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From presidents to parliaments? Party institutionalisation and constitutional reform in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

This article examines why hybrid regimes adopt constitutional reforms that reduce presidential powers. Comparing Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, it combines cross-case analysis with in-depth studies of reform episodes in Armenia and Georgia. The findings suggest that governing-party organisational capacity enabled reform despite limited broader party institutionalisation, while strategic incentives among presidents and governing elites shaped its timing and direction. Such reforms reveal an ambiguity in hybrid regimes: shifts away from president-centred rule may serve incumbent strategic interests in the short term while leaving open the possibility of more democratic institutional development over time.

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In Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, several hybrid regimes have deliberately weakened their own presidencies. Armenia (2005), Georgia (2013), and Ukraine (2006; 2014) shifted between two semi-presidential subtypes: from president-parliamentarism, where extensive presidential powers coexist with a government accountable to both president and parliament, to premier-presidentialism, where a directly elected but weaker president shares executive power with a cabinet dependent exclusively on parliament for survival (cf. Elgie 2011; Shugart and Carey 1992). Armenia (2015) and Georgia (2017) went a step further by adopting parliamentary systems, where executive power rests with a government accountable exclusively to parliament and where the presidency is indirectly elected. This is unexpected. In systems marked by personalised executive power and weakly institutionalised parties (Gherghina 2020), reforms that curtail presidential power run counter to prevailing incentives. Weak parties tend to favour strong, directly elected presidents (Doyle and Power 2020; Samuels and Shugart 2010), and elites embedded in patrimonial structures rarely support reforms that limit presidential power (Shugart 1998). This apparent paradox forms the puzzle of this study.

The democratisation literature repeatedly links reductions in presidential powers with party strengthening and parliamentary accountability (Casal Bértoa and Weber 2024; Lee

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and Casal Bértoa 2026; Linz 1990; 1994), and constitutional reforms shifting power from the executive to the legislature are considered safeguards against presidential autocracy (Cheibub 2007; Elgie and Moestrup 2016; Ganghof 2021). Yet despite substantial scholarly interest in executive-legislative relations, we know little about why hybrid regimes undertake such reforms. Hybrid regimes, political systems combining formally democratic institutions with illiberal practices and personalised executive powers (Levitsky and Way 2002), have been persistent across Eastern Europe and the Caucasus since the early 1990s. Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine share such trajectories marked by fluctuating political competition (Bielasiak 2005), tensions between constitutional rules and informal networks (Baturo 2016; Fisun 2016; Galligan and Versteeg 2013; Hale 2006), and oscillations between democratisation and autocratisation (Wheatley and Züricher 2008).

Several strands of scholarship speak to different aspects of this puzzle. Research has generated important insights into party institutionalisation in post-Soviet politics (Gherghina 2020; Randall and Svåsand 2002), presidential succession and term limits (Baturo and Elgie 2019), and constitutional reform in presidential and semi-presidential systems (Elgie and Moestrup 2016; Samuels and Shugart 2010). However, these literatures have not been brought together to explain why hybrid regimes undertake constitutional reforms reducing presidential powers. Limited attention has been paid to whether organisational dimensions of party institutionalisation are politically consequential for such reforms, even where parties remain weakly institutionalised according to conventional criteria. This distinction is especially relevant in hybrid regimes, where governing parties may develop sufficient organisational coherence to facilitate constitutional reform while remaining weakly institutionalised in broader respects.

More recently, an emerging literature has begun to connect presidential leadership in hybrid regimes with neo-institutional studies of presidential and semi-presidential regimes (Ahlquist and Levi 2011; Burkhardt 2024; Chaisty, Cheeseman, and Power 2018; Elgie 2015; Pérez-Linan, Schmidt, and Vairo 2019). These studies underline the balancing act presidents face between maintaining personalised rule and navigating executive-legislative relations. In authoritarian and hybrid regimes alike, presidents must build administrative routines that enable effective governance while limiting the ability of rival political actors to challenge presidential dominance (Åberg and Sedelius 2026). At the same time, they depend on governing parties capable of mobilising and sustaining parliamentary majorities required for institutional change (Ishiyama, Breuning, and Widmeier 2018). Building on these insights, we argue that the organisational capacity of governing parties and the strategic incentives of presidents and governing elites deserve greater attention as interacting conditions for constitutional reform.

This study investigates the conditions under which post-Soviet hybrid regimes have adopted constitutional reforms reducing presidential powers. We examine two mechanisms. First, we assess whether reforms emerged in contexts where governing parties had developed organisational dimensions of party institutionalisation sufficient to coordinate and sustain constitutional reform. Second, we examine whether presidents approaching constitutionally mandated term limits possessed strategic incentives to initiate or support such reforms. We argue that these explanations play different roles in the reform process: organisational development shapes the capacity to implement constitutional reform, whereas presidential succession incentives shape when and why such reforms are pursued.

This study makes two main contributions. First, it advances comparative research on constitutional reform in hybrid regimes by refining how party institutionalisation is understood in relation to constitutional change. We argue that governing parties may acquire sufficient organisational coherence to carry through constitutional reform even while remaining weakly institutionalised. This perspective nuances prevailing assumptions about the marginal political relevance of parties in post-Soviet hybrid regimes.

Second, the study brings together two strands of scholarship that have largely developed in parallel: party institutionalisation and presidential succession. This allows us to examine how organisational capacity and presidential succession incentives may play complementary roles in constitutional refoms.

Empirically, the study employs a mixed-methods design in three steps. First, using V-Dem data, we map temporal long-term trends in party institutionalisation to identify periods preceding constitutional reform. Second, we conduct structured within-case analyses of Armenia and Georgia prior to constitutional reforms, drawing on secondary sources and elite interviews to reconstruct the reform processes. Third, a cross-case comparison assesses how patterns of organisational party development and presidential succession incentives varied across reform episodes.

The next section outlines the theoretical framework, followed by method, case selection and data. The results section first examines longitudinal patterns of party development before turning to in-depth analyses of the reform processes in Armenia and Georgia. The subsequent comparative discussion and conclusion integrate the findings by considering their broader implications for research on party institutionalisation, constitutional reform, and hybrid regimes.

Theory

Over the past two decades, several post-Soviet hybrid regimes have formally shifted away from president-parliamentarism towards premier-presidential or parliamentary forms of government. Armenia (2005), Georgia (2013), and Ukraine (2006; 2014) adopted premier-presidentialism, while Armenia (2015) and Georgia (2017) introduced parliamentary systems. Despite some reversals (Ukraine 2010; Moldova 2016), this movement away from the most president-centred subtype of semi-presidentialism represents a broader regional pattern requiring explanation.

