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**Master's degree in  
Human Rights and Multi-level Governance**



From Western Aspirations to Eastern Shadows: Analyzing  
Georgia's Path from Perestroika to the Foreign Influence Law  
and Its Implications for EU Integration

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### **Abstract**

Georgia's post-Soviet path has been shaped by its ongoing efforts to integrate with Western institutions, amidst internal political challenges and external pressure from Russia. This thesis investigates Georgia's democratic backsliding, applying Levitsky and Ziblatt's (2018) democratic backsliding framework, with a particular focus on the Foreign Influence Law's effects on civil society, media freedoms, and Georgia's prospects for EU membership. The study relies on qualitative research methods, including semi-structured interviews and secondary document analysis, to examine the wider political consequences of the Georgian Dream party's governance.

According to the findings, the Foreign Influence Law has contributed to restricting civil society activities, silencing independent journalism, and fostering a political climate conducive to authoritarianism. These tendencies align with Russia's foreign agent regulations, employed as a means of controlling opposition voices. Moreover, interviewees expressed widespread skepticism towards political institutions, noted a decline in voting integrity, and observed an increase in state-sponsored repression of protest movements. The study also places Georgia's experience in the context of comparative cases of democratic backsliding while examining the EU's varied responses to democratic decline in its periphery.

The results underline the strategic relevance of EU engagement in stopping Georgia's democratic backsliding and demand further diplomatic pressure, focused sanctions against anti-democratic elements, and more backing of independent media and civil society organizations. This study gives voice to the continuous discussion on authoritarian encroachment in hybrid governments and the function of outside actors in either halting or accelerating democratic loss as Georgia is ready for a pivotal turning point.

*Keywords: Democratic Backsliding, Foreign Influence Law, Georgia, European Union*

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## Chapter I: Introduction

The idea that Georgia will live on through history is part of its national identity. The saying, "The Roman Empire is extinct, but Georgia still exists," displays an inherent sense of resilience and longevity. This shows pride in cultural and political continuity, which has survived invasions, foreign rule, and internal strife. Georgia is one of the earliest Christian nations and its history goes back more than two millennia to the ancient kingdoms of Colchis and Iberia. In the 4th century CE, King Mirian III converted to Christianity - a faith that continues to shape Georgian identity and resilience today (Rapp, 2017). Having adopted Christianity earlier gave Georgians a collective purpose and resistance to outside influences. Furthermore, the country's 4th-century CE adoption of Christianity strengthened its ties to Western ideas and cemented its role as a cultural bridge between Europe and Asia (Sunny, 1994)

Georgia's strategic position between the Black Sea, Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey has made it a meeting point for various empires and cultural influences. Throughout its history, the country has demonstrated a strong commitment to autonomy and a European orientation, and it has maintained its cultural identity despite attacks from powerful empires such as the Persian, Ottoman, and Russian (Lang, 1962; Rapp, 2017).

The recent history of Georgia demonstrates these goals well. When the Soviet Union collapsed and Georgia declared independence in 1991, it set off on a path of state-building and democratic reform (Jones, 2013). In its early years of independence, it faced internal problems such as wars in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and economic and political instability caused by Russian pressure (Cornell, 2002).

Despite these challenges, Georgians remained committed to integrating with the West. For instance, the 2003 Rose Revolution overthrew a corrupt regime through nonviolent uprising. It started with pro-Western reforms under President Mikheil Saakashvili, with Georgia taking many steps to distance itself from Russia. Also, in seven of the eight categories of political rights and civil liberties, Georgia ranked less corrupt than Russia in the 2006 Freedom House report. This caused great disturbance in Russia (Kakachia, 2010). However, these revolutionary changes also created more concentrated power and more fractious governance that exacerbated the 2008 conflict with Russia and made Georgia's geopolitical state worse ((Mitchell, 2009; Wheatley, 2005).

Currently, Georgia is caught between pro-Western ambitions and a growing pro-Russian government. For this reason, the Foreign Influence Law has become a big controversy. Nevertheless, it is not the only element causing public discontent. This law supposedly introduced to protect national sovereignty, suppresses civil society and opposition - the very democratic values Georgia has long sought to uphold (Popjanevski & Nilsson, 2016).

Despite government efforts, there have been several long-running protests against Russian interference in Georgian affairs in recent years. In 2021, mass protests over the Georgian Dream government's handling of Russia-related policies were considered inadequate by many. Further protests against the Foreign Influence Law in 2023 and 2024 demonstrated public resistance to authoritarian tendencies, similar to those of Russia. By November 2024, election tampering, an unfit president, and government policies that seemed to ignore democratic goals had created tensions. By the end of February 2025, the protests point to a fundamental contradiction: Georgian peoples' commitment to Western values clashes with a

government that many believe is pushing the country toward Russian-style authoritarianism (Mitchell, 2009; Popjanevski & Nilsson, 2016).

This paradox shows how Georgia struggles to maintain its historical identity and aspirations while dealing with the current political state. Understanding Georgia's modern politics requires looking at its historical links to Western ideals, its political decisions, and external forces that have shaped its course including but not limited to - NATO and EU commitments.

