# **A Panopticon of Georgian Politics: Naturalized Concept of Illegal Surveillance and Its Political Utility**

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## **Abstract**

The thesis explores the persistent perceptions of politically motivated illegal surveillance practices in Georgia and aims to highlight the extent of their detrimental effect on the integrity of democratic processes while relying on the theoretical groundwork done by surveillance studies. To achieve this, the research uses discourse textual analysis to trace the dominant discourse on the topic through local media coverage. It is then supplemented by primary interviews with the local activists and politicians to tie the dominant discourse to their experiences and local political processes.

## **Keywords**:

Surveillance and Democracy, Georgia, Illegal Surveillance, Georgian Dream, State Security Service of Georgia.

## **Introduction**

When the Georgian Dream gained the majority of votes, 54,92 %, in the 2012 parliamentary elections, it marked the first peaceful transfer of power since Georgia’s independence in 1991 (Aprasidze, 2014) and halting the politically motivated illegal surveillance practices and giving citizens the privacy and the freedom to express their political opinions were among the party’s initial promises to the Georgian public (Avaliani, 2012). Long after the 2012 parliamentary elections, the perceptions around politically motivated illegal surveillance practices persist. The legislative changes around government-mandated surveillance practices remain contested, while the recurring surveillance breaches strengthen the belief that politically motivated illegal surveillance is ongoing (TI, 2022).

The research seeks to uncover the following: How did the dominant discourse on politically motivated illegal surveillance practices persist in Georgia after 2012, and what are its implications for the consolidation of democracy in Georgia?

There is a clear lack of academic literature devoted to perceptions around surveillance practices in Georgia and the detrimental effects that this lack of trust in the public sphere can have on democratic consolidation in the country. The academic interest in the topic was visibly higher around the years 2012-2015, as will be demonstrated through the brief literature review. Since then, interest in the topic seems to have declined overall. For example, the frequency of mentioning the topic of surveillance across the Radio Free Liberty articles peaked in 2014 with 39 articles. Then it continued on a downward trend, with the exception of 2021, when the much-contested legislative changes were taking place (RL, 2021), with only eight mentions of the topic in 2022 (RL, 2022). While the reasons behind this decline are not clearly evident, it has not been due to the resolution of the issue.

Most papers that cover the phenomenon focus on the problematic use of surveillance practices before the 2012 elections, the complicated legacy of the UNM government, and the implications of the government change for the future of Georgia. Driscoll and Hidalgo write that the expectations that private behaviors can and will be monitored and reported to authorities and a sense that the political sphere is “dirty” are common in post-Soviet states and are ubiquitous in the region. These perceptions then inform the opinions citizens form around surveillance practices (Driscoll, Hidalgo 2014). Korneli Kakachia and Michael Cecire (2013) acknowledge that the “chief mandate” of GD was to dismantle the security and surveillance apparatus practices and at the time of publishing the article, authors’ evaluation of the party’s approach is still positive, with note of much work that still needs to be done.

Anna Dolidze (2013) urges using the best practices to handle the fate of surveillance footage collected under the previous government, due to the extremely high risk of dissemination of potentially traumatizing personal information because of the regulatory vacuum. Additionally, Dolidze advocates for the extra precautionary measure to avoid repeated infliction of trauma to victims of surveillance and their relatives. David Aprasidze (2014), applies the concept of “autonomy from citizen” to depict the dynamic of Georgian polity, and argues that while the first peaceful transfer of power was an important step for the country, not much has changed in terms of local politics and political consolidation of the state. Mitchell (2013) also acknowledges the culture of illegal surveillance in Georgia and past experiences and focuses on the legacy of Saakashvili, bringing attention to details like the mechanism used by the UNM to uphold their status internationally while employing authoritarian tactics inside the country. However, there is a lack of more recent academic articles on the matter that would study the persistence of the discourse a decade after the first peaceful transfer of power and the promises of aborting the practices of illegal surveillance. This article aims to fill this gap by looking at the local media coverage.

The research starts out with an examination of illegal surveillance coverage through discourse theory framework and textual analysis methodology. The research maps the representations of the surveillance system in the media of choice and primary interviews supported by the existing research on the negative aspects of the surveillance-democracy nexus. The thesis keeps in line with Dahl’s conception of electoral democracy, which presumes the existence of freedom of speech, assembly, and other rights essential to make electoral competition meaningful, with the emphasis on freedom and liberty as its essential goals, with the institutions of democracy as a way to achieve it. (Dahl, 1982).

