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GEORGIA'S CIVIC SPHERE IN TIMES OF FUNDAMENTAL RUPTURE

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INTRODUCTION BY THE SPECIAL EDITOR

Georgia's Civic Sphere in Times of Fundamental Rupture

The adoption of the law "On Transparency of Foreign Influence" in the first parliamentary reading on 7 March 2023 triggered large crowds to take to the streets of the capital Tbilisi in the following days. This turned the front of the Georgian parliament into a theatre of massive rallies featuring seas of European Union (EU) and Georgian flags alongside slogans such as "No to the Russian law." While voicing their opposition to the law, people faced water cannons amid the fog of tear gas and the blasts of stun grenades. The legislative framework would compel "non-commercial legal entities" deriving more than one-fifth of their revenues from foreign sources to register as "foreign agents." The unprecedented wave of protest as well as the political negotiations led by the EU and the United States, however, compelled the ruling party Georgian Dream (GD) to withdraw the bill within three days, citing its failure to convey the necessity of the law to the public effectively.

Despite its pledge to withdraw the "foreign agents" bill "unconditionally," GD returned it to the parliamentary agenda a year later. The text of the legislation remained mostly unchanged; only the term "foreign agent" had been amended to "organization pursuing the interests of a foreign power." This time, GD pursued the quick ratification of the law in an uncompromising manner: after three hearings, the law was adopted through a parliamentary majority on 14 May 2024. Though at times up to 200,000 people protested the law and the majority of civil society organizations (CSOs) and civic initiatives declared their intention to disobey it, the government moved forward in enforcing the law, granting itself the authority to financially penalize, raid, and forcibly register CSOs as of 3 September 2024. Alongside this law, a row of other legislative frameworks were passed in the Georgian parliament, including an amended tax code which will make it easier to bring offshore assets to Georgia as well as a another law curtailing LGBTQI rights.

How can we make sense of these developments? This special issue aims to contextualize the enforcement of the "foreign agents" law in Georgia, with a particular focus on the institutional and discursive dynamics as well as the protest mobilizations that have emerged in response.

In this issue, we address four key questions:

1. How did the state-NGO relations develop amid democratic backsliding in Georgia, and what are the implications of the "foreign agents" law? (Najmin Kamilsoy)
2. How can we interpret the dynamics of protests, and what practices and interactions related to inclusion and exclusion can we identify among the protesters? (Clara Weller)
3. What discourses has the Georgian government employed to challenge civil society, and what roles do the "anti-LGBTQI" law and the Russian foreign agent law play in this context? (Tamar Tolordova)
4. Finally, what insights do we have about the segment of the Georgian population that supports the protests, and how can we characterize those who took to the streets in Georgia during the spring of 2024? (Tamar Khoshtaria/Veronika Pfeilschifter)

The idea and proposal of this Special Issue originated within the framework of the Jena Cauc project (2021–2024), and was later further developed through a panel at the Eighth Annual Tartu Conference on East European and Eurasian Studies and a meeting between one contributor and an editor at ZOiS in Berlin.

Disclaimer

This Special Issue does not cover the results of or events following the parliamentary elections on 26 October 2024 since submissions took place before. The official election results granted victory to the Georgian Dream party with 54% of the votes, whereas four opposition coalitions were given 37%. The main domestic election observation NGO, International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), subsequently released a statement declaring that the elections did not accurately represent the preferences of Georgian voters. Local and international observers have noted widespread violations during Election Day (such as violations of the secrecy of the vote, intimidation of and pressure on voters, voter tracking) and an uneven playing field in the pre-electoral period. The preliminary OSCE/ODIHR report asserted that "the elections unfolded amid entrenched polarization in an environment marred by concerns over recently adopted legislation, its impact on fundamental freedoms and civil society… and reports of pressure on voters, particularly on public sector employees… and coupled with extensive tracking of voters on election day, raised concerns about the ability of some voters to cast their vote without fear of retribution." Up to date (1 November), 8 countries (Azerbaijan, Armenia, China, Hungary, Russia, Turkey, Venezuela, United Arab Emirates) have either endorsed or recognized the legitimacy of the elections. The United States and the European Union called for a transparent investigation into the reported election irregularities.

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ANALYSIS

State-NGO Relations Under Georgian Dream: From Discursive Confliction to Institutional Deadlock

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Abstract

Georgia's formal sphere of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), often broadly referred to as civil society, has faced numerous challenges concerning its disposition towards the subsequent governments since independence. Particularly under the incumbent Georgian Dream elite, state-NGO relations have gradually deteriorated since 2016 until they fully crumbled in 2023 with the inception of the "foreign agents" law. This article first traces the processes in the mentioned period (2016–2024) to recount the political background of NGO confrontation. Then, based on evidence, including original interview data, it identifies five modes of state pressure on NGOs: surveillance, discursive framing, forging divisions, physical attacks, and legislative restrictions. Lastly, it discusses the implications of the specified pressures, arguing that state-NGO relations in Georgia reached the point of what can be called "deadlock," both discursively and institutionally. Georgia's case represents a vivid example of the globally expanding assault on Western-funded non-profits, though its variation should be studied further regarding the episodes of democratic decay and civil society pushback.

Introduction

Stepping out of the Marjanishvili metro station in central Tbilisi, one instantly encounters posters with photo collages displaying Georgia's renowned non-governmental leaders. The posters—which have lingered here for the past couple of years—read "traitors without a homeland" and "enemies of the church," heralding the severity of animosity facing claim-making NGOs under the Georgian Dream (GD) government.[1] But how did relations arrive at this point? Tracing the processes in the

1 "Civil society" is a widely debated concept, the borders of which remain elusive. This article takes an actor-centric approach and also focuses solely on the formal and institutionalized segment of it, namely, non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

period between the 2016 and 2024 elections and drawing on original interview data,[2] this article demonstrates that the formal regulative pressures on NGOs in Georgia, i.e., the passing of the "Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence," ensued years of frontal, informal, and discursive confrontation which conditioned the consequential institutional deadlock. Here, "institutional deadlock" refers to a situation wherein conflicting interests or power dynamics obstruct policy implementation.

Amid the global backlash against civil society—a phenomenon that has drawn the interest of political scientists over the past decade—Georgia's increasingly non-democratic government moved forward in 2023 to impose new, and much tighter, rules of the game to the country's NGOs. The new legislation, deemed the "foreign agents law," would allow the authorities to formally brand Western-funded NGOs as "agents of foreign influence." As the law resembled Russia's own foreign agents law, the majority of the leading Georgian civic actors promptly framed it as a "Russian law" that would obstruct the path to European Union (EU) membership. An identical bill, with the sole difference in the stipulated formal label of "agents of foreign influence" changed to "organizations pursuing the interest of a foreign power," was nevertheless passed in 2024, marking the onset of coercive institutional pressure on civil society in Georgia.

Institutional pressure or "administrative crackdown" has been identified in previous research as a long-term government strategy to avert real and perceived challenges posed by NGOs (Chaudhry, 2022). This strategy is likely to be adopted in the face of electoral rivalry, among other reasons, because of the anticipation that some NGOs educate people about their democratic rights, promulgate voting, train political parties, and mobilize election observers who report wrongdoings. Western funding for such activities escalates the sense of insecurity on the part of incumbents. In Georgia too, the rationale of the GD in confronting NGOs was seen as being centered on reducing the latter's influence on the outcome of the 2024 October parliamentary election (Tavkhelidze, 2024) and facilitating the "slide to authoritarianism" (Kakachia and Lebanidze, 2023), while catalyzing societal polarization. Another government strategy, albeit perilously costly and short-term, is resorting to violence and political repression, usually opted for when mass protest mobilization occurs. The choice of strategy, Choudry (2022) argues, is contingent on factors such as the state of domestic electoral politics, similar restrictive tendencies in the geopolitical neighborhood, and dynamics of foreign aid dependency—all of which arguably come into play in Georgia.

The mass protests and pushback against the law in Tbilisi in March 2023 and May 2024 (see Khoshtaria/Pfeilschifter and Weller in this issue), coupled with the Western governments' strongly adverse reactions, not only brought the Georgian civil society situation into the global news spotlight, but also rendered Georgia's case distinct in the context of globalizing civil society restrictions. The country's state-NGO confrontation, however, is not new. The next part delineates the political background of the confrontation, informing about how these dynamics evolve during the periods of democratic backsliding.

The Confrontation in the Making

After experiencing a growing disaccord with the post-revolutionary government of the United National Movement (UNM) over growing issues related to checks and balances since 2007, Georgia's liberal NGOs found a fresh opportunity structure for policy engagement when the Georgian Dream Coalition, a GD-led alliance of political parties, won the 2012 parliamentary election. As the parliament had become "more pluralistic," NGOs became more actively involved in drafting reforms through multiple government-NGO platforms, such as the consultative group established together with the Human Rights and Civil Integration Committee of the legislative body (socialjustice.org.ge, 2015). Though this model of cooperation is considered by some to be "technocratic" and disengaged from the broader public (Japaridze, 2023), the state-NGO cooperation yielded some results in the reforms concerning local self-governance, management of public broadcasters, and judicial oversight over government surveillance. However, dynamics changed adversely when GD—despite the breakdown of the coalition it led—secured a constitutional majority alone, taking 115 seats of 150 in the Georgian parliament in 2016, and reversed the political trajectory back to overt single-party dominance.