This study examines constitutional reform in hybrid regimes as a political process shaped by elite incentives and the organisational capacity of governing actors. While research on post-Soviet hybrid regimes has rightly emphasised the importance of informal institutions, patronal networks, and personalised rule, we argue that formal political institutions and party organisation continue to shape how constitutional reform becomes politically feasible. Our theoretical expectations draw on three related literatures: party institutionalisation, constitutional reform, and presidential leadership in hybrid regimes.

Party institutionalisation and constitutional reform

In the phrasing of Enyedi and Bértoa, "party systems are expected to 'mature' with time, and parties are anticipated to develop routine reactions towards each other" (2018, 423). Yet the path towards institutionalisation cannot be taken for granted, particularly in

hybrid contexts. In the post-communist region, especially the former Soviet Union, party institutionalisation has faced numerous obstacles: an authoritarian institutional legacy, weak mass political organisations and grassroots mobilisation, a volatile economic history, and a leader-centred political culture (Robinson 2023). Already in 1997, Mair argued that the fragility of collective identities, voter alienation, and the overlap between social movements, parties, and interest groups would continue to hinder party system institutionalisation. Consequently, most scholars came to assume that party institutionalisation in the region would remain limited, reinforcing expectations that parties would play only a modest role in major constitutional change.

To be clear, we distinguish between *party system institutionalisation* and *party institutionalisation*. Party system institutionalisation (PSI) concerns stable interactions among parties, whereas party institutionalisation (PI) concerns the stability of parties as organisations. Yet the two are closely related, and a more recent study by Casal Bértoa, Enyedi, and Mölder (2024, 206) concludes that

> out of the two phenomena, party institutionalisation is the prime mover. That is, party system institutionalisation demands party institutionalisation, while not the other way around. To achieve a predictable [party] system, it seems that one needs to stabilise the parties first.

In this study, we are primarily occupied with party institutionalisation, in general terms referring to the organisational continuity and longevity of political parties (Huntington 1968). Following Sanders Self, Franke, and Mitchell (2025, 2), we define institutionalised parties "as those that survive multiple electoral rounds and/or leadership changes, feature an apparatus that is stable and permanent, have rules to govern the management of internal affairs, and manage access to candidacy as a selective incentive for its members". Party institutionalisation thus encompasses several organisational and societal characteristics that need not evolve simultaneously. That is, institutionalised parties should demonstrate both independence and stability beyond its leader and meaningful internal procedures for action and role selection.

Sanders Self, Franke, and Mitchell (2025) further separate between party institutionalisation and *party strength*. The latter simply refers to the party's ability for large-scale voter mobilisation. Party strength is a complementary concept, particularly useful in hybrid regimes where parties may mobilise voters without developing organisational autonomy. Party strength may be a vehicle for democratisation attempts, but strong parties' regular function in a hybrid or authoritarian context is often as a means for renting power access. Therefore, party strength captures characteristics not fully reflected in the broader concept of party institutionalisation. However, while party strength helps explain how governing parties gain and retain power, it says less about their capacity to implement major institutional reforms. From an institutional perspective, organisational aspects of party institutionalisation should strengthen governing parties' capacity to coordinate and act collectively (Kitschelt 1995). Whereas party strength concerns electoral mobilisation, constitutional reform depends on governing parties' capacity to organise and sustain parliamentary majorities. It therefore requires more than electoral success: it depends on governing parties' capacity to organise and sustain parliamentary majorities capable of carrying institutional change through the legislature. For hybrid regimes, this leads us to the following hypothesis:

H1: Constitutional reforms away from president-centred arrangements are more likely when governing parties have higher levels of organisational party institutionalisation.

Presidential power and term limit constraints

A substantial literature examines how presidential term limits shape executive behaviour and constitutional change in presidential and semi-presidential systems (Baturo 2014; Baturo and Elgie 2019). This literature emphasises how term limits reshape presidents' strategic incentives as they approach the end of their constitutionally permitted terms. We refer to these below as presidential succession incentives. These incentives are particularly pronounced in authoritarian and hybrid regimes, where leaving office may entail significant political and personal costs. However, presidents must balance the pursuit of personal dominance with the development of sufficiently capable governing structures to maintain political control (Burkhardt 2024; Krol 2021). Hale (2015) explains these dynamics through the concept of patronal presidentialism. In president-centred post-Soviet systems, directly elected presidents have combined extensive formal powers with informal authority rooted in patron-client networks. Patronal presidents typically maintain political control by building dominant governing parties or loyal parliamentary majorities, without relying on highly institutionalised parties (Bader 2011). This perspective also suggests that organisationally strong governing parties need not be institutionally autonomous, as they may primarily function as vehicles for patronal networks (Magyar and Madlovics 2020).

Semi-presidentialism (premier-presidential and president-parliamentary systems) introduces competing centres of executive power. As Hale argues, rival "pyramids of power" centred on the president and the prime minister generate genuine political competition and increase the possibility that an incumbent patron may ultimately lose office (Hale 2015, 92). Under these conditions a divided executive may strengthen presidential incentives to change the constitutional rules before succession becomes imminent. Across the post-Soviet region, the combination of hybrid regimes and dual executives turns elections into high-stakes moments capable of altering the constitutional balance of power (Levitsky and Way 2002). Attempts to extend presidential tenure are particularly common where democratic institutions remain weak and the personal costs of leaving office are high (Baturo 2010). As a result, consensus on constitutional design has often proved temporary, with reforms driven less by stable institutional preferences than by changing centres of political power. In this way, institutional preferences have tended to follow office rather than constitutional principle. Amendments and electoral laws have been repeatedly revised in ways that reflect the strategic interests of incumbent elites. Instead of mitigating institutional rivalry, semi-presidentialism has often intensified conflict between the executive actors, reinforcing incentives to alter the constitutional distribution of power (Birch 2008; Fruhstorfer and Hein 2016).

Presidential term limits constrain executives in hybrid regimes. Circumvention through constitutional manipulation or informal power retention carries substantial costs, including legitimacy loss, elite defection, and international pressure (Baturo 2010; Bunce and Wolchik 2011). In contexts with EU or Western integration aspirations, such as for Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, circumvention invites sanctions and isolation.