The remainder of the article engages with these representations identifying the 5 recurring narratives that make up a cohesive unit of the illegal surveillance system as per dominant discourse. The research seeks to highlight the detrimental effects of these perceptions on democratic consolidation and to showcase further the importance of putting an effort towards dismantling them. It should be noted, however, that this study does not claim to prove or disprove the existence of such practices but instead focuses on perceptions and their effect on political life and civil society

**The Importance of Media in Creating Public Discourse**

Extensive research has shown that media plays a key role in political agenda setting by influencing public opinion and therefore shaping the framework of the public discourse, supporting the choice of data analyzed within the scope of this research. Gamson and Modigliani write that choosing media generated discourse is valuable when studying discourses that holds public’s attention as it constantly provides suggested meanings and is easily accessible. Additionally, media discourse dominates the larger issue culture, meaning they reflect and create them simultaneously. This will ring especially true in media-saturated societies where this is the most important indicator of the general issue culture. (Gamson, Modigliani, 1989)

According to Saraisky, media influences the process of defining public problems by framing - providing the frame for issues that are curated and understood in the public space, and playing a gatekeeping role in who is selected to comment on said public problems and prescribed solutions. (Saraisky, 2016)

McCombs writes that a lot of the pressing social issues are not amenable to the majority of individuals’ personal experiences and for almost all concerns on public agenda, citizens deal with a second-hand reality, which is structured for them by journalists (McCombs, 2014).

It’s important to highlight that the media is responsible for the initial stage in the formation of public opinion but it isn’t necessarily a premeditated influence, but rather an inadvertent outcome from the necessity of having to select a few headlines. To sum it up, the news media is more successful in telling the audiences what to think about, not necessarily as successful in telling them what to think about it. (McCombs, 2014)

Shaw and McCombs, showcased a strong causal effect of mass communication on the public agenda, specifically the transfer of salience from the media to public agenda. Time after time, these comparisons showed a high degree of correspondence between the media and the public in their ranking of issues. It’s important to note that this effect translates on internet channels of communication as well. What makes this approach even more robust is that the author acknowledges that no personal experiences people have with media and the communication effects are identical, but even persons with different characteristics frequently have similar experiences (McCombs, 2014). Rastrilla argues that we can study the production of meaning by observing representations of the real world. When these meanings and representations are articulated, discourses are shaped, offering different versions of reality. The author also continues that analyses of media representations reveal dominant narratives that create the legitimacy of discourses among the public (Rastrilla, 2018).

**The Panopticon Concept**

An important concept for surveillance studies, but the case at hand in particular, is that of a Panopticon, created in the 18th century by philosopher Jeremy Bentham’s brother Samuel and then explored by the former as an efficient means of overseeing workers, an effective metaphor and an efficient construction model for surveillance. Panopticon, popularized and redefined by Foucault through his book “Discipline and Punish” in 1977, is a prison designed to efficiently control people by delegating governance functions to its architecture - a prison design of a circular building with cells along the outer walls and a guard tower in the center with individually housed inmates. The principal detail of this design is that the window blind in the guard tower makes it impossible for the inmates to know when they are being.

In a Foucauldian panopticon, the prisoners are at the center of the panopticon - it's the “prisoners” or the “observed” who are the primary interest of this thesis; more specifically, the effect of the perceived surveillance on citizens. Foucault sees panopticism as a functional mechanism that improves the exercise of power by making it “lighter”, through which people voluntarily regulate their behavior even in the absence of verifiable external observation because of the possibility that they could be under surveillance at any given moment. observed (Lyon et al. 2012). Jenkins writes that Bentham’s remote panopticon, particularly as interpreted by Foucault, may be the archetype, if not the prototype, of surveillance (Lyon et al. 2012). It must be said that Foucault’s conception of the panopticon has received its share of criticism, specifically from a number of contemporary surveillance scholars calling to move on from the panoptic model as it isn’t sufficient in societies that must track and manage digital information. (Monahan, Wood 2018). While the criticisms, or as Galič and Timan put it, “the second phase of surveillance theory,” may be valid, it is mostly irrelevant to the case at hand. While technology is an important element of perceptions in question, technological advances have not played a major role in its evolution, as will be demonstrated through the analysis of the data corpus. We shouldn’t dismiss Foucault’s analysis of centuries of development in European history simply because of technological developments that change the mode of surveillance (Galič, Timan 2017).