Georgia's transition from a pro-Western country seeking NATO and EU membership to a Russian-style government shows a dramatic geopolitical and domestic shift. Georgia sought integration into Western security and political structures when it gained independence in 1991. The country joined NATO's Partnership for Peace program in 1994 and was one of the largest non-NATO contributors to NATO-led missions in Afghanistan. Though it has expressed interest and made substantial reforms to NATO standards, Georgia has always been on the fence about membership. At the 2008 Bucharest Summit, NATO leaders discussed Georgia's potential to join the alliance eventually yet no Membership Action Plan (MAP) was presented. This vague promise, the 2008 Russian invasion, and the subsequent occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia exposed Georgia to danger and increased public discontent with Western institutions (Mitchell, 2009; Popjanevski & Nilsson, 2016). Georgia has consistently demonstrated its ambition to join the EU. This was evident when it participated in the European Neighborhood Policy in 2004 and created the EU-Georgia Action Plan in 2006, both of which helped strengthen its ties with the EU. In 2014, Georgia took a significant step by signing an Association Agreement with the EU, which included the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), highlighting its commitment to European integration (Jones, 2013; Cornell,

2002). However, unmet expectations and perceived disengagement from the West have eroded confidence and allowed a place for authoritarian tendencies to emerge (Jones, 2013; Cornell, 2002).

All these challenges eroded trust in Western commitments yet the Georgian people still wanted a pro-European future. However, internal governance issues widened the gap between political realities and public expectations. At the time of the Georgian Dream's rise to power in 2012, their rhetoric seemed to balance practical ties to Russia with EU ambitions. Over time, their policies - most notably the Foreign Influence Law of 2023 - showed a growing centralized power and an authoritarian bent. Critics say that it undermines democratic freedoms and civil society while claiming national sovereignty.

The study examines how historical, geopolitical, and domestic factors contributed to Georgia's current political crisis. It argues that democratic standards are declining in Georgia due to power consolidation, civil society suppression, and laws like the Foreign Influence Law that weaken institutional independence.

The theory helps examine key events in Georgia's political history, from the early pro-Western reforms of the Rose Revolution to the gradual shift towards authoritarian governance under the Georgian Dream. It allows a thorough assessment of how individual policies, like the Foreign Influence Law, fit into the broader global trends of democratic decline. By applying this theoretical framework to Georgia's experience, the research explores how governance practices have steadily eroded democratic institutions and fueled popular discontent with both local and foreign players.

A qualitative approach, including interviews with members of the civil society, officials, and analysts, as well as document analysis of legislative texts, protest records, and international

agreements as secondary data, will be used to provide a thorough understanding of Georgia's political route. This technique offers a thorough look at how historical and contemporary governance patterns intersect with public opinion and outside influences. The research aims to explain why Georgia, once a pro-Western leader in the post-Soviet region, is now struggling with serious democratic issues as geopolitical factors change.

The study also examines how Western organizations, such as NATO and the EU, have affected Georgia's political landscape. It looks at how broken promises of integration led to widespread discontent, creating an opportunity for authoritarian tendencies, inspired by Russian government models, to gain ground. This research aims to provide insights into the staying power of democratic values in transitional democracies by analyzing the Foreign Influence Law and its broader implications, as well as offering suggestions for preventing similar backsliding in other situations.

## Chapter II: Literature Review

### 2.1. Chronological Analysis of Georgia's Path

Georgia's deep historical roots in Western values are based on its Christian heritage and unique cultural identity. The nation adopted Christianity in the early 4th century and became one of the first to adopt it formally. This momentous event wove Georgia into the fabric of the vast Christian world and created a feeling of being part of a common cultural and spiritual reality beyond its own borders. Nevertheless, its leaders and intellectuals have always emphasized Western values in governance, education, and culture.

Georgia remained close to Western ideals. However, in the 19th century the country, under geopolitical pressure and with regional weaknesses, sought protection from the Russian Empire and was eventually annexed. Georgia was integrated into the Russian Empire in the 19th century and included the entire province by 1878, having started by acquiring eastern Georgia in 1801. In this period there was both a loss of sovereignty and a bitter incorporation into the Russian imperial domain. Georgian elites were involved with the Russian intellectual and revolutionary movements and fused national ambitions with wider ideological agendas (Suny 1994). The fall of the Russian Empire in 1917 was a historical opportunity to restore sovereignty and restore sovereignty and proclaim independence and establish the Democratic Republic of Georgia on May 26, 1918. Fortunately for Georgia and its desire for autonomy, the fall of the Russian Empire in 1917 presented a historic chance to restore its sovereignty, resulting in the proclamation of independence and the founding of the Democratic Republic of Georgia on May 26, 1918. Presently, the date is commemorated as the official Independence Day of Georgia and stands as a symbol of the country's freedom.