Where governing parties possess sufficient organisational capacity to sustain parliamentary majorities, a negotiated constitutional reform may therefore offer presidents a less costly alternative to overt constitutional manipulation. Under such conditions, presidents may be tempted to trying to preserve political influence through parties and parliamentary institutions rather than through direct presidential powers. Organisational capacity alone does not explain why constitutional reform is pursued, but it creates the opportunity to pursue this strategy when political circumstances make it attractive. As presidents approach constitutionally imposed term limits, constitutional reform may become one such strategy for managing political uncertainty and retaining influence beyond the presidency. This leads to our second hypothesis:

> H2: Constitutional reforms away from president-centred arrangements are more likely when presidents seek to preserve political influence as they approach constitutional term limits.

Method and data

Analytical framework and temporal focus

Studying political trajectories in hybrid regimes in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus is difficult because of the region's institutional complexity and frequent political change. Assessing the roles of parties and constitutional reform therefore requires a structured comparative framework. Our analysis adopts a historical-comparative approach that traces and compares political processes preceding constitutional reform. Historically oriented analyses of institutional change often focus on critical junctures as macro episodes that generate enduring legacies (Collier 2011; Collier and Collier 2015). However, because the long-term consequences of institutional change are often uncertain in hybrid regimes, we use political focal points – causally relevant sequences of actions that can be identified and compared across cases – as our temporal anchor (Bengtsson and Ruonavaara 2016). Following Bengtsson and Ruonavaara's historical-comparative framework, we combine within-case analysis with between-case comparison using a common set of concepts and temporal focus.

The quantitative analysis identifies developments in party institutionalisation and constitutional arrangements preceding reform. The qualitative case studies then examine how party development and presidential incentives unfolded during the political processes leading to reform.

Comparative design and case selection

The first step in our analysis compares constitutional reforms in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine to examine temporal relationships between party institutionalisation (and, where relevant, party strength) and constitutional change. With the exception of the three Baltic democracies, Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine show higher democratic records than other post-Soviet countries and have moved along a continuum between flawed democracy and electoral authoritarianism (Csaky 2021; Levitsky and Way 2010). Since becoming independent states, Freedom House has consistently placed them in the "Partly Free" category (Table 1).[1] We operationalise hybrid regime status as Freedom House scores between 3.5 and 5.0 ("Partly Free") during the period 2000–

Table 1. Constitutional types and electoral systems 1994–2025.

	Constitutional type	Electoral system, parliament	Freedom House status*
Armenia	Pres-parl 1995–2005	Parallel 1995–2017	PF
	Prem-pres 2005–2015	List PR 2017–	PF
	Parl 2015–		PF
Georgia	Pres 1995–2004	Parallel 1995–2024	PF
	Pres-parl 2005–2012	List PR 2024–	PF
	Prem-pres 2013–2017		PF
	Parl 2018–		PF
Moldova	Prem-pres 1994–2000	List-PR 1994–2017	PF
	Parl 2000–2016	Parallel 2018–	PF
	Prem-pres 2016–		PF
Ukraine	Pres-parl 1996–2006	Parallel 1998–2002	PF
	Prem-pres 2006–2010	PR 2002–2012	F
	Pres-parl 2010–2014	Parallel 2012–	PF
	Prem-pres 2014–		PF

Note: Pres = presidentialism; Pres-parl = President-parliamentarism; Prem-pres = Premier-presidentialism; Parl = Parliamentarism; PR = Proportional Representation, Parallel = Mixed Member Majority (one share of MPs elected by PR and the other by majority/plurality elections in single-member constituencies) TR = Majoritarian Two Round System.
*Freedom House's annual status, F = Free, PF = Partly Free, NF = Not Free, based on scores on Civil Liberties and Political Rights.
Sources: Elgie and Moestrup 2016; and Elgie and Moestrup 2008, with updates; IDEA Electoral System Design Database 2025; Freedom House 2025.

2020, capturing political systems that combine meaningful political competition with significant constraints on democratic contestation. This is consistent with key characteristics of competitive authoritarian regimes, where elections are contested but the playing field remains uneven (Levitsky and Way 2002).

In the second step, we examine the patterns identified in the comparative analysis in greater depth through case studies of two reform periods in Armenia and Georgia, which transitioned from president-parliamentary to premier-presidential systems (in 2005 and 2013) and then to parliamentarism (in 2015 and 2017). These cases satisfy three criteria: hybrid regime status, constitutional reforms reducing presidential powers, and two successive reform episodes permitting within-country comparison across constitutional transitions. We exclude Moldova and Ukraine from the in-depth analysis. Moldova's constitutional shift from premier-presidentialism to parliamentarism occurred in 2000, during an early and relatively fluid phase of state formation, making it analytically distinct from the more institutionally consolidated reform episodes examined in Armenia and Georgia. In Ukraine, constitutional arrangements have oscillated back and forth and have been closely tied to mass protests (the Orange Revolution 2004 and the Maidan Revolution 2013), making it difficult to identify the more gradual pre-reform political processes that constitute the focus of our analysis.

Third and finally, the qualitative findings are placed in a between-case comparison to generate empirical conclusions and inform theoretical development. By comparing two constitutional reforms per country case, the analysis draws out cross-case insights while retaining the same temporal and conceptual core (cf. Bengtsson and Ruonavaara 2016).

Materials and operationalisation

We first use the V-Dem party institutionalisation index to identify temporal developments in party organisation preceding constitutional reform. The party institutionalisation index captures the extent to which political parties are institutionalised, ranging from 0 to 1,

with higher scores indicating greater institutionalisation.[2] The index is aggregated from measures of the depth of party organisation, including the extent of party organisation, branches, linkages, platforms, and legislative cohesion of a country's main parties. In this way, the party institutionalisation index captures parties' organisational capacity and capacity for a routinised role in elite coordination and candidate selection.

There are three main shortcomings in this operationalisation. First, the index does not capture the level of independence, that is, whether the parties are free from serving as vehicles for rents and political influence. Second, because the index is based on expert coding at the system level, it may overlook developments within individual parties. Third, the V-Dem datasets are organised at the country-year level and therefore cannot capture shorter-term or within-year political dynamics. We therefore complement the system-level V-Dem index with V-Party (Varieties of Party Identity and Organisation) indicators at the level of individual parliamentary parties, aggregated to country-year level using seat-share weighted means.

