectives of future research are to understand: a) how international actors' discourses can inadvertently contribute to bolstering the liberal democratic legitimacy of non-democratic regimes in different ways, other than the use of international rankings; and b) how non-democratic regimes, in turn, navigate within the framework of the liberal world order, leveraging liberal democratic public discourse to their advantage.

On a final note, it should be noted that what has been gleaned from the discursive mechanisms and the role of international rankings in this study not only has theoretical significance but also offers practical lessons. Indeed, the findings of this article can provide insights for developers of international indices and advocates working to promote liberal democracy in non-democratic regimes worldwide. Moreover, to some extent, the critique of the effects of international rankings in non-democratic political environments may redirect global and domestic public discourse toward more politically substantive issues and reforms.

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