Georgia's pre-Soviet desires for independence were heavily impacted by its Western alliance. The short-lived independence of three years is significant because it provided Georgia with an opportunity to establish itself as an independent state and to implement domestic and foreign policy goals that were informed by its understanding of its historical role and regional

responsibilities (Jones, 2013). Nevertheless, in 1921, the Soviet Red Army invaded Georgia, disintegrating the newly established democratic government and incorporating the country into the USSR. During the period of the Soviet occupation, Georgia developed from an agricultural to an industrial country but at the same time, people were persecuted. The Stalinist purges of the 1930s affected Georgian academics and cultural elites, thus erasing the earlier generation of leaders (Jones, 2013).

Georgia was an important agricultural and industrial center of the USSR during the Soviet period. However, this prosperity had its price, and the government carried out the policy of the Russian language and cultural domination and suppression of the Georgian language. Nationalism was on the rise in the 1970s and 1980s so people started demanding more rights of the Georgian language and the demand for independence from the Soviet Union (Suny, 1994).

In the mid-1980s, two major policies were introduced by the head of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, Perestroika and Glasnost. Perestroika was meant to improve the effectiveness of the Soviet economy through the incorporation of market features into the economy. On the other hand, Glasnost was meant to enhance the transparency and freedom of information, which was to allow open discussion of matters that had been forbidden in the past under Soviet rule (Gorbachev, 1987).

In Georgia, Glasnost allowed people to re-examine historical events, which led to a surge in nationalist feelings. This new openness made it possible for people to publicly discuss previously forbidden topics, such as the Soviet takeover of Georgia in 1921. As a result, a growing independence movement emerged, with Georgians openly challenging Soviet authority and demanding more autonomy (Coppieters, 2005).

Perestroika's economic reforms which were meant to enhance production and increase productivity made the economy more unstable. In Georgia there was a shortage of goods and high inflation the economy was further stretched to the limit. Although the purpose of decentralizing economic power was to give local governments more authority, it only meant that

there was more economic disparity as some regions were unable to manage the new system because of their weak relationship with the central government (Beissinger, 2002).

These sentiments were in tune with the nationalist sentiments in Georgia. The relaxation of control by the Soviet Union led to the emergence of nationalist movements as different groups demanded more power or complete independence. Georgian history was also a clear example of how the Soviets undermined the Georgian culture and language and thus this growing awareness of the national identity particularly in Georgia (Suny, 1993).

As the financial stability deteriorated and political liberty was being adopted, the situation became more tense. This was followed by events such as the tragic event of April 9, 1989, in Tbilisi where Soviet soldiers killed peaceful protesters who wanted independence (Maisashvili et al., 2022). This event largely weakened the Soviet Union and strengthened the spirit of Georgian independence.

The failure of Perestroika and the erosion of Soviet power can be attributed to the event that happened on April 9. The use of force by the Soviet military to disperse the demonstration in Tbilisi showed that Gorbachev's policies had not factored in the Georgian situation. The Soviet leadership, through the use of force, in the management of the protest demonstration, only made the situation worse for the Soviet government in the eyes of many Georgians and thereby strengthened the resolve of the independence movement (Cornell, 2002). This is because, after the tragedy, the population of Georgia was heard calling for independence and supporting the idea of independence.

It was a turning point in the relations between the Soviet Union and its non-Russian partners. Georgia thought that Gorbachev's policies, which were introduced to make the Soviet Union a more democratic state, had revealed the weakness of the regime and its inability to address the needs of the ethnic regions. The use of force on non-violent protesters in Tbilisi showed that the Soviet Union did not recognize real autonomy and that Perestroika could not control the Union's ethnicity and politics. The Soviet government lost more of its legitimacy as Gorbachev's policies failed and Georgia and other Soviet republics moved towards independence

(Cornell, 2022). The events of April 9, 1989, in Georgia and the subsequent end of the Union can be linked to Georgia's aspiration to become a European state.

The formation of the independent Georgian state on April 9, 1991, was the end of a long and tough way that began at the end of the past century. In a referendum held on March 31, 1991, 98.9 percent of the population voted for the former Soviet state, thus rejecting Soviet rule (Suny, 1994). The country's first president was elected a well-known nationalist Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the head of state, a champion of Georgian statehood and tradition. But the path to independence for Georgia was fraught with difficulties. Within the country there was a very unstable political situation, and fighting between different political forces and ethnic wars, for example in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Samachablo, for the Georgians). Nevertheless, the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991 left Georgia to fight for its position in the international arena in the conditions of a shifting scenery in the region. Although Georgia declared its independence in 1991, it has since been able to achieve its goals of becoming a democratic country, a European state, and a sovereign nation.

Following Georgia's independence from the Soviet Union, Gamsakhurdia's administration prioritized chauvinist, ethnocentric policies over national minorities, failing to address their concerns. Georgia's autonomous territories saw increasing displeasure with nationalist policy. They sought to preserve their privileges and power under the Soviet federative system and avoid the consequences of transferring central rule from Russia to local capitals. However, only groups with Russia's active support used military force to push for self-rule. Georgia was a prime target for Russian intervention due to its strategic location, which allowed control over Central Asia and the Caucasus region. Russia chose to back South Ossetians and Abkhazians due to their proximity to Russian territory and advantageous location. Moscow gained access to the Black Sea through Abkhazia, while South Ossetia is situated on a main highway connecting the North and South Caucasus (Atilgan & Feyerabend, 2015).