As a complementary measure for party institutionalisation, we select the parties' nomination capacity and the continuation of parliamentary parties during the election year to capture the stability of the party and the extent to which it matters for role selection. Party continuation measures whether the party participated under its current name during the previous election. This measure is recalculated to capture a gradually increasing range of values (0–4) to match the range of the two other measurements.[3] Candidate nomination centres on the most common type, ranging from national party leadership decides (0) to candidate decides (4), with higher values indicating progressively more decentralised nomination procedures.[4] As an additional indicator of organisational development, we capture the extent of local party organisation. Local party office captures whether the party maintains permanent local offices that operate outside of elections.[5] These indicators complement the broader V-Dem index by capturing organisational characteristics relevant to governing parties' capacity for collective parliamentary action. The criticism of measures based on expert coding, however, also applies to the V-Party dataset, which motivates the complementary use of qualitative evidence in the subsequent case studies.

In the second, qualitative part, we trace the actual role of political parties and presidents in the two selected cases, Armenia and Georgia. The analysis draws on peer-reviewed research, policy reports by domestic and international expertise, and country-specific analyses, and original interview material. It includes 14 semi-structured face-to-face interviews conducted in Georgia (May 2024) and 10 semi-structured face-to-face interviews in Armenia (March 2026) with current and former parliamentarians, party and government representatives, constitutional specialists, and academics with extensive knowledge of each country's political and constitutional development. The interviews followed a common thematic guide focusing on party development, presidential power, constitutional reform, and the interaction between these processes. Respondents were selected on the basis of their direct experience of, or expertise in, the constitutional reform processes. The interviews complement written sources by providing contextual information on political decision-making, institutional conflicts, and elite strategies that is not readily apparent from official documents or public debate. They were particularly valuable for identifying key actors, reconstructing sequences of events, and interpreting the interaction between elites during the reform processes. All interviews were conducted under conditions of confidentiality and are therefore cited in anonymised form.

Each case study is organised around the two theoretical expectations developed above: (1) the development of party organisation and parliamentary coordination prior to the reform, and (2) the incentives of presidents facing constitutionally imposed term limits. Both analyses follow the same temporal sequence, examining developments leading to each reform.

Results

Politics in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine have often been characterised by personalised struggles over political and economic resources, dominated by powerful presidents and rival elites embedded in clientelist politico-business networks. Political parties have long been described as only one among several relevant actors and rarely been considered decisive for policy outcomes (Gherghina and Volintiru 2020; Hale 2015; Pleines 2019: Protsyk 2013b). Although constitutional shifts away from president-parliamentary arrangements have formally reduced presidential powers, presidents have largely kept substantial informal influence (Choudhry, Sedelius, and Kyrychenko 2018; Elgie and Moestrup 2016), partially through the creation of presidential parties capable of securing parliamentary majorities. Saakashvili's United National Movement in Georgia and the Party of Regions and later Servant of the People in Ukraine are clear examples, often facilitated by mixed electoral systems. Yet such parties have typically been short-lived and internally fragmented. Where electoral rules favour individual leaders and presidential elections continue to dominate voter perceptions, incentives to develop stable, programmatic party organisations have remained limited (Protsyk 2013a; Sedelius 2015).

Party institutionalisation trajectories

Figure 1(a–d) plot party institutionalisation means from the V-Dem data and of constitutional regime type per country from 1995 to 2020, except for Moldova, where the last constitutional change of relevance occurred in 2000. Across all four countries, the figures indicate a gradual increase in party institutionalisation from the late 1990s into the first decade of the 2000s. This broader upward trend precedes the first constitutional reforms reducing presidential powers in Moldova (2000), Georgia (2004), and, albeit less clearly, Ukraine (2006). As discussed below, however, the Ukrainian trajectory becomes considerably less consistent when examining the organisational indicators at the party level. In Armenia, the evidence is more ambiguous, with only modest changes prior to the 2005 reform.

However, in Armenia, Georgia, and Ukraine, which have experienced more than one constitutional shift involving a reduction in presidential powers, the figures do not indicate a comparable increase in system-level party institutionalisation prior to the later reform episodes. In this latter period, Armenia and Georgia shifted from premier-presidentialism to parliamentarism, while Ukraine again weakened presidential power by returning from president-parliamentarism (2010–2014) to premier-presidentialism (2014-). The 2014 change in Ukraine was an outcome of the Maidan Revolution, representing a strong backlash against the autocratisation and constitutional rollback to a strengthened presidency initiated by President Yanukovych in 2010. Following Yanukovych's ouster, parliament restored the 2006 constitutional model, originally adopted after the Orange

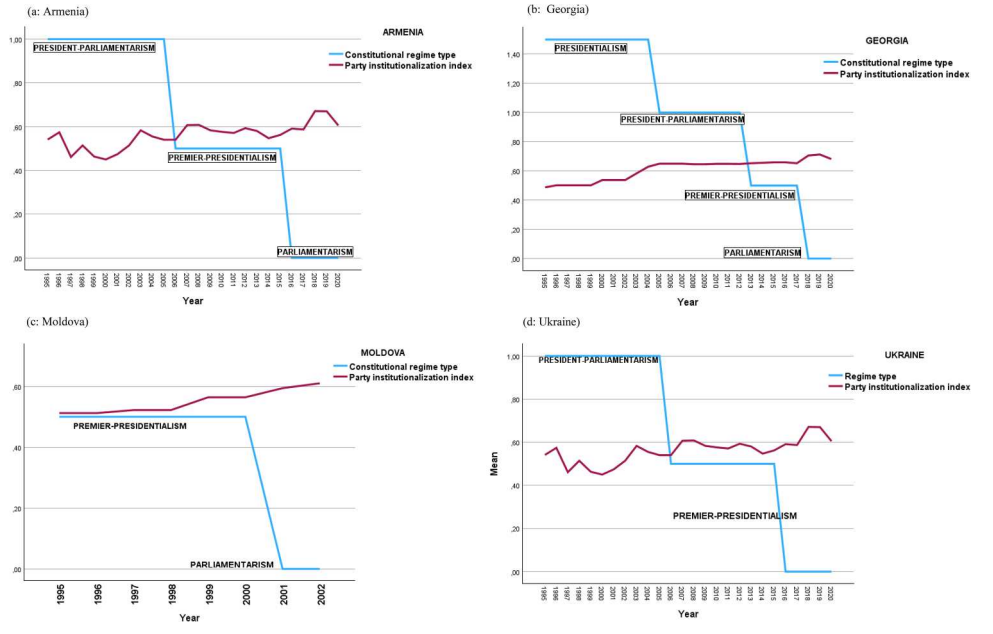

Figure 1. (a–d) Party institutionalization (V-Dem) and constitutional regime type.