GD's creeping control over the appointment of high court judges in 2017 represented a significant breaking point in government relations with human rights NGOs and their Western partners. While the NGOs' "Coalition for an Independent and Transparent Judiciary" blamed the authorities for a "lack of judicial independence," Transparency International Georgia (TI) further alleged that GD entered into an informal agreement with a group of influential judges for political ends (transparency.ge, 2020). The rupture grew when civil society organizations supported mass protests in June 2019 against the ruling party, which had hosted a member of Russia's State Duma at the highest tribune of the Georgian parliament. The protests—

2 The qualitative data used in this article was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with NGO representatives within the framework of the author's dissertation project titled "Civil Society Professionalization in the South Caucasus." Sixteen interviews were conducted between the years 2022 and 2024 in three regions, namely, Tbilisi, Shida Kartli and Imereti, from CSOs working in the areas spanning human rights, environment, youth, social services, culture and more.

deemed "Gavrilov Night"—turned violent, with excessive law enforcement intervention resulting in the hospitalization of over 240 people and the detention of dozens. Thus, having consolidated legislative dominance and tightened its grip over the judiciary, GD crafted a coercive political groundwork for maintaining regime resilience.

While "Gavrilov Night" represented a crucial episode in GD's authoritarian turn, developments in the years 2020 and 2021 cemented the politics of hostility between GD and NGOs. The 2020 parliamentary election which the country's largest NGOs regarded as the "least democratic and free among the elections held under Georgian Dream rule" due to the significant number of reported irregularities (civil.ge, 2020), triggered another round of turbulence in Georgia's political scene. The parallel vote count results announced by the key domestic election observation NGO, the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), were central to the crisis, as the opposition parties cited it to denounce the election as rigged.

However, ISFED later acknowledged a human error in its results, and its director stepped down. This allowed the election-winning government to further disparage ISFED and other critical NGOs, accusing them of allegiance to the opposition UNM. The tantrum signified the fact that backward trends in democratization are often associated with increased politicization on the part of NGOs and increased insecurity towards them on the part of governments. Due to perceptions of interference, election observation NGOs are particularly prone to attacks in such scenarios: for instance, Azerbaijan's civil society crackdown in 2013 started with the criminal prosecution of the country's top independent election observer (HRW, 2013).

In June 2021, an unimpeded assault of conservative groups on the Pride March in Tbilisi—leaving an opposition TV journalist dead—prompted calls from NGOs for the resignation of the prime minister and other top officials (agenda.ge, 2021). NGO representatives contended that the government did not make any effort "to stop the violent groups despite being aware in advance of the risk of aggression." The overtly political calls, however, backfired as the government increasingly brought into question the legitimacy, accountability, and transparency of the agendas and operations of NGOs in the coming years, particularly after the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war in early 2022, which led to further distancing of Georgia from its Western partners. Consequentially, GD questioned NGOs' ties with the West and also accused them of attempting to draw Georgia into a war with Russia in coordination with the West.

While it is not uncommon for states around the world to utilize pretext of illegitimacy to instigate measures curtailing NGO activities (Brechenmacher and Carothers, 2018), GD in doing so also capitalized on the weakness of public awareness of NGOs. While NGOs in actual fact carry out vital tasks, providing services to the vulnerable sections of society and checking the power of hybrid regimes, critical scholars have for decades pointed to "elitist" and "vanguardist" images of NGOs, wherein professionalization of activism has come at the cost of bottom-up citizen engagement (Muskhelishvili and Jorjoliani, 2009). Moreover, Georgian NGOs are entangled in structural overreliance on Western assistance and recognition, nurturing the perceptions of their legitimacy as being externally generated, rather than locally rooted. This enabled GD to maliciously alienate advocacy organizations instead of accommodating their critiques.

Modes of Pressures

The shifting nature of the relationship between donor Western democracies and recipient developing countries is a key determinant of globalizing assault on civil society. Especially since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Georgian ruling elite—albeit nominally committing the country to EU accession and receiving candidate status in December 2023—in fact pursued an ambiguous policy of "transactional hedging" and forwent value-based integration to the EU (Kakachia, Lebanidze and Kakabadze, 2024). The GD was thus emboldened to dismiss the normative criticism coming from the EU over its "foreign agents" law. However, the repertoire of state interventions against NGOs under GD was broader than regulative assault, and included informal and discursive modes of confrontation:

Surveillance

"We live under illegal surveillance," said one activist,[3] echoed by another NGO representative noting *"civil society organizations are one of the targets for secret surveillance, which is really intense. And we have evidence for this."*[4] The evidence in question pertained to thousands of files leaked by a former security service officer in 2021, which revealed that the private communications of NGO representatives, alongside other non-state actors, were secretly recorded (civil.ge, 2021). Though the laws regulating associations had been liberal, this far-reaching scandal—which even involved alleged surveillance of Western diplomats—was considered to be the first significant state intrusion into the work of NGOs under GD.

Discursive Framing

The discursive conflict between GD and Georgian NGOs intensified ahead of and following the introduction of

3 Author's interview with queer NGO program manager, 14 October 2023
4 Author's interview with legal NGO deputy director, 17 August 2023

the "foreign agents" bill in 2023. While the NGOs discursively framed the law as "Russian" to appeal to the public's pro-EU and anti-Russia sentiments, GD engaged in a broader framing strategy, arguably with two purposes—first, to justify the stringent civil society policy and second, to activate the regime's support base. Three discursive framing patterns could be identified. The first pertained to **transparency**. In a notable case in point, in 2022, before becoming prime minister, former GD chairman Irakli Kobakhidze asserted that the country's key advocacy NGOs "receive millions, tens of millions […] directed against the state, against the government" and that "their budgets are completely opaque, and the public does not have any information about this" (civil.ge, 2022).

The second discursive framing is related to the **representation**, which is utilized by GD to challenge the domestic embeddedness of foreign-funded NGOs—as seen in the statement of parliamentary spokesperson Shalva Papuashvili from GD: "…the interest of the Georgian people represented by the Georgian Dream is on one side, and the opposition and their ally NGOs are on the other, standing for the foreign countries' interests" (bm.ge, 2024). The third framing instrumentalizes '**Georgianness**' and its cultural attributions, particularly Christianity, in juxtaposition to the norms promoted by NGOs. Embracing conservative populism, GD contends that liberal NGOs are "attacking the Orthodox Church" and engaging in so-called "LGBT propaganda" (see Tolordava in this issue). According to a leader of a women's NGO, *"that's even more dangerous than calling someone a foreign agent because it's somehow greenlighting abuse and attack."*[5]

Divide and Rule

In the wake of the inception of the "foreign agents" law, the GD aimed at singling out large advocacy and watchdog NGOs, such as ISFED, Transparency International Georgia and the Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA), which increasingly and vocally decried the declining democratic credentials of the government and deployed election observers. GD officials often pointed to the greater resourcefulness of these NGOs compared to the others, labeling them "political entities" in an additional attempt to create divisions between politicized and nonpoliticized organizations. Though resource-related divisions factually exist within Georgia's NGO domain, the naming strategy did not succeed in deepening intrasectoral conflict, as civil society remained united in contesting the "foreign agents" law—not least because every organization, including social service providers for vulnerable groups in the regions, was affected by the regulatory assault. That is because virtually all of the approximately 2.3 thousand active NGOs in Georgia are "overwhelmingly dependent" on Western funds for their survival due to the challenges of generating domestic revenues (CRRC-Georgia, 2021).[6]

Physical Attacks

The spring of 2024 saw NGO and independent media offices turning into stages of attacks and vandalism, with at least 17 offices being targeted (Kucera, 2024). Alongside scores of anti-government activists, the director of the NGO Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI) was physically assaulted by thugs. A GD member of parliament, Dito Samkharadze, avowed orchestrating the attacks in retaliation for the public protests against him and his party (OC Media, 2024). In the meantime, NGO workers and their family members received threatening phone calls, and in many Tbilisi neighborhoods where offices or apartments of NGO representatives were located, posters with their faces were hung labeling them as "foreign agents." This followed the remarks of GD officials announcing the creation of a database of those "involved in violence, other illegal actions, threats and blackmail, or publicly approve of such actions," widely believed to be referring to activists and protesters (agenda.ge, 2024). While it is known that physical attacks and repression against opponents in hybrid regimes is a costly tactic, in GD's rationale, it would serve to scare off the activists and weaken the protest mobilization.

Implications

While most of the institutionally embedded state-NGO engagements stalled already in 2022,[7] the emergence of the "foreign agents" bill in the parliamentary agenda nonetheless had a chilling effect on NGO activities and cultivated social cleavages, especially in the regions, where relations used to be more cooperative. *"There were some statements that were really insulting for us—ones that local authorities made. Some people would directly call us agents, even though they were the ones who were involved with our projects,"* said a leader of a community-based NGO in the Shida Kartli region.[8]

NGO representatives have differing views on the actual effects of the "foreign agents" law, with some believing that the contention around it boosted the public recognition of NGOs by society on the one hand, and others

5 Author's interview with women's NGO director, 17 October 2023
6 According to official data, there are over 31 thousand non-entrepreneurial (non-commercial) legal entities in Georgia, but this number does not reflect the real number of operational NGOs, as it also includes state and municipality-owned public entities and a large number of inactive NGOs which was not liquidated because of bureaucratic complications.
7 Author's interview with program director of anti-corruption NGO, 17 August 2023
8 Author's interview with leader of a community-based NGO, 30 October 2023

suggesting that the smear campaigns against NGOs resonated with large segments of the society on the other. According to representative survey results, trust in NGOs among respondents rose from 22 percent in 2021 to 32 in 2024—however, the share of respondents expressing distrust in NGOs also slightly increased, from 20 percent in 2021 to 22 in 2024 (CRRC, 2021, 2024). More strikingly, 46 percent of Georgians still held no opinion about NGOs, demonstrating continued broad unawareness.