Abkhazia declared independence from Georgia in July 1991, resulting in a civil war that ended in the autumn of 1993 with a ceasefire, a UN observer mission, and Russian peacekeeping

troops stationed under a CIS mandate (Shaffer, 2009). Parallel to the military struggle in Abkhazia, civil war erupted in South Ossetia in 1992, which had demanded secession from Tbilisi before Georgia attained independence. The war concluded with a truce in the same year, allowing Russia to establish a military presence under a “peace” mission, similar to what happened in Abkhazia. Two separatist wars in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, along with a civil war in Tbilisi, damaged the country. Georgia's GDP decreased by 78% between 1990 and 1995, leaving the government unable to control its territories or provide basic services (Atilgan & Feyerabend, 2015).

Despite the gravity of these conflicts, Georgia initially received far less international attention than other post-Soviet crises, such as the Nagorno-Karabakh War. Although Western institutions expressed strong support for Georgia's democratic transition, their main concern was regional stability rather than direct involvement in Georgia's internal conflicts. Unlike other war zones, Georgia saw little diplomatic effort or Western-sponsored peace talks, and it did not receive significant financial aid for post-war reconstruction in the early 1990s (Wheatley, 2005). As a result, Georgia had to navigate its transition with minimal outside help, which increased its economic and political instability. The inadequate response from international actors also made Georgia more vulnerable to Russian influence in the long run, as Moscow remained the dominant force in the region.

In January 1992, President Zviad Gamsakhurdia was overthrown in Georgia amid growing violence and political unrest. His authoritarian style and inability to manage ethnic tensions led to his downfall. After the coup, a Military Council seized power and appointed Eduard Shevardnadze, the former Soviet Foreign Minister, to lead the country. Shevardnadze returned to Georgia in March 1992 and became chairman of the State Council, a role similar to the presidency at the time. His leadership was solidified in October 1992 when he was elected chairman of the parliament. He was formally elected president in November 1995 and focused on combating organized crime and addressing separatist violence in South Ossetia and Abkhazia throughout his term (Brittanica, n.d.).

Under Shevardnadze's presidency, Georgia's relations with Western institutions improved. Georgia joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) in 1992, taking the first step toward cooperation with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (Infocenter.gov.ge, n.d.). In 1994, Georgia joined NATO's Partnership for Peace program, aiming to boost military cooperation and bring its security policies in line with Western standards (NATO, 2024.). At the 2002 NATO summit in Prague, Shevardnadze formally expressed Georgia's wish to join the Alliance, marking a significant change in the country's foreign policy (NATO, 2002). Georgia has also played a notable role in international security efforts, participating in peacekeeping missions like the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, n.d.).

Georgia's cooperation with the European Union began in the early 1990s, shortly after achieving independence. During this time, the European Union (EU) and its member states recognized Georgian sovereignty and began providing humanitarian aid to the fledgling country (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2023). The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement signed in 1996 formalized contacts and created the groundwork for political and economic cooperation (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2018). This agreement allowed discussions on democratic reforms, human rights, and the rule of law, bringing Georgia's policies closer to European standards. The EU backed Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity by offering help in a variety of areas, including economic development and governance (European Council, 2017).

Despite Shevardnadze's efforts to modernize and integrate with the West, his administration faced many challenges. Government corruption, economic problems, and unresolved territorial tensions were persistent concerns that fueled public discontent. Shevardnadze advocated for free speech and press, but his Soviet background may have hindered his efforts to decentralize government power and promote civil society. Local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) relied on international donations to exist. Few believed they could have any influence on the government (Kelly et al., 2021). The 2003 parliamentary elections were

marred by allegations of electoral fraud, sparking massive protests that ultimately led to the 2003 Rose Revolution and Shevardnadze's resignation in November 2003 (BBC News, 2014). His term is notable for both guiding Georgia toward Western alliances and the internal issues that ultimately led to his downfall.

The Rose Revolution marked a turning point in Georgia's post-Soviet history, launching a new era of political change. This largely peaceful movement stood out for its focus on mass mobilization, civic engagement, and international support. Unlike previous revolutions in Georgia, which sometimes turned violent, the Rose Revolution was seen as a major democratic achievement, confirming the country's pro-Western stance (Fairbanks 2004). When Mikheil Saakashvili won the election in January 2004, it kicked off an ambitious plan to build a stronger state, eliminate corruption, reform government institutions, and speed up Georgia's integration into Euro-Atlantic structures (Nodia, 2005).