## **Material and Methodology**

Discursive textual analysis, according to Philips and Jorgensens (2004) can use the following directive: a critical approach to assumed background knowledge, a link between knowledge and social processes, and the link between knowledge and social action, all of which is encompassed within this particular analysis. Additionally, according to Dunn and Neumann (2016, 110), discourses are potentially at their strongest when they are accepted as irrefutable truths, which then form the background of naturalized knowledge, which is why the process of analysis includes looking at assumed background knowledge and identifying the narratives that emerged from it.

Mutlu and Salter (2012) identify three dominant discourse analysis strategies focusing on either continuity, change, or rupture - plastic, elastic, and genealogical discourse analyses. The research will combine plastic and elastic strategies, looking at consistencies as well as changes that have occurred over time in the local discourse on surveillance. Through discourse analysis, the work seeks to identify and analyze representations of the said surveillance system, showcase the organizing principle of this dominant discourse, study the persistence of this particular scheme, linguistic signs, and tropes as well as study how the naturalization of the phenomenon in its current form took place.

To achieve that, the research relies on a three-tier data corpus. The first tier focuses on the media coverage of illegal surveillance on Radio Liberty for the dominant discourse and ImediTV for the alternative discourse. The choice of this medium for tracing the dominant discourse is supported by the existing literature on the influence of media over public agenda and discourses highlighted above. Additionally, Barnard-Wills writes that news media covers the instances of surveillance technologies and practices as an active concept which suggests that media is a useful starting point for mapping wider discursive assemblages of surveillance (Barnard-Wills, 2011), which supports the choice of a media outlet for tracing the dominant discourse.

The second tier looks at CSO reports featuring evaluations as well as occasional public surveys on the topic to connect the dominant discourse to social knowledge. Meanwhile, the third tier uses personal interviews with three political activists and politicians: Single members from the political parties “Lelo” and “Strategy Aghmashenebeli” and the political activist and the board member of the organization “Caucasian House” to showcase the manifestation of these perceptions and to tie it to local political processes and social action. Discourse analysis is more effective for theorizing the power of language in relation to specific political processes (Mutlu, Salter, 2012), hence, the research follows this suggestion by focusing on discourses as well as practices surrounding perceptions of surveillance practices and their effect on Georgian politics, which the article attempts to do by bringing in the interviews as a third tier of the data corpus.

The time frame for the first two tiers is October 2012 to December 2022, as the topic of illegal surveillance before 2012 is already relatively well explored, which is not the case for the period after the 2012 parliamentary elections.

### Data Collection

To study the formation of the dominant discourse regarding illegal surveillance with political motives and position it against the alternative discourse, the 1st dataset looks at the coverage of illegal surveillance from Radio Liberty (dominant discourse), the only source that has been rated as highly ethical and professional by MediaMeter, (MediaMeter, n.d) which strengthens the legitimacy of the dominant status of this particular conception of illegal surveillance practices as it minimizes the likelihood of a politically skewed coverage.

In the process of collecting data for this tier, all the articles containing the keyword “მიყურადება” (surveillance) beginning from October 2012 to December 2022 were collected, amounting to 128 articles (RL, 2022). All of them were read, and the articles containing the statements of “naturalized knowledge” and narratives regarding the politically motivated illegal surveillance practices were selected, narrowing down the count to 24. To further support the position of the dominant discourse, a breakdown of alternative discourses is also given based on the coverage of the topic on ImediTV as the pro-ruling party media (TI, 2020), within the same time frame and following the same process for gathering and analyzing data. The number of relevant articles narrowed down from 124 (ImediTV, 2022) to 7. As will be demonstrated through selected articles the statements affirming this particular conception of the State Security Service (SSS) and illegal surveillance all follow a similar formula of denying allegations and attributing the illegal surveillance to the previous government and including more of them in the research would be redundant.