In the face of the official campaign in favor of the "foreign agents" law, which exacerbated negative conceptions of NGOs (such as "grant-eaters"), the latter were propelled to rethink their accountability approach. Though NGOs traditionally exhibit a high level of accountability to donors and the state tax authorities, public accountability was insufficient, if not ineffective, in the face of modern challenges. *"We are doing the right things, but nobody's going to read a 20-page PDF [annual report] of why we are doing this. So now not only us, lots of NGOs are trying to communicate to the public in language… [that is] easier to understand and digest,"* said one NGO deputy director.[9] Organizations emphasized turning to social media to create engaging content for public information-sharing.

Institutionally, though being legally compelled to abide by the "foreign agents" law, most pro-democracy NGOs chose a strategy of active defiance. In doing so, NGOs relied on leverage points including the society's EU aspirations; the role of domestic actors, including Gen Z protesters, ever-growing independent media platforms, and Georgian president Salome Zurabishvili, who became a vocal GD opponent in voicing her support of NGOs; and international factors, including the reductions in Western aid flows to the Georgian government, EU conditionality, and new U.S. sanctions against the GD officials complicit in the adoption of the "foreign agents" law. Eventually, nearly five hundred NGOs decided to undergo the mandatory registration procedure to declare themselves as "pursuing the interests of a foreign power," while the rest refused. In the case that GD clung to power after the 2024 October elections, most of those NGOs would either formally close down, relocate abroad, informalize, or face repression due to incompliance.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the decades of optimistic accounts amplifying civil society's role as a hallmark of democratization, there has been growing evidence that this simplistic approach overlooks crucial nuances related to state-society relations as well as power dynamics. This essay illustrated that the backsliding of fragile democracy in Georgia went hand-in-hand with contention against non-governmental actors, first starting with frontal interventions and stigmatization, then moving to a regulatory offensive. In this sense, the case of Georgia did not stand out in the ecosystem of globalized civil society assault[10]; the core difference instead lies in the leverages utilized by Georgian NGOs, which inflicted significant costs on the (particularly aid-dependent) state. More crucially, state-NGO relations reached the point of institutional deadlock, and further progress is not feasible at this time.

Even in the most restrictive settings, civil society organizations proved able to devise strategies for survival (Kamilsoy, 2023). However, the Georgian case demonstrates that foreign funding dependency constitutes a significant liability, especially in the context of feeble social awareness of NGOs' civic functions and resource strategies. Thus, *inter alia*, it is imperative to rethink NGOs' public accountability against the background of global democratic backsliding. Elsewhere, for instance, NGOs forge self-regulatory alliances to preempt stringent state regulations (Sidel, 2010). Such collective attempts by Georgian NGOs, such as establishing a common ethical code entailing downward accountability in 2004 and again in 2017—having been induced by international partners—did not sustain the adherence of the sector. Thus, overcoming the challenges of sector-driven collective self-regulatory mechanisms could contribute to forestalling restrictions and redeeming legitimacy.

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9 Author's interview with capacity-building NGO deputy director, 27 October 2023
10 Based on the cases of four "partial democracies" (van der Borgh and Terwindt, 2014), constructed a typology of actions and policies pursued by states to curtail NGOs. The typology includes physical harassment, criminalization, administrative restrictions, stigmatization, and cooptation.

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ANALYSIS

Dynamics of the Mass Mobilizations Against the Georgian Foreign Agent Law

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Abstract

The eventful protests against the reintroduction of the Georgian Foreign Agent Law in the spring of 2024 brought a diverse range of actors to the streets, including well-established civil society organizations (CSOs) and the youth, but also grassroots movements and leftist local groups. Driven by a combination of democratic and geopolitical grievances, the protests reflected responsiveness in opposing the increasingly authoritarian stance of the Georgian government. At first glance, the opposition to the controversial law seemed homogenous, with an organic nature and sometimes self-organized events. Those engaged in protest have employed a combination of peaceful demonstrations, contentious practices, symbolic framing, and digital activism to contest the policy of Georgian Dream. This paper presents an exploration of the power dynamics within the opposition to the Georgian Foreign Agent Law, relying on an inductive analysis based on qualitative data collected in 2023 and during the 2024 protests through participant observation and semi-structured interviews with different actors from CSOs, grassroots movements, and local labor unions. An examination of the underlying practices and the repertoire of actions that gave rise to these mobilizations indicates that the protests gathered actors with disparate agendas, unified by their opposition to the government. The study finds that certain groups have remained excluded within the mobilization in terms of strategy building, contributing to their marginalization from both the civil society sector and the authorities.

Introduction

The 2024 protests have demonstrated a diverse array of mobilization against the reintroduction of the Foreign Agent Law. These mobilizations encompassed a combination of self-organized actions catalyzed by specific events, coordinated initiatives by prominent CSOs, and collective actions led by leftist groups—independent local unions and socialist collectives, to name a few. Despite differences in strategy and levels of organization, these groups share a common resistance to the controversial legislation. The objective of this paper is not to provide an exhaustive account of the events in question but rather to analyze several key episodes, exploring the power dynamics and the challenges involved in forming a cohesive opposition. The data collection comprises participant observation during the mobilizations against the Foreign Agent Law and several dozen semi-structured interviews conducted with diverse groups of actors—from grassroots environmental movements, left-wing activists, local unions, CSOs representatives, local multimedia platforms, and protestors.

To navigate the complexity of organic mass mobilization, the concept of contentious practices (Baća 2018; Baća 2022) is employed as a micro-level analytical approach. An analysis of the practices that emerged during the 2024 mobilizations reveals a certain lack of alignment in campaign strategies among the various activist groups. While the main CSOs coordinated a campaign against the Foreign Agent Law, the subaltern status of some groups of activists has resulted in marginalized conditions (Rekhviashvili, 2022), which in turn revealed the power dynamics at play within the protest movement. The initial section provides an overview of some practices observed during the protests of 2024, tracing the evolution of symbolic actions from earlier demonstrations and describing significant micro-events triggering organic reactions within the mobilization. The second part of the study examines the prac-

tices of various groups of activists, as not all adhered to the strategy proposed by the main CSOs. The professionalized CSO sector in Georgia represents the primary domain and mode of democratic expression. However, the power dynamics within the coalition-building of the protest demonstrated that some groups of activists, despite opposing the controversial law in alignment with the main CSOs, were subjected to exclusionary practices and remained marginalized.

The Organic Dimension of the Mobilizations

The Role of Contentious Practices

A significant aspect of the protests was their organic dimension. To grasp the different elements of the repertories of action of the protesters, the concept of contentious practices developed by Bojan Baća provides relevant insights. Contentious practices are understood as tangible actions undertaken outside the institutional channels of contestation that generate new spaces for social and political expression and new forms of civil participation translated into protest politics or everyday resistance (Baća 2018). In sum, contentious practices can be a core unit of analysis that reflects the creativity in tactics that adapt to different contexts and reflect the originality and modularity of contestation in the postsocialist space (Baća 2022). As a result, studying contentious practices, allows us to understand how certain actors make sense of the social world, negotiate with others, and justify their actions. These practices provide insights into the dynamics, sites, and scales of mobilizations in the rapidly evolving Georgian context.

In the spring 2024 mobilizations, a variety of methods have been employed to express opposition to the Foreign Agent Law, referred to as 'the Russian Law' by the protestors. The latter linked their actions to the broader geopolitical context, utilizing symbols like the widespread display of Georgian, European, and Ukrainian flags, as well as a range of slogans denouncing the ruling party's rapprochement with Russia (JamNew 2023). These symbols, and particularly, the Ukrainian flags, have been inherited from the mobilizations of support for Ukraine from the Georgian people in the wake of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Despite the Georgian people's strong support for Ukraine (CRRC 2022), the government refused to take part in Western sanctions against Russia (Civil.ge 2022a). The posture of the ruling party prompted several diplomatic controversies with Kyiv (Civil.ge 2022b).

Additionally, in contrast with the stance of Georgian Dream, pro-European rallies were held in June 2022 to demonstrate the Georgian people's strong attachment to Europe following the denial of candidate status for Georgia by the European Union (OC Media 2022). Consequently, during the mobilizations in support of Ukraine that have become anti-government, the systematic carrying of Ukrainian flags by Georgian demonstrators, the singing of the Ukrainian anthem, and the numerous graffiti gradually appearing in the streets of the Georgian capital as the war entrenched itself have become new tools of protests. The utilization of these symbols illustrated the act of protest and creativity, thereby making the solidarity of Georgian citizens with Ukraine visible in the public domain, in opposition to the government's official stance. This represents an important element in the repertories of action of demonstrators employing symbols from a third country to contest the policies emanating from their own government.

Popular Expression of the Protestors

Overall, the scale of the demonstration by the participation enhanced the homogenization and strong solidarity aspect against the Foreign Agent Law. Besides, some micro-events triggered important episodes of the protests. Although calls to rally were broadcast daily on social media throughout the demonstrations, initiated by several activist groups, it is notable that certain events served as catalysts for spontaneous gatherings. For instance, on 3 May 2024, the arrest of activists demonstrating outside a Tbilisi hotel owned by Bidzina Ivanishvili, founder of the ruling party and former Prime Minister, where a reception organized by the Asian Development Bank was taking place, led to an increase in the number of demonstrators. This resulted in the blocking of the street where the hotel was situated, marking the commencement of a significant demonstration that day, which subsequently transformed into a procession through the city center towards the Georgian Dream headquarters and then on to Parliament (OC Media 2024).

These initiatives, in terms of both their widespread, but above all the huge number of demonstrators, have become a norm of anti-Foreign Agent Law protests, and due to their autonomous aspect have been particularly difficult to channel or for political actors to appropriate. These demonstrations marked a broadening of opposition to the government beyond the usual militant circles without the explicit support of opposition political parties, whose representatives, on the contrary, were rejected by the protestors. Indeed, when members of opposition parties attempted to speak on the stage set up in front of the Parliament during the demonstrations, they were ignored at best and booed at worst (Civil.ge 2024a). In this way, the mobilizations reflected a distrust of politics in general, as evidenced by establishment politicians of the opposition from the protest arena.