The Rose Revolution was a landmark event, being the first peaceful transfer of power in the post-Soviet space led by mass protests. One of the most significant outcomes of the revolution was Georgia's growing dependence on Western allies, especially the European Union and NATO. Under Saakashvili's government, Georgia pursued an assertive foreign policy, seeking to strengthen ties with Western institutions and presenting itself as a key player in the struggle between democracy and Russian tyranny (Jones, 2013). The government stepped up its involvement in NATO's Partnership for Peace program, boosted military cooperation with the United States, and sought to deepen economic and political ties with the European Union (Lanskoy & Areshidze, 2008). To support these efforts, the government implemented domestic reforms to bring Georgia's governance up to Western standards, including overhauling the courts, restructuring law enforcement, and introducing major privatization measures.

Despite these ambitious reforms, the Rose Revolution's long-term influence is complex and multifaceted. The revolution achieved major success by removing the corrupt networks of the Shevardnadze era and rebuilding state institutions. However, concerns about democratic backsliding soon began to emerge. Saakashvili's consolidation of power, the suppression of the

media, and political opposition sparked fears about Georgia's democratic future (Mitchell, 2009). The 2007 anti-government protests, which were violently put down, highlighted a key contradiction in Georgia's post-revolutionary governance: the country had made significant progress in state-building and economic development, but its democratic institutions remained fragile (Bichanan, 2007).

The Rose Revolution was a turning point not only for Georgia but also had significant effects on the region. It inspired similar movements in the post-Soviet area, such as Ukraine's Orange Revolution in 2004 and Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution in 2005. However, it also led to increased tensions with Russia, which viewed Georgia's shift towards the West as a direct challenge to its influence (Welt, 2010). Russia began its passportization campaign (granting Russian passports to people) in 2002 and reinforced it in the contested territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia following the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia. This tactic not only strengthened Russian influence in the territories but also increased tensions with Georgia, which saw these activities as a violation of its sovereignty (Asmus, 2010; Fischer, 2016). The tensions that built up in the years following the revolution culminating in the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, highlighted the difficulties that new democracies face in asserting their independence while navigating complex regional power dynamics.

Prior, Georgia had been one of the most overtly independent-minded countries among the Soviet Union's successor republics since it gained freedom. Since declaring independence, Georgia's relations with Russia had deteriorated as it sought to strengthen ties with Europe and the transatlantic community. Following the Rose Revolution, Moscow saw the Georgian government's efforts to remove itself from Moscow-centered economic and security groups and its push to replace Russian peacekeeping soldiers with an international presence as humiliating affronts. Furthermore, at a time when Russia was largely regarded in the West as increasingly undemocratic and corrupt, Georgia was praised as a model of real commitment to democracy and market reforms (Cornell, 2007).

This geopolitical conflict aggravated the issue, as Moscow used its power over South Ossetia and Abkhazia to deter Georgia from further integration with Western institutions. Skirmishes and provocations increased in the years preceding the war, with both Georgian and separatist soldiers clashing regularly. By early 2008, tensions had reached a boiling point, with Russia boosting its military presence in the separatist regions under the guise of defending the Russian people, while Georgia accused Moscow of preparing for a direct military clash (Allison, 2008).

The war began in August 2008, when a series of violent escalations occurred in South Ossetia. Following repeated attacks on Georgian settlements, Georgia initiated a military operation on August 7 to restore constitutional order in the region and retake control of separatist-held territories. However, Russia's answer was prompt and significant. On August 8, Moscow launched a full-scale military invasion, sending ground soldiers, artillery, and air strikes not only into South Ossetia but also deep into Georgian territory, including the important city of Gori. Russian forces carried out large-scale bombing strikes and cyberattacks, damaging Georgia's military infrastructure and communications. The scope and pace of Russia's attacks revealed that the invasion was pre-planned, with military logistics and troop deployments in place well before Georgia's initial attack (Cornell & Starr, 2009; Nixey, 2012).

Beyond the battlefield, Russia's military action had wider geopolitical ramifications. The disproportionate use of force and the swift seizure of Georgian land revealed Moscow's intention to punish Georgia for its pro-Western goals while also sending a strong message to other post-Soviet governments considering closer ties with NATO or the EU. Furthermore, the war demonstrated the West's weak ability to deter Russian aggression. Diplomatic responses from the US and Europe, while essential, did not transfer into actual military backing and humanitarian

aid for Georgia despite the country's significant contributions to Western security, including large troop deployments to Afghanistan (Mitchell, 2015). Despite international mediation headed by France, the war resulted in Russia formally recognizing South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent republics, consolidating their split from Georgia and prolonging regional instability (de Waal, 2018). The failure of Western governments to intervene decisively during and after the war undermined the credibility of their promises to support countries facing aggression, thereby encouraging Russia to pursue its goal of regaining dominance over its neighbors (Welt 2010).