The second tier looks at the relevant reports published by Transparency International and the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information. IDFI publishes biannual reports on the topic of surveillance in Georgia, and all available reports starting from 2013 were included in the data corpus. TI, although less consistent with reports and its format, offers valuable insight into the topic nonetheless.

The 3rd tier looks at the experiences of politically active citizens/politicians with the perceptions of illegal surveillance through primary interviews. The interviews strengthen the status of the dominant discourse while simultaneously providing a more detailed look at how the discourse is perceived and experienced among politically active citizens and how it affects their decision-making. The respondents are well-known public figures that actively participate in politics, and two of them are members of the opposition parties. Their identities will remain anonymous. The interviews used a semi-structured protocol focused on the respondent's and their social circle’s personal experiences. The texts and the respondents were chosen based on necessity, accessibility, and the core objective of the study - identifying the dominant discourse and exposing the naturalized facts and their effects.

The primary research limitation encountered during the process was the difficulty of getting in touch with certain politicians and activists. While reached out to on numerous occasions, a lot of the potential respondents were not available for the interviews. While through the interviews that were conducted within the scope of this research, common themes, and shared experiences were discovered nonetheless, a higher number of respondents would have created a more robust dataset.

## **Surveillance Studies and Democracy - The Role of Theory**

While there is no consensus on the complicated yet deeply intertwined relationship between surveillance and democracy, the existing theoretical works are unanimous in that the surveillance of the kind that this research is concerned with has detrimental effects on democracy, as defined at the beginning of this article.

Surveillance, as explained by David Lyon, is focused, systemic, and routine attention to personal details for the purpose of influence, management, protection, or direction when the attention to personal details is not random, occasional, or spontaneous. Monahan and Wood write that the purpose of surveillance involves relations of power in which the watchers have a clear privilege. (Monahan and Wood, 2018). Wood argues that most Western nations can qualify as surveillance societies given the centrality of surveillance to most of these states’ institutional practices (Wood &Webster, 2009). ​​

The debate within surveillance studies often focuses on the anomaly that surveillance makes the protection of human and civil rights possible, but at the same time, it tends to erode them. However, there is also a “creative tension” between the two (Haggerty & Samatas, 2010).

Usually, governments are tasked with finding the “balance” between security and freedom and surveillance can be seen as the management of information on citizens in order to provide their protection. Agar and Higgs describe the phenomenon as the dual factors of welfare and warfare unique to the modern period and states. (Lyon et al., 2012). Giddens goes as far as to say that free speech and democratic movements have their origins in the arena of the surveillance operations of the modern state - surveillance is the defining characteristic of modernity itself, tightly connected with industrialization and the rise of nation-states (Giddens, 1991).

Despite these justifications, the reason why surveillance tends to interfere with democratic processes on such a fundamental level is that citizens need a space comparatively free of government oversight if they are to engage in political action. (Haggerty & Samatas, 2010)

State-mandated surveillance has a long history, reflecting the hollowing out of political liberties underpinning democratic states and the suspicion and intolerance with which powerful elites view their critics. Throughout history, spying on citizens has resurfaced with regularity, usually in response to perceived threats. Counterintelligence operations become more frequently deployed to fight social movements and enforce order, people's advocacy, education, and organizing to prevent these trends from assuming momentum (Boghosian 2013); however, this particular use for surveillance erodes the foundation of the public sphere.

Tilly argues that the integration of trust networks into public politics aids the process of democratization, while its withdrawal has the opposite effect and weakens democracy.

According to Tilly, the erosion can happen whether or not the severance of trust was intentional or unintentional, and continues to say that this severance of trust networks and public politics accompanies or follows de-democratization (Tilly, 2005). Haggarty and Samatas build off of Tilly’s work to specify that surveillance is anti-democratic to the extent that it prevents citizens from freely finding and discussing common interests with others, it makes it difficult and risky to form alliances and work on their political strategies, which is an essential element for upholding democracies (Haggerty, Samatas 2010).

Similarly, Habermas notes that the democratic public sphere is already ridden with challenges to creating spaces and processes of free and engaging deliberation and action because of the transformation of the liberal public sphere, which comes into direct contradiction to processes akin to democracy, where public sphere and activities within should retain integrity if they are to fulfill the promise of democracy (Habermas,1991).