In a context of almost daily mobilizations, these micro-events become factors in the convergence of the

protests. Besides the illustrated micro-events that triggered self-organized rallies, a more detailed analysis of the circumstances leading to the initiation of episode protests, as well as the strategy development encouraged by different activists from various groups, reveals a more intricate configuration.

Dynamics Within the Coalition Building of the Protest

Democratic Expression Through Professionalized CSOs

The professionalized CSOs (Beraia & Yavuz 2019)—composed of specialized staff and experts designed to meet the bureaucratic requirements of donors, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs)—have come to exert a dominant influence over Georgian civil society, with the sector widely perceived as the primary vehicle for democratic expression in the country. This sector, which emerged and gained its legitimacy during and after the regime change in Georgia following the Rose Revolution in 2003, is substantially supported by Western donors and is entrusted with a number of key roles, including strengthening democracy-building processes, implementing human rights reforms, and fostering liberal values (Nodia 2005, Serrano 2008). As a consequence, while the CSO sector has developed a more elitist and politicized character (Muskhelishvili & Jorjoliani 2009), which has resulted in a lack of popular participation (Aliyev 2014), CSOs have continued to exert significant influence over the public debate through their watchdog activities. In a consequence of these functions, CSOs have become increasingly vocal in their criticism of the government, citing its failure to implement reforms in accordance with democratic development and its lack of good-faith efforts in this regard. This has led to a confrontation between the CSO sector and the Georgian Dream (see Kamilsoy in this issue).

The CSO sector appears to be the one most clearly targeted by the Foreign Agent Law, particularly those organizations that receive funding from Western donors. The dominant stance of CSOs about democratic expression is a common thread in the region. However, a critical examination of the CSO landscape reveals that the sector does not necessarily reflect the major social issues in these countries, which remain largely unaddressed (Gagyi & Ivancheva, 2019), Georgia is, in this respect, no exception. A crucial aspect of comprehending the intricacies of the Foreign Agent Law and its implications is the recognition that its reach extends far beyond the targeting CSO sector (Rekhviashvili et al., 2024). This legislation can be viewed as the initial step in suppressing any form of criticism or opposition directed towards the ruling party from CSOs or social or grassroots movements (Eradze et al., 2024)—some of the grassroots movements having been framed as agents following the interest foreign influence of a by the government as early as 2021 (Rekhviashvili, 2021).

Social, environmental, and grassroots movements also represent a significant challenge to the Georgian government by highlighting the flaws of the neoliberal policies continued by the ruling party and demanding social and environmental justice (Weller, 2024). Despite relying on legitimacy derived from community-based orientation and social and economic struggles, certain social movements and groups have been marginalized by the CSO sector, resulting in their continued subaltern position (Rekhviashvili, 2022). The marginalization of certain groups is also reflected in the coalition-building dynamics within the protests against the Georgian foreign agent law.

Marginalization

Upon initial observation, it became evident that the Georgian civil society demonstrated a notable degree of cohesion in their opposition to the Foreign Agent Law. This was exemplified by the coordinated efforts of the CSO sector, which spearheaded the campaign against the law and facilitated collaboration among prominent CSOs to disseminate information about the implications of this controversial legislation. However, the marginalization of leftist groups, some of the core grassroots movements within the coalition, manifested in several ways. The professionalized CSO sector, with its established networks and funding from liberal Western donors, has the resources to control the protest space and determine the agenda and strategy of the campaign against the law[1]. In contrast, unions, student groups, and other leftist movements were afforded some visibility, for instance, being allocated speaking slots on the main stage outside the Parliament rented by this coordination of CSOs[2]. However, this visibility did not translate into influence over the campaign strategy.

Notwithstanding these challenges, leftist groups proceeded to pursue independent actions to amplify their stance. In addition to organizing meetings with groups sharing similar values and agendas and fostering cooperation and reciprocal support within these groups of activists, they have also defined different tactics for expressing their opposition to the controversial legislation. By establishing autonomous networks and cultivating intergroup collaboration and mutual assistance, these groups have adopted a diverse array of tac-

1 Author's interview with an activist from a leftist movement, 9 May 2024, Tbilisi.
2 Author's interview with a local independent unionist, 8 May 2024, Tbilisi.

tics to advance their contestation. These eventful protests provided a resourceful framework to strengthen the solidarity and networking (Della Porta 2018) of a specific group of activists. Transactional mobilizations and collective actions were an important part of their cooperation. Notably, one significant initiative undertaken by these groups and emphasized by labor unions was to disseminate information about the implications of the law against the CSOs not only in urban areas but also in the regions. This is because the Foreign Agent Law aims to target not only professionalized CSOs in the capital but also any social movements that could emerge due to social, economic, or environmental issues that criticize the ruling party policies. For these movements, opposition to the law should not be confined to street demonstrations framed around the Foreign Agent Law; it had to be manifested in collective actions across a wider range of sectors emphasizing social and economic issues as well[3]. In this context of general contestation and daily protests, leftist groups initiated a series of actions. One such action was the march for social justice that took place on May 26, which resulted in the obstruction of one of Tbilisi's primary avenues[4]. This march was organized by the Khma movement, a socialist collective that has previously engaged in campaigns targeting various societal issues, including forced evictions and hunger in schools.

These actions have revealed the disparate priorities within the broader coalition against the controversial legislation, underscoring the challenge faced by non-liberal groups in gaining recognition for their demands while operating in a political environment dominated by the more established, professionalized CSO sector. The subaltern position of social movements represents a significant challenge to the formation of a unified movement and the introduction of new, potentially alternative narratives within the civil society sphere. This is due to the continued influence of power dynamics and the limitations of the liberal agenda that has been followed thus far.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the mass mobilizations against the Georgian Foreign Agent Law in 2024 have highlighted the complex dynamics of protest within a diverse civil society landscape. Although the protests initially appeared unified in their opposition to government policies, they in fact revealed underlying tensions between and disparities among various activist groups, including well-established civil society organizations, grassroots movements, and leftist collectives. The analysis demonstrates how contentious practices have emerged as vital forms of resistance, enabling new avenues for political expression and social participation. Nevertheless, the exclusion of specific voices, particularly those from leftist movements, highlights the persistent marginalization of alternative perspectives within the broader coalition. As these movements continue to seek recognition and influence, the challenge remains as to how a coherent opposition can be constituted which is not only capable of challenging authoritarian stances of the ruling party—seen in the repression of protestors, intimidations of activists and opposition (Civil.ge 2024b)—but also of responding effectively to urgent social, economics and environmental issues.

About the Author
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ANALYSIS

From "Foreign Agents" to "LGBT Propagandists": Demonization of Civil Society Organizations in Georgia

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Abstract
In March 2024, Georgia's governing Georgian Dream (GD) party announced the initiation of constitutional changes aimed at combating "LGBT propaganda" and protecting "family values and minors" despite previous assurances that it would not move forward with such laws. GD party officials emphasized that the bill is intended to shield society from "pseudoliberal ideology" and its "inevitable harmful consequences." Subsequently, the GD party reintroduced the controversial "foreign agent law" under the new title "On transparency of foreign influence." Topics related to LGBTI+ issues are closely intertwined with foreign agent law, and both bills are being used to demonize not only the LGBTI+ community but also civil society organizations (CSOs). In GD party discourses, Western-funded NGOs are portrayed as entities that—by supporting "LGBT propaganda"—are fighting against traditional and family values, which the Georgian nation perceives as sacred. This article aims to examine how and why the introduction of so-called "foreign agent" and "LGBT propaganda" laws is used by the GD party to demonize Georgian CSOs through an analysis of speeches and interviews with key government officials. Moreover, this article highlights parallels with Russian examples, as Russian "foreign agent" and "anti-LGBT propaganda" laws have served as models for the GD party.

Introduction
In March 2023, amid public protests, the Georgian Dream-led government withdrew the controversial "foreign agent law." Additionally, in May 2023, in response to demands from conservative groups calling for a law to ban public demonstrations by LGBTI+ rights groups, member of parliament (MP) Mamuka Mdinaradze emphasized that Georgian Dream (GD) was not planning to adopt a ban on "LGBT propaganda." Moreover, he referred to unspecified "legal issues" and emphasized that they would not "give advantage to 'LGBT propagandists and radicals," assumably referring to civil society organizations (CSOs) and LGBTI+ activists (Civil Georgia, 2024a). Despite these assurances, in February 2024, Mdinaradze announced the initiation of constitutional changes aimed at combating "LGBT propaganda" and protecting "family values and minors." During a briefing held at the GD Party office, Mdinaradze noted that this legislative initiative is intended to shield society from "pseudoliberal ideology" and its "unavoidable negative consequences" (Georgian Public Broadcaster, 2024a). Soon after this announcement, the GD party reintroduced the controversial "foreign agent law" under the new title "On transparency of foreign influence". In May 2024, the Georgian parliament adopted this law, and in September 2024, Parliament passed anti-LGBTI+ legislation in its third hearing. Importantly, in Georgia, topics related to LGBTI+ issues are closely intertwined with the "foreign agent law", and both are used to demonize not only the LGBTI+ community but also CSOs and the West. The adoption of a law that limits LGBTQ rights most strongly endangers queer communities; however, coupled with "foreign agent law," this law will also have broader implications.

According to Juniper Katz, the demonization of political opponents is not a new phenomenon and serves as a deliberate tactic to create a villainous portrayal of opponents (Katz, 2008). In this article, I use "demonization" to describe GD party-led government portrayals of CSOs, activists and opponents as dangerous and morally reprehensible to justify repression and nondemocratic actions.