To achieve their goals of the unresolved conflict, the Russian Federation has used a range of military, political, and informational tactics. One of the main strategies has been the so-called "borderisation" (Kakachia, 2018) of occupied territories. This has led to a gradual, irreversible takeover, or "creeping occupation" (IDFI, 2015), which has become a daily reality. Georgia lacks the resources to respond to the daily loss of land without making the situation worse. This process has violated the human rights of local people. According to Amnesty International's report, Russian military and authorities in the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have restricted travel across the de facto border, arresting and fining dozens of people for "illegal" border crossings. The increased fencing along administrative boundary lines continued to have a negative impact on local residents' rights, including the right to work, food, and an adequate standard of living, as they lost access to their orchards, pasture, and farmland (Amnesty International, 2018, pp. 172-173). Along with the arbitrary seizure of property and kidnapping, the procedure is accompanied by grave abuses such as physical assaults and, in some instances, killings. Meanwhile, Georgia had stepped up its efforts to connect with the West, even though the conflict had complicated NATO membership due to unresolved territorial concerns (Freire & Kanet, 2012). The battle also established a precedent for Russian military intervention in the post-Soviet sphere, prefiguring Moscow's activities in Ukraine in 2014 and beyond.

Throughout his presidency, Saakashvili made it clear that he wanted the world to view Georgia as a Western country rather than a former Soviet one. Saakashvili made joining the EU

and NATO a primary aim for Georgia. The strict accession requirements of these organizations, which included adhering to Western democratic principles, provided civil society with leverage to keep Saakashvili and his government on track toward transparency and accountability. Georgia's parliament unanimously endorsed a resolution in 2006 inquiring about NATO membership (Civil Georgia, 2006). A non-binding referendum in January 2008 showed that around 77% of voters supported NATO membership (Civil Georgia, 2008). The Bucharest Summit in 2008 was a watershed moment, with NATO leaders acknowledging Georgia's objectives and stating that the country would eventually join. However, the alliance declined to grant the Membership Action Plan (MAP) title, owing mostly to opposition from key European members such as Germany and France, which feared aggravating Russia (Nitoiu, 2016). Following the war, NATO increased its involvement through the NATO-Georgia Commission and the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP) in 2014, with an emphasis on defense reforms, interoperability, and military modernization (Freire & Kanet, 2012). Georgia has since engaged in NATO-led operations, including deployments in Afghanistan under the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and later the Resolute Support Mission (RSM), displaying its commitment to the alliance (Makarychev and Krussmann, 2022) even during the Georgian Dream era. However, Saakashvili prioritized strengthening the state over protecting individual rights (Kelly et al., 2021). His administration encountered numerous problems, including accusations of authoritarianism and human rights violations. Critics charged Saakashvili with consolidating power, stifling political opposition, and failing to combat systemic corruption effectively. These concerns damaged public trust and caused general discontent with his leadership (RFE/RL, 2007).

The Georgian Dream party grew into a formidable political force in reaction to rising discontent. Georgian Dream, founded in 2012 by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, took advantage of public dissatisfaction with Saakashvili's government, promising increased transparency, democratic governance, and a balanced foreign policy. The party's rise to power marked a fundamental shift in Georgia's political environment, ending Saakashvili's United National

Movement's supremacy and ushering in a new era of governance (Politico, 2016). However, critics argue that under the Georgian Dream's leadership, Georgia has shifted toward closer ties with Russia, possibly at the expense of its Euro-Atlantic goals. This shift is evident in the adoption of laws similar to those in Russia, a cautious stance on opposing Russian aggression, and actions that have put a strain on relations with Western partners. Moreover, Georgia's response to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine has been noticeably restrained. While the country provided diplomatic and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, it did not impose economic penalties against Russia or send military aid to Ukraine. This cautious attitude has been criticized both domestically and internationally, with some seeing it as a refusal to face Russian aggression and proof of Georgia's shifting allegiances (Iacono, 2024). These moves have sparked concerns about Georgia's foreign policy direction and its long-term strategic alliances (Harris, 2025).

The party's actions have led to allegations of democratic backsliding. Following the 2020 parliamentary elections, Georgian Dream withdrew from an EU-brokered deal aimed at resolving a post-election political crisis. This move was widely interpreted as a departure from democratic standards, raising questions about the party's commitment to European integration. Critics claimed that the withdrawal was a purposeful shift toward authoritarianism, damaging the country's democratic institutions. Furthermore, the administration has faced criticism for how it has always been handling protests, with claims of excessive force and mass arrests (UAB Institute for Human Rights, 2025). These acts have raised questions about the country's devotion to democratic ideals and compatibility with Western norms.

In recent years, Georgia has faced a wave of public protests, driven by widespread dissatisfaction with the perceived Russian influence, government actions seen as a threat to national sovereignty and democratic values, and their foreign policies. The protests, planned for 2021, 2023, and 2024/2025, underscore the people's commitment to democratic values and the crucial role of civil society in combating authoritarian tendencies.

Initially, the Georgian Dream government continued its predecessors' pro-European position. Georgia signed the Association Agreement with the EU in 2014, which included the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area with the goal of improving political and economic ties (European Parliament, 2024a). Following this milestone, the EU granted Georgian citizens visa-free access to the Schengen Area in 2017, indicating a significant stride toward European integration (European Policy Centre, 2023).

However, in recent years, there has been a noticeable shift. The 2021 demonstrations were triggered primarily by the Georgian government's decision to halt EU accession talks on November 28, 2021. Many people viewed this move as a step towards increased Russian dominance, which led to widespread anger. Protests broke out in Tbilisi and other cities, with citizens expressing their support for European integration and opposition to growing Russian influence over Georgia's affairs (Atlantic Council, 2021).