Lastly, Mitrou points out that modern surveillance has the potential to render democratic debate and participation anemic, as it can chill political participation. Mitrou writes that personal data retention can discourage communication between citizens, which can result in an inert civil society and add hurdles to forms of active political participation and affiliation. Quoting Solove, Mitrou writes that for individuals, data-retention policies may lead to self-imposed inhibitions and censorship, reminiscent of Foucault’s docile bodies (Haggerty, Samatas 2010).

Schwartz also writes that personal data retention leads to further complications for citizens while engaging in democratic choice-making and degrades the health of deliberative democracy, as citizens know that the data will follow them into other areas of their lives (Scwartz, 1999,).Hoffman-Riem even argued that policies prioritizing preemptive security, specifically data retention may blow up the cornerstones of the rule of law (Hoffmann-Riem, 2002).

Brighenti talks about visibility politics in democracies and sees resistance to it as a process akin to democracy. Brightenti specifically talks about the the increasing difficulty of laying people to know the specific knowledge that will be applied to scrutinize them of what types of behavior would cause them to be considered as posing a threat, along with the normative questions of what should and should not be seen (Haggerty, Samatas, 2010).As Haggerty and Samatas write, democracy is more than just a decision-making system, it is also an idea that includes specific modes of institutional arrangements and, in a wider sense, an open discussion between competing views, the equal right of members to participate and voice their opinions about decisions that affect the community to elect office holders and to influence their deliberations as well as the freedom to associate with others, which the widespread perceptions around the politically motivated surveillance does not align with (Haggerty, Samatas, 2010)

**Contemporary Political History of Georgia**

Georgia gained independence in 1991, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and battled with the turmoil of civil war and territorial conflicts through the1990s. A military coup toppled Georgia’s first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, and saw him replaced with a former Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, who was subsequently elected in 1995 (Crosby, 2018). During his two terms as a president, high corruption characterized the regime. Tensions in the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region and the economic hardships garnered widespread resentment towards the president (Akhmeteli, 2014). After yet another fraudulent election under Shevardnadze, a series of nonviolent mass protests in Tbilisi forced Eduard Shevardnadze out of power - the movement would then be called “The Rose Revolution” as the peaceful protestors carried roses in their hands (Crosby, 2018). Saakashvili emerged as the promising young leader of the movement and took Shevardnadze’s place. Jones writes that Saakashvili ended the “feckless pluralism” of the Shevardnadze era, removed Soviet nomenclature, and increased state capacity, propelling Georgia towards the west. At the same time, he created a corrupt surveillance state, with a monopoly on resources and the use of widespread intimidation, which became evident towards his second term as president. (Jones, 2013).

Towards the end of the UNM regime, the media freedom was strongly suppressed, which was noted by the US Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index, which described Georgia as a “hybrid regime with strong government control of media with opaque decision-making processes and a de facto single-party political system” (Falkowski 2016). In 2011, The Georgian Dream Coalition was created by the Georgian billionaire, Bidzina Ivanishvili as an alternative political power to the UNM. (Georgian Dream, n.d) 2012 parliamentary elections marked the first peaceful transfer of power in the country and the new government once again declared the Euro-Atlantic foreign policy (Wheatley, 2005). However, the path forward has not been straightforward. Halting the illegal surveillance practices and cultivating the environment of free political expression were among the party’s initial promises to the Georgian public (Avaliani, 2012) however long after the 2012 parliamentary elections, the issue of politically motivated illegal surveillance practices remained relevant.

## **Results**

### *Radio Liberty - Dominant Discourse*

Through the analysis of 24 articles that mentioned the topic of surveillance and contained the statements by the author or the respondent, including a narrative or the assumed background knowledge relevant to the topic were selected, and the following narratives were retrieved, listed here based on the frequency of their appearance:

1. Systemic Surveillance by SSS - The institution behind politically motivated illegal surveillance is SSS, and its practices are ongoing, including spying on media and politically active citizens as a tool of intimidation and political control - Present in 10/24 articles analyzed.
2. Politicization - The SSS remains politicized, Bidzna Ivanishvili, or The Georgian Dream controls the SSS and uses it as a way to retain political power. - Present in 5/24 articles analyzed
3. Lack of Political Will - There is a lack of political will to make any substantial changes to the institution and its practices, which is reflected in the activities of SSS and the incidents of the surveillance leaks, as well as the contested legislative changes that have followed the transition of power to GD in 2012 - Present in 5/24 articles analyzed
4. Dual-Nature - There is a mismatch between the declared functions of the SSS and its actual, covert activities. The institution intentionally avoids clearly answering the questions of the public regarding its hidden activities. Present in 5/24 articles analyzed.
5. Insufficient Reform - The SSS reform that the Georgian Dream initiated has failed to achieve its goal, the reform is seen as a “formality”. Present in 3/24 articles

While these are separate narratives often found in different articles, they nonetheless create a cohesive image of the SSS that reflects the dominant discourse on the institution, which says that the SSS is still politicized and uses its enormous capabilities to spy on politically active and relevant citizens to ensure the GD’s continued political influence. The lack of any positive shift in the dominant discourse is explained by the lack of political will of the ruling party.

The SSS, as well as the Georgian Dream’s attitude towards the matter, is described with words like covert, politicized, undisclosed, hidden, systemic, mismatched activities, powerful and closed off, using psychological pressure and being used as a weapon of political justice.

### ImediTV - Alternative Discourse

When it comes to the alternative discourse advocated for by the ruling party, GD, and the affiliated news outlets, the discourse seems purely reactionary. The alternative discourse on politically motivated illegal surveillance practices is dismissive of the dominant perceptions however, it does not actively try to paint a picture of a reformed SSS. For example, in 2017, Archil Talakvadze, the parliamentary majority leader at the time, is quoted advocating for the changes to covert surveillance legislature and that the critics had no tangible arguments (Imedi, 2017). Similarly, Tea Tsulukia, a member of the Georgian Dream, called the concerns over the newly created State Inspector’s office unfounded (Imedi, 2018). In 2020 The first deputy head of the Judiciary committee argues defended the State Inspector’s office, saying that it provided high-quality monitoring of the path of democratic development in any state (Imedi, 2020) Irakli Beraia, the Head of the Defence and Security Committee is quoted saying that the SSS is at the forefront of national security, encouraged by the love of the homeland, [are] brave men and women (Imedi, 2020). When commenting on the yet another surveillace material leak, Irakli Qadagishvili, a member of the GD, said that under the rule of the previous government, such crimes were not uncommon and that it would be proven that the recordings were made in the period of October 2011-2012 (Imedi, 2021) The head of the GD, Irakli Kobakhidze responded to the opposition’s requests to fire SSS head, saying that diplomats are not being listened to in Georgia and classified this particular leak as a ploy from the opposition to win the political points and that surveillance of this kind was happening during a previous regime and was a thing of the past (Imedi, 2021). Similar sentiments were shared by the Representatives of the Special State Protection Service, attributing all footage leaks to the pre-2012 period (Imedi, 2021),

Members of the ruling party or those affiliated with them generally seem to discredit the allegations of illegal surveillance, classifying any and all questions directed at its decisions regarding the changes to the legislature or the creation of new institutions with surveillance capabilities as the UNM’s attempt to discredit and taint the ruling party's image. It is also common for the members of the GD to bring up the mass surveillance practices carried out during the UNM regime as a way to discredit the claims or accusations coming from the opposition and shift the attention away from themselves.

### CSO Reports - IDFI and TI

Analyzed reports from IDFI and TI also supported the dominant narrative of insufficient change and lack of political will from the GD to implement substantial changes. IDFI 2015 confirmed that over the last two years, perceptions around the surveillance practices among Georgian citizens didn't change (IDFI, 2015), which was also the conclusion of their 2016 report on the same topic (IDFI, 2016). The 2017-2019 report assessed the efforts to reform the SSS as insufficient, while the 2018-2020 report argues that the legislative changes made the process of illegal surveillance easier and that the existing institutional framework has failed to put sufficient safeguards in place for the protection of privacy of Georgian citizens (IDFI, 2020).