For example, commenting on the adoption of the "foreign agent" law, prime minister Irakli Kobakhidze mentioned that "Transparency law ensures the bulk of things; makes it hard to attack church or carry out LGBT propaganda with foreign funds" (Georgian Public Broadcaster, 2024b). Moreover, the speaker of the Georgian parliament, Shalva Papuashvili, emphasized that "LGBT propaganda grows globally, leading senior officials to respond, while Georgians seek insurance against these risks" (Georgian Public Broadcaster, 2024c). Very often, in the narrative of the GD party, Western-funded NGOs and the political opposition are depicted as entities that—by supporting "LGBT propaganda"—are fighting against traditional and family values, which are perceived as sacred in the Georgian context. These narratives are also evident in the media (for example, TV Imedi and PosTV) and statements by public figures associated with the GD party. According

to scholars, "traditional values" is an open-ended term that typically highlights spirituality, community, Christian morality, family, and opposition to LGBT rights, abortion, surrogacy, and children's individual rights (Edenborg 2023, 42; Agadjanian, 2017). An analysis of the current rhetoric of GD politicians demonstrates that the mentioned definition is also applicable in Georgia.

Even though the European Union's (EU) candidacy status that was granted to Georgia on December 14, 2023, could have guaranteed a victory for the ruling party in the October 26 election and although a poll conducted by Edison Research in December 2023 showed that 36.6% of respondents would vote for the GD party (JAM-news.net 2024), the party still moved forward to pass the laws. This decision confused experts, activists and researchers, who raised questions about the rationale of the GD party in promoting such controversial legislation despite their apparent electoral advantage. While it is important to reflect on what such a future would mean for Georgia, the primary goal of this article is to analyse how the GD party sought to secure its constitutional majority by demonizing CSOs and the LGBTI+ community.

On August 19, 2024, the official GD page published a statement from its political council in which the 2024 parliamentary election was described as a referendum "where the Georgian people must finally decide whether they choose war or peace, moral degradation or traditional values, Georgia's subservience to external powers or an independent and sovereign state, and ultimately, whether they choose the collective "National Movement" or the Georgian Dream" (Georgian Public Broadcaster, 2024d). In the statement, the need to secure a constitutional majority is declared and justified by four main goals to be achieved after the election. One of the primary reasons for seeking a constitutional mandate, according to the statement, is to pass the constitutional anti-LGBT legislation as "the spread of pseudo-liberal ideology in the world and Georgia is gradually becoming more dangerous" (Georgian Public Broadcaster, 2024d). According to the GD party, the Paris Olympics opening ceremony, with its alleged blasphemous and offensive content and LGBT propaganda, highlighted the threat.[1] Thus, "obtaining a constitutional majority will allow the Georgian Dream party to pass the aforementioned constitutional bill, which will strengthen the protection of family values and minors at the highest, constitutional level," according to the statement (Georgian Public Broadcaster, 2024d). Moreover, on September 6, 2024, the official page of the ruling party posted the election campaign video "Choose 41![2] No to War", where representatives of Georgian civil society are portrayed as the main actors of the nation's alleged moral degradation (Georgian Dream Official, 2024).

With the announcement of plans to ban major opposition parties in the future (Georgian Public Broadcaster, 2024e), it is evident that, with a constitutional majority in hand, the GD party and its honorary chair, Bidzina Ivanishvili, aims to fully centralize power.

Following the Russian Playbook

The instrumentalization of identity-related topics to demonize civil society and activists—thereby influencing public opinion and diverting attention from substantial societal problems to nonexistent ones—is not new to former communist countries, the region, or Georgia. This rhetoric often intensifies during political crises, with representatives of CSOs and activists becoming targets of disinformation and harassment, not only from GD politicians and media outlets that openly support the ruling party (such as TV Imedi and POSTV) but also from social media pages that are associated with the GD party.[3]

The demonization of queers, activists and opponents, framing them as enemies of the state, has a long history that dates back to the Soviet Union after Stalin came to power. For example, in July 1933, 175 gay men were arrested in Leningrad, charged with "working for British intelligence, malicious counter-revolutionism, and moral corruption of the Red Army" (Khoroshilova 2017), making it one of the first cases where sexual orientation and the notion of a foreign agent were intertwined. During the Great Purge, the Soviet secret police used to torture individuals to confess relationships with foreign countries. A notable example is the famous Georgian poet Titsian Tabidze, who was forced to admit to spying for France; then, he was executed (Jaggi 2023).

Language is a powerful tool, as it is "capable of becoming the objective repository of vast accumulations of meaning and experience, which it can then preserve in time and transmit to following generations" (Barger and Luckmann, 1991, 52). Thus, the way political actors use language is crucial. Labelling and framing different groups with specific language can be highly influential because, as Snow et al. suggested, "by rendering events or occurrences meaningful, frames function

1 The opening ceremony of the Paris 2024 Olympics sparked worldwide outrage among some groups due to its artistic segment featuring drag performers, which was perceived disrespectful to the religious beliefs of these groups.

2 Forty-one is the electoral number of the Georgian Dream.

3 For example, in 2019, Meta removed hundreds of pages and accounts linked to the Georgian Dream-led government that were primarily posting criticisms of the opposition and local activist organisations. See here: https://about.fb.com/news/2019/12/removing-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-from-georgia-vietnam-and-the-us/

to organize experience and guide action, whether individual or collective" (Snow et al. 1986, 464). Framing CSOs as foreign agents and LGBTI+ groups as propagandists against traditional values has played a significant role in demonizing these groups. As Krupskiy noted, in Russia, a decade after the "foreign agents" law, the latest public opinion polls indicated an increase in negative attitudes towards those registered as "foreign agents" (Krupskiy 2023, 67).

The use of language played a central role in the Georgian Constitutional Court's hearings on the controversial "foreign agent law" in August 2024. Linguist Marina Beridze's testimony emphasized how the language used in the law, although it appears neutral on the surface, carries deeply negative connotations that demonize the targeted groups. Moreover, Beridze's testimony aligned with the arguments of the opposition MP Ana Natsvlishvili, who emphasized that the law echoes Soviet-era practices of using language and terms such as "foreign agent" against opponents and dissidents (Civil Georgia, 2024c).

In the early 2000s, the post-Soviet space experienced peaceful "colour revolutions" that ousted unpopular, nondemocratic regimes. Georgia and Ukraine were among the nations that underwent such changes. Since then, Putin has often viewed these revolutions as the "handiwork of the United States government" (Weiss 2022) and the collective West in general. Faced with the largest protest in Russia, Putin had to find ways to suppress them. Autocratic regimes tend to be concerned with emerging unrest and mass protests, as they can challenge a regime's stability. Therefore, to prevent a change in power, authoritarian regimes are likely to use repression and "channel discontent" (Robertson 2009, 530–531). Putin's regime has drawn on a Soviet-era preventative approach that involves the harassment, demonization, and sometimes the detainment of opponents (Robertson 2009, 534, 537).

To overshadow ongoing internal problems and consolidate power, Putin needed to weaken civil society and create a fabricated enemy that would divert attention from real threats to fictitious ones. To shift the focus away from issues such as election fraud, oligarchy, and corruption, he portrayed the European Union and the U.S. as existential threats meddling in Russia's internal affairs, accusing protesters of being "mindless agents of global sexual decadence" (Snyder 2018, 42–43). In 2012–2013, two crucial laws were passed by the Russian State Duma—the "foreign agent" law and the "LGBT propaganda" law—both of which suppressed civil society and endangered freedom of speech, human rights, and democracy. Putin recognized that providing personal freedom, material stability, and access to the outside world was fostering new activism and social movements that endangered his regime. To maintain control, he chose to "limit freedom for society as a whole" (Lanskoy and Suthers 2013, 75–76). The enemy was created, and civil society, activists and sexual minorities that were stigmatized as "anti-Russian spies" and "foreign agents" were explicitly associated with "extremism, treason, and "anti-Russian" values (Lanskoy and Suthers 2013, 78, 81).

From the perspective of 2024, it is clear that the Kremlin has not only largely achieved its objectives but also exported its civil society suppression politics to other countries. The recent developments and discourses in Georgia are illustrative examples of this diffusion.

The Georgian Dream Party's Actions Against Civil Society

In autumn 2023, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) in Georgia conducted a public opinion poll asking respondents to identify the main reasons they felt insecure living in Georgia. The responses included concerns such as poverty, unemployment, inflation, crime, political instability, actions by Russia towards Georgia, and high medicine prices, low levels of education, emigration, poor health care, and incidents of violence (NDI 2023, 12). Notably, issues such as "LGBT propaganda," the erosion of traditional values, or the need to reintroduce the "foreign agents" law were not mentioned by the respondents.

Instead of focusing on these pressing socioeconomic problems, the GD party, in pursuit of a constitutional majority, chose to adopt tactics reminiscent of the Kremlin's approach by taking strong action against civil society and the media. As Tavkhelidze (2024, 9) noted, civil society and media "pose a significant threat to undemocratic governments, particularly during elections, as both entities can increase electoral participation and mobilize the electorate against the incumbent administration." Moreover, these groups actively monitor the preelection period and election day, further pressuring the ruling party. Consequently, the GD party based its election campaign on fostering "anti-liberal and anti-Western sentiments" (Kekenadze, Gogoladze and Giunashvili 2024, 3) while simultaneously discrediting opponents and nongovernmental organisations by portraying them as antagonists of traditional and Christian values.

GD leaders linked support for the LGBTQ+ community with moral decay, associating transparency laws with propaganda (Kucera 2024). During the protest against the reintroduction of the "foreign agent law", GD MP Dito Samkharadze orchestrated intimidation and physical attacks on the activists and opposition leaders (OC Media 2024). On May 9, posters appeared on the walls of the offices and homes of CSO and media representatives, activists and politicians, labelling them

"agents", "enemies of the state", "Executor of foreign orders", "Faggot" and other derogatory terms (Civil Georgia, 2024d). This is yet another example of demonizing opponents and activists through moral defamation.

