

A Beacon of Progress: Civil Society in Georgia

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December 5, 2024

Georgia's increasingly far-right-leaning government is instrumentalising gender and sexual diversity to develop societal divisions and justify undermining public institutions. With LGBTQIA+ rights under threat both inside the EU and in its aspiring members, civil society and grassroots movements are key to protecting democracy and reaffirming European values.

Georgia, experiencing the deepest political crisis in decades, faces an uncertain future. The total erosion of independent institutions and the removal of checks and balances have led to what many, including President Salome Zourabichvili, are calling stolen elections. Praiseworthy institutional reforms and the protection of basic rights and freedoms, as well as commitment to and chances for European Union integration, are all going down the drain.

So where is the real guarantee of sustainable change? What can drive EU accession if institutional reforms can be rolled back in one fell swoop, especially with the EU increasingly looking inward rather than at expansion? While there are no simple answers in sight, civil society, grassroots mobilisation, and transnational solidarity could be the place to begin.

A Georgian rabbit hole

The ruling Georgian Dream party, which came to power in 2012, initially in coalition, gained majority rule in 2016 and, now in its fourth term, continues to enjoy near-unhindered single-party rule. In its socially aspirational beginnings, the party vowed to end the police brutality of its predecessors, focusing on human rights for all. Despite initially implementing improvements such as public healthcare reform, the party has shifted its position to exerting power over public institutions and weakening civil society.

Billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, who founded Georgian Dream, continues to finance the party, which operates under his direct yet secretive influence. Incrementally, it became clear that the oligarch would bend Georgia's law enforcement, judiciary, and other institutions to his will, slowly turning the country into a rich man's playground where poverty and other inequalities are rampant. Ivanishvili openly condemned homophobia in the party's early stages. However, over the past decade, Georgian Dream has scapegoated vulnerable communities that remain widely misunderstood in society.

LGBTQIA+ issues increasingly carry geopolitical significance.

The Georgian government's reaction to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 revealed its affiliation. Georgian Dream's alignment with the Kremlin, once mere speculation, became clearly evident when the government began accusing the West of prompting Georgia into a war with Russia. Politicians and government officials showed an unprecedented lack of diplomacy in dealings with international partners. They also began formally cracking down on civil society watchdogs and the political opposition.

In 2023, then-Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili spoke at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Hungary, confirming the trajectory of Georgian Dream's ideological development from self-proclaimed social-democratic to severely conservative, adopting the rhetoric of one of Georgia's prominent far-right groups. The party copied Russia, introducing legislation against "foreign agents" twice: in 2023 and 2024. Despite mass protests, parliament finally adopted this controversial law in the lead-up to this year's election.

The ruling party did not stop its authoritarian rampage there, however. Parliament quickly launched and adopted the Law on Protecting Minors and Family Values. The regulation bans gender-affirming care and legal gender recognition and denies the recognition of queer families. It also imposes the censorship of content and information about LGBTQIA+ people at all levels of education and on TV. Even if heavily contested, Georgia's election results, securing another four years of Georgian Dream rule, have set the expectation that extreme political threats will become a harsh reality.

Georgia's political trajectory is also weighing heavily on the overall stability of the EU's Eastern Partnership. Under constant Russian influence and interference, this geopolitical area remains volatile. Moldova's pro-Western government may just have won its election battle, but it is hanging on by a thread. Ukraine is literally fighting for survival as well as EU integration. Armenia is making positive shifts, but progress remains fragile. Azerbaijan and Belarus, meanwhile, continue to tighten the screws against anyone who dares speak of freedom. The regional space has shrunk like never before and Georgia, the country that used to be a relatively safe haven for activism and human rights work, has become yet another risky context that requires contingency plans, security protocols, and creative approaches.

Anti-gender scarecrows

Georgia, like many other countries that still carry their Soviet experience, has inherited the political instrumentalisation of homo/bi/transphobia. This tactic has continued to be actively applied since the country gained independence in 1991. Coupled with a lack of knowledge and awareness of gender and sexual diversity, it can cause mass anxiety and confusion, resonating with the populist framing of national identity rooted in religion and polarised gender roles. What emboldens the Georgian government today is how their position is not as marginal as it would have been a decade ago.

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back social progress and civic awareness.*

Georgian Dream benefits from the endless debate around LGBTQIA+ rights and so-called gender ideology boosted by troll factories, conspiracy theorists, and anti-gender groups. Having entered mainstream political discourse with force, gender and sexual diversity have become one of the watershed issues in the battle between so-called Western and traditional values (or in some contexts "woke" and "real" values). The division between "us" and "them" is deemed geopolitical. Even in EU member states, it is used to dilute the understanding of what real European values are. For countries like Georgia, blaming everything on Russia's influence (even if clearly existent) is an oversimplification, which state propaganda turns on its head by pointing to EU countries that have restricted LGBTQIA+ rights, such as Poland, Hungary, and Italy, as the European counterweights to the West's "pseudo-liberal ideology". Interestingly, LGBTQIA+ issues increasingly carry geopolitical significance. Georgia's ruling party has openly chosen its side by publicly objecting to what it calls "imposed false freedoms" and

“LGBTQIA+ propaganda” and touts myths about gender-affirming care for children, which we have heard so many times before. Georgian Dream’s use of homo/ bi/transphobia to further attack and damage the reputation of the civil society sector is a combination of Soviet methods used against political dissidents and newer disinformation and social division tactics from anti-gender groups. The ruling party has achieved this by not only adopting the two widely contested laws on “foreign agents” and the “protection of family values and minors”, but also actively accusing civil society of receiving foreign funding to spread “LGBT propaganda”.