At the end of 2012, TI published its report on the Telecommunication sector, which read that by December 28th, 2012, the new government had not yet addressed the issue of unchecked and systemic surveillance of electronic communication (TI, 2012) and called for solid oversight for surveillance and communication data retention in 2013 as well (TI, 2013). In 2015 TI wrote that no substantial step toward setting up mechanisms to restrain illegal surveillance and wiretapping had taken place, continuing to say that the old malicious system of operative surveillance and wiretapping remind a problem (TI, 2015) Later on in 2018, SSS was described as having duplicate functions, high risk of abuse of power and holding loosely defined mandate or scope of authority for SSS. The report also assessed SSS as politicized and abusing its power for illegal surveillance with political motives, which GD continued to allow and condone. The report yet again notes the lack of political will to reform the institutions, as it is seen serving the agenda of the GD. (TI, 2018) In 2021, TI yet again wrote that no group or people was protected from control and surveillance by the SSS, and in 2022, the new legislation was assessed as not only insufficient but reversing the initial promise made by GD to stop illegal surveillance practices. (TI, 2022)

All three respondents confirm through personal communication the existence of perception but also personal experiences with the surveillance, either through incidents like leaked information regarding the planned protest or factual proof of their conversations being recorded surveillance leaks. The member of Strategy Aghmashenebeli noted that they participated in the survey by ISFED where the majority of people confirmed that they believed that the SSS would be able to find out who they voted for, while not being able to explain how that would even be possible, which highlights the scope of mythologies around the SSS (personal communication, May 22, 2022). When it comes to their interpretation of the loss of relevancy for the issue, the member of the “Caucasian House'' identified that the scope of surveillance practices is perceived to have shrunk over time and only remains an important issue for politically active citizens (Kakulia, personal communication, April 26, 2022) While this opinion was also shared by the member of “Lelo”, they provided additional possible explanations like existential threats which more urgent for the general public, plus the fact that issue has remained unsolved for so long. (Kakulia, personal communication, May 22, 2022).

All three talk about having to consider the fact that they may be under surveillance when deciding their plan of action for political means, which means they have to modify their behavior to some capacity in the face of the Georgian panopticon. While they all note that the fear of being surveilled hasn't derailed them from voicing their political opinion, they also mention close acquaintances and the general impression that people who work in state institutions or are somehow related to people who work in state institutions usually shy away from openly protesting a cause they believe in if it contains anti-ruling party sentiments, which means that these perceptions are derailing open participation and active involvement in deliberation and protests. All three respondents also confirm that the popular perceptions around surveillance practices and their experiences make entry into politics as well as active participation more difficult, as it raises the stakes for individuals to get involved, which is detrimental to the democratic processes.

The interviews have further confirmed the claim of the article, supported by the theoretical research on the relationship between this specific type of surveillance and the development of democracy, specifically that of existing, popular perceptions serving as an obstacle to open and free participation in processes essential for any system to be considered a democracy.

## **Discussion**

The 5 narratives identified within the dominant discourse paint a political scene where opposition is made more difficult and riskier and requires more effort as well as potential sacrifices on the part of the individual to ensure their safety. The narrative coded as Systemic Surveillance by SSS affirms that the power is being abused and used against media and politically active citizens. The narrative relies on the surveillance footage leaks that most often go unpunished as proof of its legitimacy. The Politicization narrative signals that the “victims” of the illegal surveillance will be selected on political merits and that if one ends up in the opposition or openly opposes the status quo in any meaningful way, they might become the target of surveillance operations. This raises the bar for entry into politics or even openly protesting any anti-ruling party demonstration or public events.

The narrative around the Lack of Political Will from the GD to make any chances signals that the ruling party is the one who is benefitting from the SSS and its practices. Additionally, there are multiple cases of surveillance footage leaks that never came to a logical end, which considering the history, contested legislative changes, and other factors, would lead many to believe that SSS is responsible for surveillance footage and benefits from these cases never having a clear resolution leak.

The Dual Nature narrative sees the institution with a hidden side or a mythical status when it comes to its capabilities further, which further prevents the resolution or any positive development in this regard. For example, as noted by the third respondent, there is a sizable group of the population that is convinced that SSS has capabilities beyond comprehension.