Revolution, thereby returning to premier-presidentialism with a weaker presidency and a government accountable solely to parliament (Choudhry, Sedelius, and Kyrychenko 2018). The Armenian and Georgian reform trajectories are examined in greater detail below.

To assess whether these developments also reflected greater party autonomy, we turn to V-Party indicators. Figure 2(a–d) present party continuation, nomination capacity, and local organisational strength at the party level for each electoral year during the selected period. These indicators focus on organisational characteristics at the party level and not on overall party institutionalisation. Except for Ukraine, which shows a fluctuating and largely negative trajectory, each country shows an increase in party strength as indicated by the three measures. Ukraine thus provides an important qualification to H1: while the aggregate party institutionalisation index increases prior to the 2006 reform, the organisational party-level indicators do not display a similarly consistent development.

Comparing the two sets of indicators reveals that system-level party institutionalisation and organisational developments within dominant parties do not necessarily evolve in parallel, particularly evident in Armenia and Georgia. While the general PI levels plateau or fluctuate after the mid-2000s, the dominant parties in Armenia (the Republican Party of Armenia, RPA) and Georgia (Georgian Dream, GD) continued to expand their organisational presence, tighten candidate control, and extend their territorial reach. Greater organisational capacity within ruling parties therefore did not necessarily translate into broader party institutionalisation. Whether and how these developments translated into collective parliamentary action requires closer examination in the subsequent case studies.

Although the limited number of observations precludes statistical inference, the descriptive data suggest that moderate organisational development preceded the first

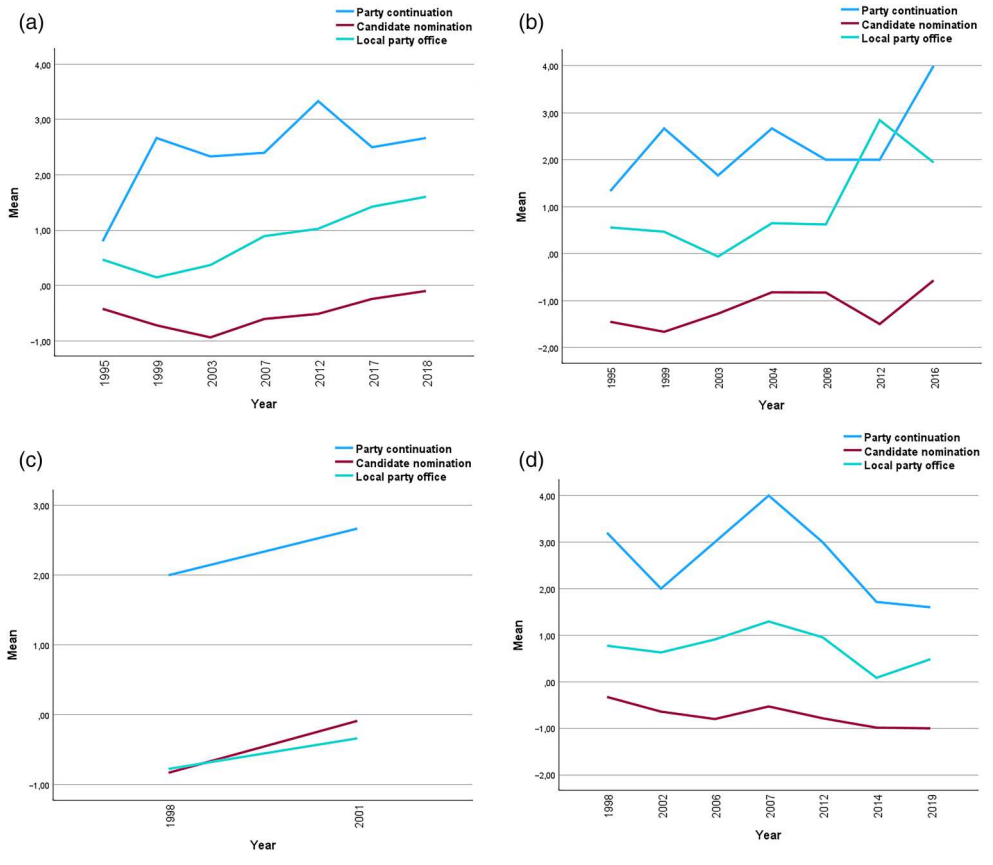

Figure 2. (a–d) Party continuation, candidate nomination, and local party office (V-Party).

rounds of constitutional reform in several of the cases. At the same time, the later reform episodes occurred without comparable increases in broader party institutionalisation. Hence, the quantitative evidence therefore provides mixed support for H1. The qualitative case studies therefore examine how party development and presidential incentives interacted during the political processes preceding the constitutional reforms in Armenia and Georgia.

Case 1: Armenia

Armenia entered the post-Soviet era with an executive structure centred on a dominant presidency. The 1995 constitution established a president-parliamentary system granting extensive presidential powers over the cabinet, foreign policy, judicial appointments, and security institutions. Informally, patronage networks linking economic elites, state officials, and local power brokers reinforced presidential control over political competition and resource distribution. With few exceptions, presidents governed with reliable parliamentary backing, either through loyal majorities or fragmented opposition. This personalised political order forms the backdrop to the 2005 and 2015 constitutional reforms (Shirinyan 2019).

Party institutionalisation prior to the 2005 and 2015 reforms (H1)

Existing studies (cf. Markarov 2016; Shirinyan 2019) and the V-Dem/V-Party trendlines (Figures 1(a) and 2(a)) suggest that limited but notable improvements in party institutionalisation occurred in the early years of the 2000s. Analyses indicate that Armenian parties were relatively more structured than those in several other post-Soviet states, particularly in terms of continuity and territorial penetration. Between 2000 and 2003, the Republican Party of Armenia (RPA) consolidated its position as the dominant parliamentary force, and a short period of cohabitation in 1999–2000 demonstrated that parliamentary blocs could momentarily constrain presidential action. These developments suggest a modest organisational strengthening that made the political arena more predictable than during the transitional turbulence of the early 1990s (Ishiyama and Kennedy 2001).