In March 2023, the situation worsened when the government passed a controversial "foreign influence" bill, similar to Russian laws that suppress dissent. The new rule required organizations receiving over 20% of their funding from foreign sources to register as "foreign agents," a term with negative implications that could be used to discredit and silence independent media and civil society groups. This sparked widespread protests in Tbilisi, with locals fearing the measure would restrict freedoms and push the country closer to Russian authoritarianism. Faced with public outrage, the government initially withdrew the law. However, in May 2024, the Georgian Dream-led parliament reintroduced and passed the law, overriding the president's veto. This move triggered further protests and international criticism, with the European Union expressing deep concern over Georgia's democratic decline (Human Rights Watch, 2024a). The government's determination to push through the legislation despite widespread local and international condemnation, further increased public unrest (Le Monde, 2024).

In September 2024, the Georgian Parliament authorized the "Family Values" bill, which has sparked controversy due to its perceived violation of LGBTQ+ rights. The bill imposes severe restrictions on LGBTQ+ expressions, including potential bans on Pride events and the display of the rainbow flag, as well as censorship of LGBTQ+-themed media and literature. According to supporters, primarily from the ruling Georgian Dream party and the Orthodox Church, the bill aims to preserve traditional moral norms and protect children. However, human rights groups argue that the bill is a deliberate attempt to suppress LGBTQ+ rights and freedoms, similar to Russia's restrictive laws that limit civil liberties (Reuters, 2024). Hence, The bill takes Georgia further away from the Western values its people have been fighting to attain for decades.

The parliamentary elections in October 2024 represented a significant moment. Since the 2012 parliamentary elections, the Georgian Dream party has steadily increased its control, effectively pushing opposition forces to the periphery while holding a dominant position in government. The party secured a parliamentary majority through a mix of clever legislative tactics, alleged electoral fraud, and institutional dominance, allowing it to pass key legislation with little opposition. The 2024 elections saw this trend continue, with widespread accusations of electoral malpractice stemming from reports of ballot rigging, voter coercion, and abuse of state resources (OSCE, 2024b). International observers, including the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), reported substantial electoral fraud, casting more doubt on the election's legality (The Soufan Center, 2024). Despite international criticism and domestic unrest, Georgian Dream held on to its supermajority, effectively shutting out opposition parties like the United National Movement (UNM) and Lelo. Furthermore, independent and opposition parliamentarians who attempted to dispute the ruling party's actions have faced legal threats, financial penalties, and, in some cases, politically driven charges (Transparency International Georgia, 2024a). As a result, Georgia's political environment has increasingly resembled a one-party system in which the Georgian Dream dominates all arms of government, undermining democratic checks and balances.

In November 2024, the Georgian Dream Party announced the suspension of EU accession discussions, claiming the need to emphasize national sovereignty and domestic stability (Stephoe, 2024). This decision sparked huge domestic demonstrations and drew considerable condemnation from Western countries. The US State Department characterized the measure as a betrayal of Georgians' ambitions and a break from the country's constitutional commitment to European integration (US Embassy in Georgia, 2024).

Furthermore, Mikheil Kavelashvili's election as president of Georgia in December 2024 caused substantial disruption in the country's politics. Kavelashvili, a former professional footballer and outspoken critic of Western policy, rose to the presidency amid controversy and claims of illegitimacy. Kavelashvili was the only candidate in the presidential election, which was conducted via legislative vote rather than popular mandate. He won the presidency with the support of 224 out of 300 lawmakers present, despite an opposition boycott (Huffington Post, 2024). This procedural diversion from direct public participation has been a source of contention, raising concerns about the democratic integrity of the process. Many saw Kavelashvili's election as a consolidation of power by the Georgian Dream party, despite his lack of political experience and nationalist position. This decision has fueled widespread discontent, resulting in numerous protests and over 460 detentions (Financial Times, 2024). The European Union and other international entities have expressed great worry over Georgia's democratic backsliding, with some foreign institutions refusing to acknowledge the new government's legitimacy.

Outgoing President Salome Zourabichvili has been a vociferous opponent of the current Georgian Dream party, citing its perceived turn toward authoritarianism and isolation from European integration initiatives. She referred to the recent parliamentary elections as "fraudulent" and the newly elected parliament as "illegitimate" (Cantone, 2024). Zourabichvili's reluctance to recognize Kavelashvili's presidency and her backing for opposition protests have further exacerbated political tensions. In response to her resistance, Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze threatened her with incarceration if she continued to oppose the government's authority. He added that Zourabichvili "has not even a week left" as president and advised her

against interacting with the opposition or campaigning for new legislative elections (RBC Ukraine, 2024). These threats have sparked international outcry, with French Minister Delegate for European Affairs, Benjamin Haddad, calling them "unacceptable and incompatible with any European perspective" (OC Media, 2024a).