As there is no meaningful effort to dismantle this particular conception of SSS, this only plays into this narrative and supports the dominant discourse, while the assumption is that if there was a political will to make the activities of SSS on the local political level more transparent and punish those who use illegal surveillance methods, than it would have happened already. The closed-off and opaque structure of the SSS creates opportunities for the opposition and the GD alike to make claims about its nature and activities without proof while upholding its mythical status and panopticon-like effect. The Insufficient Reform narrative suggests that there is still a lot of room for exploitation when it comes to SSS and its capabilities, as the reform that was put in place is classified as a “formality.” Since the local population already has a negative experience with this particular type of abuse of power, the idea that politically active citizens may be under illegal surveillance seems extremely plausible.

Meanwhile, the assumed background knowledge paints a picture that is not all that different from the one that was at the place before 2012. It is assumed that the same system that was at play before the 2012 elections remains in place today and that the SSS has hidden political functions aimed at suppressing opposition. Meanwhile, the much-contested legislative changes that have occurred over the years are assumed to be in service of simplifying the job of surveillance for the SSS. One detail that seems to distinguish the pre and post-2012 narratives clearly is that while before, surveillance was considered a problem for the general population as well, nowadays, it is perceived to be an issue for politically active citizens and the media.

Then finally, to connect the dominant discourse to the experience of being involved in politics in Georgia, primary interviews support that those who choose to oppose the ruling party openly, whether through supporting certain causes or deciding to join or build an opposition party, have to and do take into consideration the chance that they’re under surveillance and confirm the existence of a large group of people who are frequently afraid of being spotted during a protest and fear having to face consequences that threaten them and their loved ones on an existential level, including losing their income and future job prospects.

Another example discussed repeatedly in interviews is the additional hoops the members of the opposition have to jump through to avoid being watched and listened to without their consent, including turning off their phones, using encrypted applications, and having to alter or keep their opposition activity a secret due to fear of intervention. This feeling seems to be primarily present in those who are politically active, want to enter politics, or be more openly political, find themselves discouraged and have to face many more complications compared to if they were supportive of the ruling party.

Additionally, interviews offer insights into why the topic that is so critical has become less relevant over the years. One explanation offered by the member of Lelo seems to point at other, more urgent socio-economic challenges, or the fact that the issue has been around for so long that it now fades into the background. Additionally, it may also have to do with the shrinking of the pool of the observed.

## **Conclusion**

## The dominant perceptions around existing surveillance practices uphold the functional mechanism of the Panopticon, as seen by Foucault. The dominant discourse and narratives within have become naturalized, internalized and manifest themselves in at least partially self-imposed barriers due to the panopticon-like nature of the sustained dominant discourse to openly voicing opinions and participating in local politics, creating incentives to modify one’s behavior in the face of the Panopticon. Whether or not these perceptions are upheld or not actively disparaged with intention is beyond the scope of the article, but the results of the research reinforce the need for a more proactive approach toward rebuilding the trust between citizens and the government if Georgia intends to pursue democratic consolidation further. Addressing the surveillance issue, validating the existing mistrust and prioritizing the resolution of surveillance leak cases are just a few ways to start building a more favorable environment for democracy to flourish in Georgia.

The research also aimed to highlight the negative consequences of the government dismissing the dominant discourse and taking a passive approach as a rebuttal. As demonstrated by the existing research on the relationship between surveillance and democracy, under the general impression of the unsafe public spaces, genuine democratic consolidation can not be achieved and the integrity of processes that are fundamental to democracies like freedom of expression, vibrant civil society and political turnover is challenged.

The research also opens up doors for further inquiries into the variables in the modification of one’s behavior under the panopticon. It has been made clear through interviews that not all people react similarly to these perceptions. A more resource-rich study could look into factors and characteristics that encourage or discourage people from participating in politics despite the existing and widely shared perceptions of illegal surveillance in Georgia. Additionally, the systematic exploration of different experiences of male and female politicians under the panopticon could be a helpful step for local politics and democratic processes as well.

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# Appendix A Interview Questions

# 1. How would you evaluate the public perceptions around the hidden surveillance practices mandated by the government?

2. Have you or a member of your immediate social circle had a personal experience with government-mandated hidden surveillance?

3. Has your perception of hidden surveillance practices prevented you from expressing your opinion in a professional setting?

4. Has your perception of hidden surveillance practices prevented you from expressing your opinion in a social setting?

5. Was your perception of hidden surveillance practices a hindrance to getting involved in politics?

6. Has your perception of hidden surveillance practices ever held you back from making a professional decision?

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