Prior to the 2005 reform, the RPA had developed a degree of organisational consolidation that was somewhat unusual among the post-Soviet countries at the time. By the early 2000s, the party combined parliamentary dominance with an expanding territorial presence, including a nationwide network of regional offices and a large formal membership base. This strengthened parliamentary coordination and facilitated elite bargaining, even though internal democracy and programmatic development remained limited and cohesion rested largely on top-level elite coordination. The RPA had thus acquired organisational capacity to coordinate parliamentary action, alongside modest improvements in party institutionalisation. This provides some support for H1 in relation to the 2005 reform, although the organisational developments remained limited. Our interview material is broadly consistent with this interpretation. Respondents described Armenian parties as remaining highly centralised and leader-oriented, yet they also pointed to gradual improvements in organisational coordination, territorial presence, and parliamentary discipline that strengthened the RPA's capacity to act collectively (Interviews Armenia 1, 4, 5 and 8; Shirinyan 2019).

Ahead of the 2015 reform, the RPA remained dominant, but its position continued to rest on patronage, access to state resources and elite loyalty. Internal rules, cadre development and programmatic structuring remained weak (Bisarya et al. 2023; Bisarya and Hubbard 2016). Although the RPA strengthened its internal organisation and elite coordination during this period, this consolidation did not translate into broader party institutionalisation. Instead, coalition politics remained highly instrumental, limiting the development of autonomous parliamentary capacity. Even RPA's organisational capacity relied primarily on hierarchical control and access to state resources, more than on routinised internal procedures or programmatic coordination (Aleksanyan and Margaryan 2023). The interviews reinforce this interpretation. Respondents characterised the RPA as an increasingly effective governing organisation but not as a more autonomous or internally institutionalised party, emphasising the continued importance of presidential leadership, informal elite coordination, and state resources (Interviews Armenia 2, 6, and 10).

Presidential incentives and elite strategies (H2)

The dynamics behind the 2005 reform were shaped by President Kocharyan's need to stabilise a fragmented political environment. Without his own party and dependent on

a coalition of elites within the RPA, he faced both formal constraints and potential challenges from parliamentary actors. The earlier cohabitation episode had demonstrated the risks posed by a competing centre of executive power, making a more predictable executive arrangement attractive. Unlike the latter 2015 reform, these incentives were not primarily related to presidential succession or constitutionally imposed term limits and therefore do not provide support for H2 (Markarov 2016). Several respondents similarly described the 2005 reform primarily as an attempt to improve governability rather than as a strategy for presidential succession (Interviews Armenia 3, 4, and 9).

By contrast, the 2015 reform provides a clearer illustration of H2. As Figures 1 and 2(a) show, general party institutionalisation plateaued while party-level indicators diverged. As President Sargsyan approached the end of his second and final term, constitutional reform created an opportunity through which he could keep political influence beyond the constraints of presidential term limits. By concentrating power in the prime minister position, eliminating the direct presidential mandate, and introducing an electoral system favourable to the ruling party, Sargsyan and the RPA designed a system that was intended to sustain their political dominance (Bisarya et al. 2023). The interview material supports this interpretation. Respondents consistently described the reform as being driven less by constitutional principles than by strategic considerations surrounding succession and the continued dominance of the incumbent political elite (Interviews Armenia 2, 6, 7, and 10).

A precondition for this strategy was the RPA's dominance in parliament. By the time Sargsyan assumed the presidency in 2008, the RPA had become the dominant parliamentary force and further consolidated its position after the 2012 elections. This gave Sargsyan a coherent parliamentary majority through which constitutional reform could be implemented. The institutional design of the reform process further illustrates the president's control over constitutional change. In 2013, President Sargsyan unilaterally appointed all nine members of the constitutional reform commission, drawn exclusively from state and legal institutions and excluding opposition actors and civil society from meaningful participation. A draft constitution was released in mid-2015, and when Sargsyan convened consultations in August 2015, several major opposition parties declined to participate, denouncing the initiative as a façade and not a genuine forum for deliberation. Yet, the parliament approved the draft amendments in October 2015, and a December referendum provided the required popular endorsement under conditions widely criticised by opposition actors as manipulated and unrepresentative (Galyan 2015; RFE/RL 2015; Stepanian and Bedevian 2015). A further indication of strategic intent was the decision to reduce the frequency of elections. Moving from separate presidential and parliamentary contests to a single parliamentary cycle every five years lowered the risks of electoral contestation, and limited opportunities for protest and mobilisation (Bisarya et al. 2023).

Hence, our findings suggest that the 2015 reform was a calculated attempt by an outgoing president to reshape executive institutions in ways that preserved political influence. Although this strategy utimately failed amid widespread anti-government protests and snap elections in 2018, the constitutional reform served as a tool for reproducing and consolidating the power of the incumbent president and the ruling elite.

The 2015 episode illustrateshow our two theoretical expectations complement one another. Organisational capacity within the dominant governing party enabled constitutional change, while presidential succession incentives shaped the direction of that

change. Sargsyan's strategy initially succeeded because the RPA was strong enough to secure parliamentary majorities, yet its organisational strength remained closely tied to presidential leadership and state resources rather than to autonomous party institutionalisation. The subsequent collapse of this arrangement during the 2018 Velvet Revolution, when RPA elites defected and the party disintegrated, further demonstrates the relative weakness of party institutionalisation (Bisarya et al. 2023; Iskandaryan 2018; Lanskoy and Suthers 2019).

Case 2: Georgia

Georgia's political development since independence has been marked by recurrent volatility, informal power structures and shifting constitutional arrangements. The early Shevardnadze era combined weak state institutions with a fragmented party system, followed by the Rose Revolution in 2003, which opened a period of rapid institutional reform and concentrated executive power. Across these decades, the presidency remained the dominant centre of power, despite periodic attempts to rebalance relations between the executive and the legislature (Bisarya et al. 2023). This broader context is crucial for understanding the constitutional reforms enacted in 2013 and 2017.

Party institutionalisation prior to the 2013 and 2017 reforms (H1)

Party development in Georgia followed an uneven trajectory during the 2000s and early 2010s (Nakashidze 2016). The Citizens' Union of Georgia (CUG), despite its internal fragmentation, constituted an important organisational platform for emerging opposition actors who later played key roles in the Rose Revolution. Although initially a loose coalition dominated by President Shevardnadze, the CUG fostered a new generation of reform-oriented politicians, most notably the so-called Zhvania group, who built parliamentary experience and organisational capacity within the party before turning against the president (Furusawa 2022, 6). This relatively open political environment, in which parliament occasionally opposed presidential preferences and civil society grew with foreign assistance, enabled party actors beyond the executive to gain visibility and relevance (Mitchell 2009, 174).