When faced with political crises, GD party representatives blamed Georgian NGOs and the LGBTI+ community. For example, in November 2019, following large-scale demonstrations known as "Gavrilov Night," Bidzina Ivanishvili, in an interview with the pro-GD TV channel Imedi, accused NGOs and activists of acting on directives from former president Mikheil Saakashvili (Imedi TV, 2019). Following the reintroduction of foreign agent law, which triggered the largest protests in Georgia's history, prime minister Irakli Kobakhidze—who attended CPAC 2024—emphasized that "so-called liberals put the identity of countries and nations worldwide at risk" and highlighted the need to protect centuries-old traditions. He proudly presented the GD party's proposed anti-LGBT legislation, focusing on defending traditional values against the supposed threats posed by "LGBT Propaganda" (Civil Georgia, 2024b).

According to the Media Development Foundation's report on *Sexist Language and Gendered Disinformation* (2023), the manipulation of public opinion around identity issues intensified during the debate over Russian-style foreign agent law. Both government officials and pro-Kremlin, conservative actors framed foreign funding as a threat to traditional identity, casting Western-funded NGOs as agents of foreign influence. Irakli Kobakhidze of GD remarked, "First of all, everyone acknowledges that being an agent is degrading, regardless of whether you are an agent of the North, West, South, or East… Those organisations that tried to implement the Bakuriani plan,[4] called for the government's resignation, attempted to tarnish the reputation of the church, promoted LGBT propaganda… They do not truly serve the Georgian people but are agents of foreign influence" (Kekenadze, Gogoladze and Giunashvili 2024, 75–76). Additionally, to discredit the demonstrations, pro-GD media outlets circulated fabricated posters, including one that falsely stated: "No to Russian Law! Yes to Same-Sex Marriage" (Myth Detector, 2024).

On April 29, 2024, the GD party organized a rally in front of Parliament in support of foreign agent law. Key GD party leaders, including Bidzina Ivanishvili, the prime minister, the speaker of parliament, and the party chair, addressed the crowd. Their speeches reinforced anti-Western and homophobic sentiments, invoking traditional values and conspiracy theories, such as the claim that a "Global War Party" was threatening Georgia's sovereignty. The West and local NGOs were depicted as forces plotting against Georgian traditional values and planning a revolution. Notably, socioeconomic issues such as immigration, unemployment, and poverty were absent from their speeches. This rhetoric has been consistently used by GD politicians, including Ivanishvili, throughout the election campaign as they tour the regions of Georgia.

Conclusion

The Georgian Dream party's legislative actions, particularly the reintroduction of the foreign agent law and anti-LGBTI+ measures, reflect the strategic use of identity politics to consolidate power. By framing civil society organizations, Western-funded NGOs, and the LGBTI+ community as threats to traditional values, the party mirrors Russia's tactics, diverting attention from real socioeconomic grievances. These actions risk undermining Georgia's democratic institutions and promoting anti-Western sentiment, despite widespread public opposition to such laws. The party's reliance on divisive rhetoric raises serious concerns about the future of Georgia's democracy and its European aspirations.

About the Author
Tamar Tolordava studied Political Science and Soviet Studies at Ilia State University. In 2019, she continued her studies at the University of Glasgow, and in 2020, she was awarded a Master of Science degree in Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies. She is an Assistant Professor at Ilia State University and a coordinator at the university's Centre for Advanced Studies.

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4 Georgian Dream leaders have been referencing a so-called "Bakuriani plan" and "Bakuriani meeting" for nearly two years. According to them, Peter Ackerman, founding chair of the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, was brought in to train representatives from opposition parties, NGOs, and media in techniques to "overthrow the government" and initiate a "revolution."

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ANALYSIS

Protest Attitudes and Protest Behaviour in Georgia

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Abstract

In our article, we explore the attitudes and behaviours of the Georgian adult population towards protest actions and the factors motivating political mobilization in Georgia in 2024, particularly around the "law of Georgia on transparency of foreign influence". We combine quantitative insights from the Caucasus Barometer 2024 survey with an interpretative contextualization of the survey results. Our quantitative findings reveal that while almost 60% approve of protests against the government, 6% of the Georgian adult population (approximately 185,000) actually participated in protests over the past 12 months (as of April/May 2024). In addition, we find that young people aged 18 to 34, those living in the capital, supporters of Georgia's membership in the European Union (EU), and those who trust not pro-governmental television (TV) channels are more likely to support protests. When it comes to participating in protests, findings show that men were more likely to attend protests than women, young people were more active than older individuals, and those residing in Georgia's capital, Tbilisi, were more likely to participate than those living in other urban or rural areas. Finally, we identify a significant correlation between participation in protests and support for Georgia's membership in the European Union (EU). We interpret these results by drawing on contextual factors, namely Georgia's recent protest experiences and history, demographics, and value convictions.

Introduction

The media has widely documented Georgia's large-scale waves of protest around the "law of Georgia on transparency of foreign influence" (also widely referred to as the "foreign agent law" or "Russian law"), which took place both in 2023 and 2024. Scholars have outlined the nature and goals of the law (Eradze et al. 2024; Khalvashi 2024), its (geo) political economic consequences (Eradze 2024) and its embeddedness in discursive environments on alleged "sovereignity" and "anti-colonialism" (Qeburia 2024). Surveys from previous years have demonstrated that the Georgian people's support for protests has remained consistently high: the approval rate of protests has remained at approximately 60% throughout the last ten years (CRRC 2024a [2015, 2017, 2019, 2021, 2024b]). However, scientific studies have not yet

examined the characteristics of protest supporters, participants, or their value convictions, particularly during the last two years when the largest protests in Georgia's recent history took place. Thus, to fill this gap, we pose and answer two central research questions: What do we know about the segment of the Georgian population that supports protests, and how can we characterize the segment that took to the streets in Georgia during the spring of 2024? Finally, we aim to contextualize the results within Georgia's recent protest experiences and history, demographics, and value convictions.

Methodology & Data

This study uses data from the Caucasus Barometer (CB) 2024 survey which was conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Center—Georgia (CRRC-Georgia) from April 16 to May 13, 2024. Specifically, this work focuses on two variables that portray the attitudes and actions of the adult Georgian population in relation to demonstrations. Attitude towards demonstrations is measured with a question in which respondents had to choose between one of the following statements:

1. Statement. People should participate in protest actions against the government, as this shows the government that the people are in charge.
2. Statement: People should not participate in protest actions against the government, as it threatens stability in our country.[1]

On the other hand, to measure the actual actions of the Georgian population, we use a question where the study participants were asked whether they had participated in any kind of demonstration, rally, or protest during the last 12 months.

By presenting the frequencies of these two variables, we show the differences between the attitudes and the actions of the Georgian population. In addition to descriptive statistics, we also use inferential statistics to identify the characteristics of those people (1) who are pro-protest actions and (2) who actually participated in any demonstration. For this purpose, we use logistic regression models, where the dependent variables "Attitude towards protests" (1)[2] and "participation in protests" (2)[3] were dichotomized.

Using regression analysis, we attempt to test whether demographic variables (such as gender, age and settlement type) as well as trust towards different media channels, and being for the country's EU membership can be predictors for supporting or being part of protests. We chose these variables based on recent debates and discussions in the Georgian society which suggest that the protesters are mainly pro-EU young people (Kucera 2024), residing in Tbilisi (and other big cities). We assume that people who do not trust pro-governmental channels are more likely to perceive and assess the change of the country's foreign policy orientation as severe (turning away from a clearly defined pro-EU foreign policy to an anti-liberal anti-West course) and therefore are more likely to join the demonstrations (Civil.ge 2024). Similarly, people who support EU membership should be more likely to support as well as participate in demonstrations, as the actions of the Georgian Dream party are widely perceived to stand in the way of advancing EU membership. Despite the numerous discussions and theoretically obvious correlation between these variables, so far not sufficient studies or statistical analysis have been carried out to prove these speculations. Therefore, we decided to test these assumptions and include the following variables as predictors in both regression models: sex (male/female), age group (18–34, 35–54, or 55+), settlement type (capital, urban, or rural), most trusted TV channels,[4] and level of support towards Georgia's membership in the EU.[5]

The findings of the regression analysis are reported as predicted probabilities. For nominal as well as ordinal scales, the first answer options on the charts serve as the base categories.

1 After selecting one of the two statements, the study participants had to assess whether they "very strongly agree" or simply "agree" with the selected statement. Other answer options included "agree with neither" and "agree with both", together with "don't know" and "refuse to answer", which were not read out to the respondents, as opposed to the statements.

2 Those who agreed or strongly agreed with statement 1 ("People should participate in protest actions against the government, as this shows the government that the people are in charge") were coded as "1", and those who agreed or strongly agreed with statement 2 ("People should not participate in protest actions against the government, as it threatens stability in our country") were coded as "0". All other answer options ("agree with both", "agree with neither", "don't know", "refuse to answer") were excluded from the analysis.

3 Those who said that they participated in any kind of demonstration, rally, or protest during the last 12 months were coded as "1", and those who did not participate were coded as "0". The answer option "refused to answer" was dropped from the analysis.

4 Operationalized by a question in which respondents name one TV station they trust the most for news on politics and events in Georgia. The answer options "Imedi", "Rustavi 2", and "PosTV" were grouped as "trust governmental channels" (coded as 0). All other named channels were grouped under "trust other channels" (coded as 1). The answer options "I do not watch TV", "I do not trust TV stations" and "don't know" were grouped under "do not watch or trust any channels" (coded as 2). The answer option "refuse to answer" was dropped from the analysis.