The illiberal right’s tactics travel. So do its narratives. When biased messages land on the pre-primed ground of authoritarian-leaning political forces influenced by Russia, they become a dangerous tool directly affecting entire states. What has created confusion through false statements and myth-spreading for years has now found practical application. And what makes these groups so successful is not only how well funded they are but also how they lack the accountability measures that, for instance, the civil society sector employs.

Forged in crisis

It came as no surprise when Georgia’s ruling party, just like other authoritarian-leaning political forces around the world, chose to invest heavily in cracking down on the country’s vibrant civil society. It may sound like a cliché, but civil society organisations in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) are pillars within their respective states.

Initially, the sector emerged in response to the overwhelming economic and socio-political crises following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Financial support channelled through strands of development cooperation nurtured the formalised NGO sector, which over the years was able to start addressing crucial issues related to human rights, democracy, the rule of law, and gender. Today, traditional nongovernmental organisations exist side-by-side with diverse unregistered initiative groups, grassroots collectives, and individual activists – together, they represent the core of those socially and politically active in Georgian society.

The country’s diverse civil society groups have long been providing services, mobilising communities, building public opinion, suggesting and lobbying for policy changes, holding powerful institutions accountable, and keeping their international partners informed. This sector also carries more institutional memory and expertise on reforms, policy work, and the deeper analysis of societal problems than the respective government agencies that are subject to constant turnover and changes of political approach.

The Covid-19 pandemic also illustrated how adaptable Georgia’s civil society can and must be to support vulnerable communities when the state has forgotten them. LGBTQIA+ organisations across the EaP had to mobilise in an unprecedented way to respond to both the humanitarian and human rights needs of the communities that were left without accessible direct support from their state or the humanitarian aid sectors. For instance, organisations from Georgia and Ukraine had to scale up the provision of psycho-social services to community members while at the same time developing internal protocols for the disbursement of humanitarian aid and trying to raise funds for this work. We have seen this again in various other crises, such as Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, where LGBTQIA+ organisations have distributed humanitarian aid, carried out emergency relocations, and provided other types of support to the community. LGBTQIA+ organisations in Moldova and other neighbouring countries such as Poland, Romania, and Slovakia rose to the challenge and mobilised to receive LGBTQIA+ refugees. If we look closely at these times of great need, we find the same pattern of solidarity. We see that there is plenty that could make anti-gender movements, the illiberal right, and

their representatives in mainstream politics feel threatened. After all, you can roll back a law, but you cannot so easily roll back social progress and civic awareness.

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Grassroots solidarity and EU integration

The mass protests in Georgia in 2023 and 2024 against the Foreign Agents Law clearly showed the growing gap between society and government. [Opinion polls confirm](#) that Georgia's citizens clearly know what they want and are far more advanced on their path to EU integration than the political elites. Therefore, measuring a country's progress only by institutional reforms is misleading and does not present the full picture. Civil society groups and their outreach and impact are a solid driver of EU integration. As the EU faces internal political shifts, more transnational solidarity will be needed to continue shaping an understanding of the EU's fundamental values rooted in human dignity, equality, and inclusion.

In some shape and form, this solidarity has been evident for a long time. Western human rights organisations have developed an awareness of their positionality and privilege, making conscious efforts to give activists from the Global South and East access to international advocacy spaces on regional and global levels. Transnational solidarity has also helped achieve the adoption of the EU's LGBTIQ Equality Strategy, the establishment of the mandate of Independent Expert on sexual orientation and gender identity at the UN, and the formal inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people in Major Groups and other Stakeholders (MGoS) in the 2030 Agenda framework.

On a local level, successful reforms in Georgia were implemented when institutional and state funders and local and international civil society came together and state institutions were willing to follow. Robust HIV prevention and hepatitis C programmes, stronger services for survivors of gender-based violence, and the establishment of a human rights department within the interior ministry are some clear examples. However, achievements have always required the will of state institutions or at least reputational leverage pushing them in the right direction. With the shift towards more authoritarian rule, this leverage is lost, and we quickly find that the only sustainable change made over the years is concentrated in the civil society sector.

For grassroots movements to survive and be able to cooperate and engage in meaningful exchange and learning, an important show of solidarity is needed. Collective effort is required to advocate for safeguarding (if not increasing) developmental cooperation, especially in contexts where civil society is facing high risks. With development aid cuts being announced by many donor states in the EU and beyond, this will continue to be a struggle that affects groups within and outside the EU, both large and small, working on issues ranging from gender to labour rights and the environment.

Moreover, a joint effort by civil society and progressive political forces across the EU and aspiring member states is required to engage with their constituencies, ensuring active dialogue that develops consensus on fundamental values and their practical application. This is particularly important since education and opinion-building have often been deprioritised beyond short-term information campaigns. And since illiberal forces excel in delivering disinformation, resisting diluted and exclusionary

interpretations of European values remains an uphill battle. In this regard, EU integration and enlargement processes can be seen as a natural platform to negotiate and reaffirm European values for everyone involved.

When the struggles are all-encompassing, solidarity needs to be likewise. It needs to include learning from civil society and progressive political stakeholders operating in difficult EU contexts, alongside those in aspiring member states. Experience and expertise in resilience and adaptability, which could come in very handy in times of repeated intimidation, do exist and can be shared.

There is also a lesson to be learned on avoiding the complacency that often develops after big and small victories, as well as after years of perceived stability. The welfare state and fundamental human rights and freedoms can never be taken for granted, and LGBTQIA+ communities are usually the first ones to learn this hard lesson. Faced with backlash taking root in politically influential institutions, our resistance should acknowledge that the struggles of marginalised communities are not on the margins but at the forefront of protecting democracy. LGBTQIA+ people are not a footnote in this story; they are central to the broader fight for a just and equitable society.



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Published December 5, 2024

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/a-beacon-of-progress-civil-society-in-georgia/>

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