The 2003 Rose Revolution in itself reflects a moment of partial party development: opposition leaders were embedded in existing party structures and capable of coordinating mass mobilisation together with non-state actors, ultimately accelerating Shevardnadze's removal (Beacháin 2009, 199). In the post-revolution period, the United National Movement (UNM) emerged as a dominant party with a nationwide presence, cohesive parliamentary representation and a strong mobilisation capacity (Kakachia et al. 2017, 12). Importantly, when UNM subsequently lost power to Georgian Dream (GD) in the 2012 elections, it did not collapse but instead maintained parliamentary representation and organisational continuity. Although not unique in the post-Soviet region, this continuity provides an indication of a degree of party institutionalisation.

The quantitative indicators from the V-Dem and V-Party datasets are broadly compatible with this development. V-Dem indicates a moderate increase in party institutionalisation during the period, while the V-Party indicators (Figure 2(b)) point to some improvements in party continuation, candidate nomination, and local organisational

presence. These developments provide some support for H1 prior to the 2013 reform, although the quantitative trends are not uniform and primarily reflect increasing capacity within the dominant parties more than any broad party institutionalisation. The interview material reinforces this interpretation. While several respondents described UNM as the most organisationally developed party Georgia had experienced thus far, they simultaneously emphasised that it remained highly centralised around its leadership and substantially dependent on informal decision-making (Interviews Georgia 3, 7, 10, and 13).

The period preceding the 2017 reform differed markedly from the earlier reform episode. While the V-Dem index shows little evidence of renewed general-level party institutionalisation, Georgian Dream (GD) continued to consolidate its organisational capacity and parliamentary dominance. This consolidation, supported by elite cohesion and access to extensive economic resources, did not translate into deeper party institutionalisation. GD's internal organisation remained strongly leader-centred, with decision-making concentrated around Bidzina Ivanishvili rather than embedded in party structures (Sichinava 2020). Similarly, while the V-Party indicators (Figure 2(b)) show diverging trends, rising party continuation and candidate-nomination strength alongside declining local representation after 2013, V-Dem's party institutionalisation index shows no corresponding improvement (Figure 1(b)).

At the same time, the UNM underwent significant fragmentation beginning in 2016, splitting into competing factions (Kakachia et al. 2017). The interviews consistently portray this period as characterised by personalisation, informal leadership, and weak internal party democracy across the political spectrum. Respondents repeatedly characterised both governing and opposition parties as instruments of political leadership, with decision-making concentrated around a small number of dominant political actors (Interviews Georgia 1, 2, 5, 8, 11, and 14). These developments suggest that the transition to parliamentarism in 2017 was enabled by the organisational capacity of the dominant governing party, GD, more than by broader advances in party institutionalisation.

Presidential incentives (H2) and governing elite strategies

The 2013 shift from president-parliamentarism to premier-presidentialism occurred in the wake of Georgia's first peaceful alternation of power. Following GD's parliamentary victory in 2012, executive power shifted to the new parliamentary majority while President Saakashvili remained in office until the 2013 presidential election. The constitutional reform was framed publicly as a means to limit the concentration of executive power that had built up under President Saakashvili and to strengthen parliamentary accountability. These arguments also aligned with EU expectations concerning a better balance between executive and legislative powers. While these broader normative considerations formed part of the political context, several interview respondents portrayed the 2013 reform primarily as a response to the perceived excesses of presidential dominance (Interviews Georgia 4, 9, and 12). The reform thus reflected structural and normative pressures more than incumbent-driven strategic behaviour, with presidential incentives playing only a marginal role at this stage (Bisarya et al. 2023).

By contrast, the 2017 reform illustrates a different configuration of strategic incentives. The reform was not primarily driven by presidential succession incentives but by GD's

effort to consolidate executive control by removing the presidency as an institutional counterweight. The relationship between President Margvelashvili and the GD government had become openly adversarial, with the president using institutional tools, including the veto, to challenge the parliamentary majority and act as a counterweight to GD's increasingly dominant position (Caliskan 2023; Zurabashvili 2016a, 53; 2016b). With a constitutional majority in parliament, GD possessed both the means and the incentive to restructure the executive in a way that eliminated this constraint. Margvelashvili's approaching term limit further reduced the political costs of removing the presidency's direct popular mandate. Hence, the 2017 reform abolished direct presidential elections, curtailed presidential powers and strengthened the position of the prime minister and the parliamentary majority. Both the case literature and the interview respondents portrayed the reform as an effort to consolidate the governing party's control over the executive and reduce the risk that an independently elected president could emerge as a competing centre of power (Bisarya et al. 2023; Civil Georgia 2017; Interviews Georgia 1, 5, 6, 8, 11, and 13).

As in Armenia, the Georgian case suggests that organisational capacity and strategic elite incentives complemented one another. Unlike Armenia, however, these incentives were rooted less in presidential succession than in the governing party's effort to consolidate executive dominance.

Comparative reflections: shifting to parliamentarism as a tool for power consolidation

In both countries, earlier constitutional reforms, Armenia's shift in 2005 and Georgia's move to premier-presidentialism in 2013, occurred during periods of moderate organisational development within the party system. V-Dem and V-Party indicators, together with case literature, point to growing organisational continuity, greater parliamentary relevance of parties and improved coordination capacities during the early 2000s. However, the case studies also demonstrate that these developments fell short of party institutionalisation in its broader sense. The findings therefore suggest that relatively modest organisational developments strengthened governing parties' capacity for collective parliamentary action.

The later reform episodes point even more clearly in this direction. Armenia (2015) and Georgia (2017) were not preceded by comparable advances in system-level party institutionalisation. Instead, the evidence points to increasing organisational control within the dominant governing parties, while broader party institutionalisation stagnated. In Armenia, the RPA's dominance rested less on institutional depth than on elite coordination and access to state resources. In Georgia, Georgian Dream similarly combined organisational cohesion with highly centralised leadership, while the previously strongest opposition party, UNM, became increasingly fragmented.

Strategic elite incentives also became more important in these reforms, although the two cases provide uneven support for H2. In Armenia, President Sargsyan used the 2015 reform to circumvent presidential term limits by shifting executive powers towards the prime minister position. In Georgia, the 2017 reform enabled Georgian Dream to remove an independent presidency as a potential institutional counterweight.