5 Operationalized by a question where respondents had to assess the extent to which they support Georgia's membership in the EU. A dummy variable was generated, where "fully support" and "rather support" were grouped as "support EU integration" (coded as 1) and all other answer options ("don't support at all", "rather not support", "partially support, partially don't support", and "don't know") were grouped as "do not support EU integration" (coded as 0). The answer option "refuse to answer" was dropped from the analysis.

In the second part of our analysis, we contextualize the quantitative findings through qualitative interpretation. We focus on the independent variables divided by demographic indicators, namely age, gender, and settlement type, and the value dimension, namely perceptions of EU membership.

Empirical Findings: Protest Supporters, Protesters, and Their Characteristics

Quantitative Findings

The share of those who generally support protest actions is relatively high in Georgia. When respondents had to choose between these two statements: 1. "People should participate in protest actions against the government, as this shows the government that the people are in charge"; 2. "People should not participate in protest actions against the government, as it threatens stability in our country"; almost 60% of the Georgian population agreed with the first statement, and 22% agreed with the second (see Figure 1).

However, the share of those who said that they actually participated in any kind of demonstration, rally, or protest during the last 12 months was much lower at just 6%.

To better understand the characteristics of those respondents who are more inclined to support protests, as well as those who actually participated in demonstrations, we ran logistic regression models, which included demographic and other predictors measuring support for EU membership, as well as sources of information/TV channels that respondents trusted the most.

The results of the first regression model, where the dependent variable is the attitude towards protests, show that while no statistically significant differences were observed in terms of gender, other demographics like age and settlement type are significant predictors of being a protest action supporter; those aged 18 to 34, as well as those living in the capital, are more likely to say that "people should participate in protest actions against the government, as this shows the government that the people are in charge", compared to other age cohorts and those living outside the capital. Furthermore, those who trust governmental channels are less likely to agree with this statement than those who trust other (not pro-governmental) channels or those who do not trust any of the channels. Finally, respondents who support Georgia's membership in the European Union are more likely to agree with this statement than those who do not support EU membership (see Figure 2 on p. 22).

We also looked for the characteristics of respondents who actually participated in protest actions during the last 12 months. The model shows that men are more likely to have participated in protest actions than women. Similar to the previous regression model, age and settlement type seem to be significant predictors of protest participation. Again, young people aged 18 to 34 years, as well as those living in the capital, are more likely to have participated in some kind of protest than other age cohorts and people living outside Tbilisi. Furthermore, similar to the previous regression model, this model also shows significant differences between those who are and are not EU supporters. Those who support Georgia's membership in the EU are more likely to have participated in some kind of rally than those who oppose this membership. Interestingly, unlike the previous model, this model shows no significant differences between those who trust governmental versus

Figure 1: Which of the Following Statements Do You Agree With? (Caucasus Barometer, 2024, Georgia %)

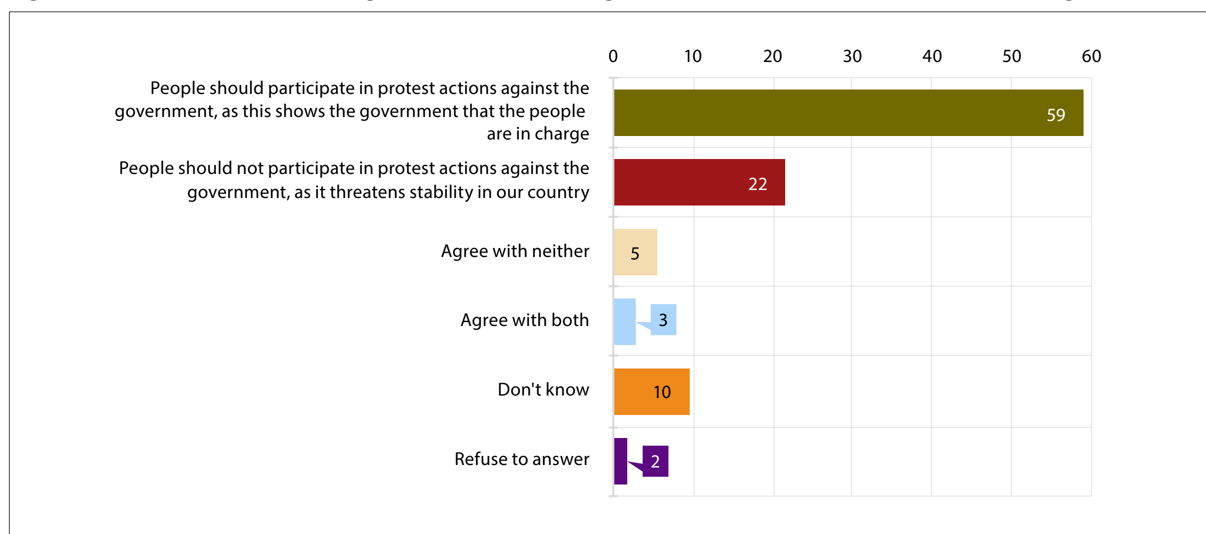
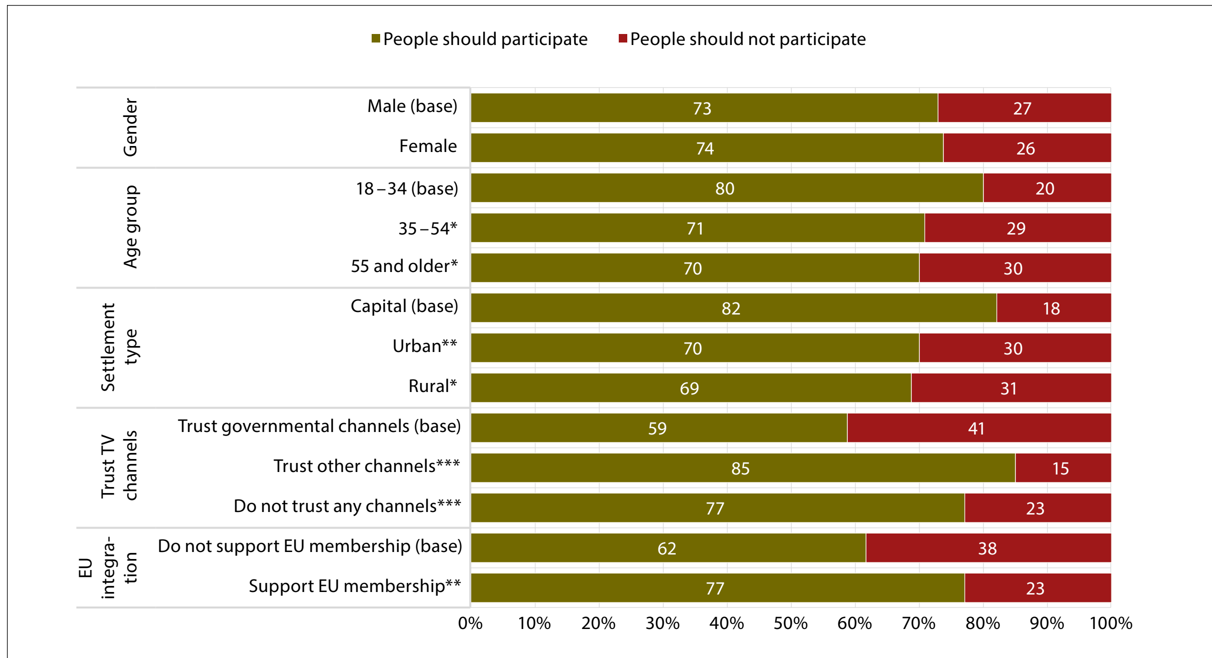


Figure 2: Predicted Probabilities of the Responses to the Question of Whether People Should or Should Not Participate in Protest Actions (Caucasus Barometer 2024, %)



*Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.*

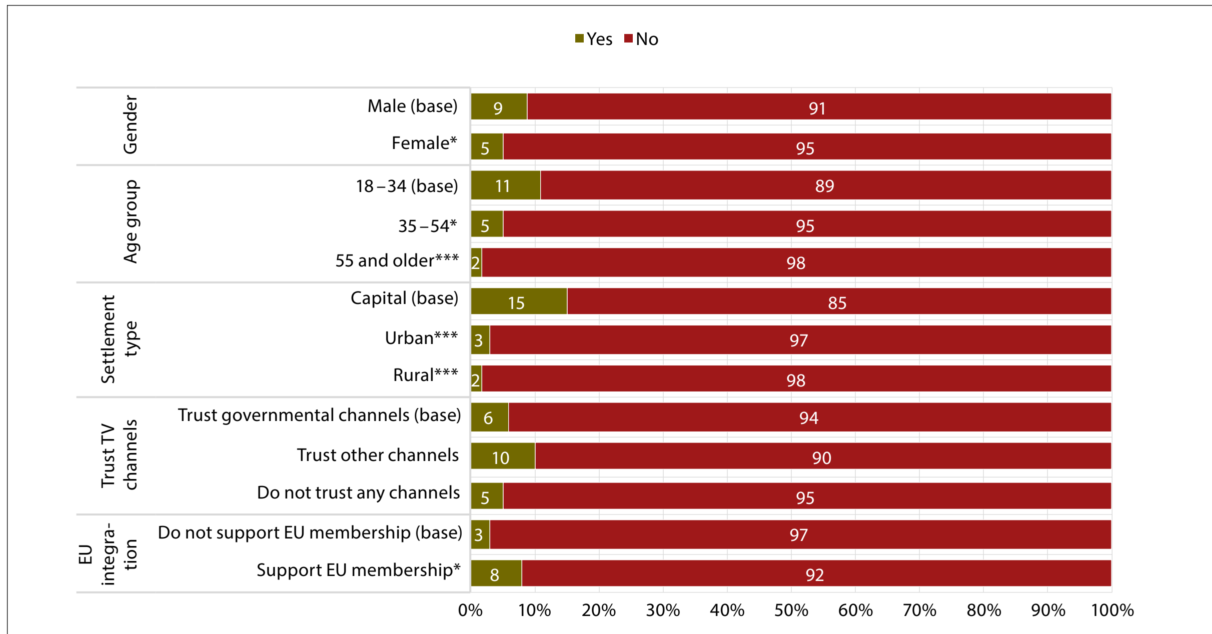
non-governmental TV channels (see Figure 3 on p. 23). However, it should also be noted that a separate bivariate regression revealed significant differences and confirmed that those who trusted nongovernmental channels were more likely to attend the protests than those who trusted governmental channels.