Although the specific political circumstances differed, both reforms illustrate how constitutional change may be used to pursue strategic elite interests. The cases suggest that the two theoretical expectations are complementary. Organisational capacity within the dominant governing parties helped make constitutional reform politically feasible, whereas strategic incentives among presidents and governing elites shaped when and why such reforms were pursued. The findings do not suggest a linear process in which party institutionalisation leads to constitutional reform. Instead, they point to the combined importance of organisational development and strategic political agency.

Finally, the hybrid regime context suggests that formal shifts away from president-centred constitutional designs do not necessarily entail democratisation. Although presented as measures to strengthen parliament and create a more even executive-legislative balance, the latter reforms in both Armenia and Georgia ultimately served to consolidate the position of actors that were already in power.

Conclusion

This study contributes to explaining why post-Soviet hybrid regimes have adopted constitutional reforms that reduce presidential power. We have assessed constitutional shifts across Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, focusing on whether they were preceded by changes in party institutionalisation (H1) and shaped by presidents approaching the end of constitutionally limited mandates (H2). We combined this cross-case comparison with more detailed analyses of constitutional reform episodes in Armenia and Georgia. The findings suggest that these two factors capture complementary aspects of constitutional reform. Organisational developments within governing parties help explain how constitutional reform becomes politically feasible, while strategic choices by presidents and governing elites shaped its timing and political direction.

First, the early 2000s saw an increase in party institutionalisation across three of the four countries examined. Ukraine, however, does not fit this pattern as clearly. While aggregate party institutionalisation increased prior to the 2006 reform, the party-level organisational indicators show a more uneven trajectory. In Armenia, Georgia and Moldova, party structures became more predictable, parliamentary blocs more stable, and, particularly in the wake of key moments such as the Rose Revolution in Georgia, opposition forces gained organisational coherence and visibility. These developments created political environments in which constitutional reform was both feasible and, for leading actors, desirable. However, the evidence leads us to qualify our initial expectation regarding party institutionalisation. Although we do not suggest that these organisational developments alone explain why constitutional reform occurred, they appear to have constituted an important institutional condition enabling governing parties to coordinate parliamentary action and carry constitutional reform through the legislature. The distinction between party institutionalisation and party strength also clarifies why later reforms diverged from the expectations of H1. Although dominant parties such as RPA, UNM, and GD displayed considerable internal organisational strength, this remained concentrated within these parties and did not translate into broader party system institutionalisation.

Party institutionalisation plateaued from the late 2000s onward, and before the second wave of reforms in Armenia (2015) and Georgia (2017) there is little evidence of renewed

broader party institutionalisation. What mattered instead was the capacity of ruling parties to coordinate and implement constitutional change at specific moments, drawing on organisational cohesion and periodic parliamentary dominance. The later reform episodes therefore highlight the importance of governing parties' organisational capacity for implementing constitutional reform.

Second, strategic incentives among presidents and governing elites played a more decisive role in the later reforms. In Armenia, the 2015 constitutional reform provided President Sargsyan with a means of retaining executive influence beyond his second presidential term. In Georgia, the 2017 reform reflected Georgian Dream's effort to consolidate executive control by removing the presidency as an institutional counterweight. Although the underlying political dynamics differed, both reforms illustrate how constitutional change became a tool for strategic political objectives, whether by an outgoing president seeking to preserve influence or by a governing party seeking to reduce institutional constraints.

Our findings carry broader implications. The cases show that constitutional reform in hybrid regimes emerges from a combination of organisational capacity and strategic political agency. Hence, parliaments and parties mattered, although their role in the later reforms was shaped more by elite strategies than by autonomous institutional action.

These patterns illustrate structural vulnerabilities in hybrid regimes and are consistent with previous studies of the post-Soviet context, which have shown how constitutional arrangements may be used as political tools by incumbent elites instead of providing stable frameworks for structuring political behaviour (cf. Fruhstorfer and Hein 2016). Georgia illustrates this dilemma, as the shift to parliamentarism coincided with the centralisation of power within the ruling Georgian Dream without strengthening parliamentary pluralism. Although the limited time horizon of this study prevents firm conclusions, the results suggest that constitutional reform towards parliamentarism in hybrid regimes does not by itself produce more balanced or accountable government. However, such reforms may have different effects over the longer term. Parliamentary systems may gradually strengthen incentives for legislative coordination, more routinised parliamentary politics, and potentially more democratic forms of political competition.

Our study faces limitations common to much research on hybrid regimes. It cannot directly observe elite decision-making or internal party deliberations. Instead, the analysis combines quantitative indicators, secondary sources, and expert interviews to reconstruct the political processes preceding constitutional reform. While this approach cannot establish actors' motivations with certainty, it provides a stronger empirical basis than any single source alone. Our theoretical expectations are intended to identify mechanisms that may operate in hybrid regimes more broadly, but the empirical evidence presented here is limited to the post-Soviet context. Future research could extend and corroborate these findings in several directions. Comparative analysis of additional hybrid regimes would test the generalisability of these findings. Future studies should also examine whether the organisational developments identified in this study eventually translate into broader party institutionalisation following constitutional reform. Such analyses would help clarify whether reforms initially driven by strategic elite considerations may, over time, strengthen the organisational foundations of parliamentary politics.

Notes

1. Most other non-Baltic post-Soviet countries are continuously categorised as "Not Free" by Freedom House and as "Electoral/Closed Autocracies" by V-Dem (Freedom in the World 2025; and V-Dem 2026).
2. V2xps_party.
3. Party continuation (v2paelcont) is recalculated so that 0 = No, party did not participate in the previous election, 2 = No, but the party participated in the previous election under a different name, 4 = Yes, party participated in the previous election under the same name.
4. Candidate nomination (v2panom) is coded from 0 to 4: 0 = national party leadership decides; 1 = national leadership after consultation; 2 = regional party organisations decide; 3 = local party organisations decide; 4 = candidates decide themselves. Higher values therefore indicate increasingly decentralised candidate selection.
5. Local party office (v2palocoff) measures local offices as 0 = The party does not have permanent local offices. 1 = The party has permanent local offices in few municipalities. 2 = The party has permanent local offices in some municipalities. 3 = The party has permanent local offices in most municipalities. 4 = The party has permanent local offices in all or almost all municipalities.

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