Qualitative Contextualization of Findings: Protest Experiences and Recent History, Demographics, and Value Convictions

In the following discussion, we first contextualize the high approval rate of protest among the Georgian adult population. Second, we further interpret the fact that men, young people, and Tbilisi residents tended to be more present at protests than women, older generations, and people residing outside the capital. Third, we briefly contextualize the interrelation between TV channels and protest attendance. Fourth and finally, we draw on the role that the factor "EU membership" plays in the approval of protest actions.

We interpret the high level of approval of protest actions among the Georgian people as a consequence of at least two major factors: a comparatively successful history of protests as a means of expressing political discontent and commitment to democratic values (Abbasov 2023), and the limited space available for citizens to express and negotiate their political wishes within formal institutions. All generations in Georgia have, to some extent, experienced how large-scale protests can lead to real and tangible political consequences. Most notable are the mass protests from fall to winter in 2003, which led to the resignation of former president Eduard Shevardnadze (1995–2003) and the rise of the young reformer Mikheil Saakashvili and his party, the United National Movement (UNM). UNM's governance was accompanied by frequent large-scale protests (notably 2007, 2011). Protesters criticized the regime's "monopoly on national politics" (Cheterian 2008: 691) and political violence and demanded governmental reforms and, ultimately, regime change. 2012 then saw the first regular and peaceful transition in post-Soviet Georgia, with mass protests denouncing UNM's violent and authoritarian practices ('prisoner tape scandal'). Since 2012, when Georgian Dream (GD) came to power through elections, several waves of anti-government mass mobilizations have followed. Notable examples include the 2017/2018 protests, initiated by the youth-led White Noise Movement which demanded that the Georgian government revise the national narcotics law or the 2019 protests following the "Gavrilov Night" which resulted in the resignation of former Chairman of Parliament Irakli Kobakhidze (2016–2019). Simultaneously, while antigovernment protests are symbolic for expressing common political will, they are also symptomatic for limitations with respect to the democratic function of Georgia's formal political institutions. Apart from transitory periods, mostly a single political group has controlled the majority (often supermajority) in the

Figure 3: Predicted Probabilities of the Responses to the Question on Whether Respondents Had Participated in Any Kind of Demonstration, Rally, or Protest During the Last 12 Months (Caucasus Barometer 2024, %)



[1] The survey is nationally representative of the adult population (18 years old and over) of Georgia, excluding those living in territories affected by military conflict (South Ossetia and Abkhazia).

Georgian parliament, thus also "the regional and local authorities" (Aprasidze 2016: 97); this, along with other factors such as the resource monopoly held by a small group of economic and political elites, has been limiting political representation in the country.

Furthermore, data indicate that men tended to be more present at protests than women, which corresponds with the results of other studies on antigovernment protests in Georgia (Abbasov 2023). We assume that men are more likely to attend protests, as women in Georgia—and globally—are statistically more tied to unpaid household work than men. We also suggest that women are more likely to be occupied with domestic labour, including caring for children, during the evening hours when protests often reach their peak. In addition, we suspect that some men might have volunteered to go to the protests since some of them might have aimed to protect spouses or female relatives and friends from police harassment, pressure, and violence. There have been many memorable incidents of police violence against protestors in Georgia when the Georgian police, despite varying in quality, employed disproportionate violence by dispersing, kicking, beating, or attacking protestors (Human Rights Watch 2007, 2011, 2018a, 2019).

We also found that Georgians residing in the capital, Tbilisi, were more likely to attend protests than those living in rural or other urban areas outside of Tbilisi. For decades, Tbilisi, where approximately 1.1 million out of 3.7 million Georgians live, has been the epicentre of political life and protest in Georgia. Notable protest locations include the area in front of the Georgian Parliament on Rustaveli Avenue and Freedom Square. Additionally, the dense social networks in Tbilisi facilitate political mobilization more easily.

A bivariate regression confirmed that those who trust channels which are not pro-governmental were more likely to support protests than those who trust governmental channels. TV channels remain one of the primary sources of information in Georgia; however, as recent studies have found (Atchaidze 2024), the consumption of TV has considerably declined from 88% in 2013 to 49% in 2024. Georgia's TV landscape can be broadly distinguished between pro-governmental and oppositional channels, with Imedi, Rustavi 2, or POSTV sharing GD's partisan views and TV Mtavari, TV Pirveli, TV Formula, and Kavkasia TV critical and oppositional towards the government. There is a significant divergence in how these channels present political events and narratives. We assume that those who consume TV channels that are partisan towards GD, which has adopted an antagonistic and dismissive attitude towards protests against the foreign agent law, are motivated to adapt a rather negative attitude towards protests and are more averse to attending protests.

Regarding the significant statistical relationship between support for EU membership and the approval of and participation in protests, we argue that the law was perceived by a majority of the population as a threat

to the collective societal goals of democracy and freedom. By referring to it as "Russian law", the Georgian population likely articulated discontent with further rapprochement with Russia and the potential transformation of the country into a full-fledged authoritarian state. For years, the Georgian population's approval of the EU and its desire to integrate into EU infrastructure and systems have remained consistently unwavering (International Republican Institute 2023: 63). Since 2017, EU-Atlantic integration has even been included in Georgia's constitution[6]. Sociologist Lia Tsuladze argues that the cultural discourse of a "return to Europe" was inseparable from the political ambition to join political institutions (Tsuladze, quoted in: Laulan 2023). According to Tsuladze, the Georgian population affirms EU integration for pragmatic and identitarian reasons: Pragmatic reasons could involve material benefits and the potential for self-realization, whereas identitarian reasons refer to a desire to identify with being 'European' (also Khoshtaria et al. 2021). Potentially turning away from the EU and towards Russia was interpreted as an 'existential threat' to collective social aspiration and historical identity.

Finally, similar to other researchers (Abbasov 2023), we found that young people (aged 18–34), the two post-Soviet generations, attended protests more frequently than did adults or older individuals. In fact, young people seem to be most prominent during the 2023/2024 mass protests against the "law of Georgia on transparency of foreign influence" (Jones 2024), which was frequently described as a "Gen Z" protest (Samkharadze/Lebanidze 2023), highlighting the significant role that youth played in these demonstrations. Approval rates are particularly high among Georgians aged 18 to 34. A survey conducted by CRRC-Georgia in March 2023 revealed that 93% of individuals in this age group wanted Georgia to join the EU (CRRC 2023). Young people not only attended the protests but also helped with coordination tasks. For instance, some Georgian youths set up a facebook group called Daitove (Georgian for: stay/keep), which contributed to organizing the transfer and participation of regional Georgians to the protests in Tbilisi. More than 150,000 virtual members were gathered within a few days. Georgia's young people have had considerable political experience with regard to political youth mobilization. For example, the 2012 mass mobilization against the UNM was largely initiated by young people, particularly students (Barkaia 2014), whereas the 2017/2018 protests criticizing Georgia's drug policy were led by the White Noise Movement, another youth group (Oravec/Holland 2019). At the same time, the younger segment of the population is not yet as deeply integrated into the labour force as adults or older individuals are (GeoStat 2024), which may have provided them with comparatively more opportunities to participate in protests.

Conclusion

In our article, we explored two central questions: What do we know about the segment of the Georgian population that supports protests, and how can we characterize the section that took to the streets in Georgia during the spring of 2024? We then contextualized the results with Georgia's recent protest experiences and history, demographics, and value convictions.

In the quantitative part of our study, we found that while a majority of Georgians approve of protests (60%), the actual attendance at protests is significantly lower (6%, equal to 185,000). We identified four core traits among the protestors in Georgia's adult population:

1. *Gender*: Both women and men show nearly equal approval of protests. However, men were more likely to attend protests than women were.
2. *Age*: Young people and adolescents (18–34 years old) are more likely to support and attend protests than older generations.
3. *Location*: Residents of Tbilisi, Georgia's capital, are more likely to support and attend protests than those living in other urban or rural areas.
4. *Value Orientation*: We also found a significant relationship between support for EU membership on the one hand and support for and participation in protests on the other hand.

In the qualitative part of our study, we further contextualized the results. We suggest that more men than women attended protests due to differences in household responsibilities, working hours, and perceptions of vulnerability to police violence. We also highlight the crucial role of Georgia's capital because of its history of protests. Like others (Abbasov 2023, Kincha 2020), we identify the crucial role that young people in Georgia have held with respect to collective political actions and political mobilization. In the specific case of the "law of Georgia on transparency of foreign influence", we underline their strong pro-EU orientation and political support. We suggest that future studies should further examine participants' protest motivations in a more nuanced way and consider, for instance, their ideological outlooks, foreign policy orientations, and relationships with the past (CRRC 2024b).

6 Article 78 of the Georgian Constitution states: "The constitutional bodies shall take all measures within the scope of their competences to ensure the full integration of Georgia into the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization" (Legislative Herold of Georgia 2024).

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