As of February 2025, Protests in Georgia have continued as the country's political situation remains tense and unstable. Alongside The Foreign Influence Law, The LGBT Propaganda Law, the election fraud, and the government's decision to suspend European Union (EU) admission talks until 2028 was the final push that triggered widespread demonstrations and international criticism. In response to the government's actions, European Union foreign ministers approved the suspension of visa-free travel for Georgian officials with diplomatic passports beginning January 2025. This decision was made in direct response to the violent crackdown on pro-EU protesters in Georgia, with the goal of punishing prominent Georgian leaders while excluding regular residents (Reuters, 2025b). On February 2, 2025, the 64th consecutive day of the protests, opposition leaders Nika Melia and Gigi Ugulava were detained at an anti-government rally in Tbilisi, where demonstrators attempted to block a highway entry to the capital. Moreover, Mzia Amaghlobeli, a journalist and media director, was targeted in the government's crackdown on independent media. She began a hunger strike in January 2025 to protest her arrest on charges of assaulting a police officer, a claim that human rights organizations strongly question. As her health worsened, she ended the hunger strike after 38 days, on 18 February 2025 (OC Media, 2025b). Her continuing arrest has been denounced as arbitrary by international observers.

These arrests, alongside many of both civilians and CSO leaders, have once again raised questions about the government's approach to dissent and commitment to democratic norms (Agence France-Presse in Tbilisi, 2025).

Furthermore, Georgia's delegation announced its withdrawal from the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) on January 30, 2025. The move came in response to PACE's decision to certify the Georgian delegation's credentials, but only if certain conditions

were met to address concerns over the country's democratic standards. These included holding new democratic parliamentary elections, restarting European integration efforts, reducing police brutality, and freeing political prisoners. The Georgian delegation's withdrawal has sparked doubts about the country's commitment to democratic reforms (Council of Europe, 2025).

At this time, Georgia's political environment remains in disarray, with legislative moves that have fueled public outrage and drawn worldwide attention. In early February 2025, the Georgian government announced laws that would increase the punishment for protest-related acts. This action comes amid continuous political instability following the contentious October 2024 parliamentary elections and the government's suspension of European Union admission discussions until 2028. The proposed legislation has significantly increased the penalties for protest-related infractions. Individuals accused of blocking roads now face fines of up to 5,000 Georgian Lari (about USD 1,798), a severe financial burden in a country with a substantially lower average monthly income (OC Media, 2025a). Furthermore, the legislation increased the length of incarceration for minor infractions from 15 to 60 days and imposed up to ten-year terms for acts of resistance or violence against police officers. Critics claim that these policies are intended to suppress dissent and signal a turn towards authoritarian administration (Reuters, 2025c).

The government has additionally employed mysterious paramilitary forces, known as "titushki" or "titushkebi," to intimidate and forcefully disperse demonstrators. These disguised men, who frequently work with official security officers, have been implicated in a number of attacks on demonstrators and journalists. Their actions have fueled anxiety and have been blamed for weakening the rule of law (Foreign Policy, 2024).

Additionally, it was announced at the end of February 2025 that according to an additional draft law on foreign agents published on the Georgian Parliament's website failure to comply with the law can result in up to five years in prison, a \$10,000 fine, or both. Furthermore, 'any foreigner who is convicted of breaking any provision of this law or is caught attempting to breach the regulations set by it will be liable to deportation', the measure stated. Moreover,

Georgia's ruling party has introduced a legislative package in Parliament that would remove civil society organizations' mandated involvement in all governmental decision-making processes (OC Media, 2025c).

Domestic and international observers have widely criticized the government's repressive actions. Human rights organizations have documented numerous cases of police brutality, arbitrary detentions, and abuses of free expression. The European Union has responded by postponing Georgia's membership discussions, citing worries about democratic deterioration and the erosion of civil liberties (The Times, 2025). Georgians are increasingly dissatisfied with their administration, which is perceived as autocratic and inattentive to their pro-European aspirations. The adoption of laws similar to Russia's restrictions on non-governmental groups and media outlets shows how unmet Western promises can lead to internal policy decisions that harm democratic institutions (Steptoe & Johnson LLP., 2025).

In conclusion, a complex interplay between domestic objectives and external influences has shaped Georgia's post-Soviet transition. The country's consistent pursuit of Western integration has been marked by cautious engagement from NATO and the EU, resulting in unfulfilled expectations that have created opportunities for authoritarian reversal. Understanding this timeline is crucial for grasping Georgia's current political landscape and the obstacles it faces in building a democratic and Western-oriented future.

## **2.2. Conceptual and Analytical Framework**

This section will look at the conceptual frameworks needed to comprehend Georgia's recent political developments. The first thing to be discussed is the theory of democratic backsliding, which focuses on the degradation of institutional balances, the suppression of civil society, and the introduction of legal processes that contradict democratic norms. This will include an examination of how these notions apply to the Georgian Dream party's governance strategies, particularly in light of the Foreign Influence Law. Furthermore, the section will examine various theoretical viewpoints, such as Huntington's "Third Wave of Democracy,"

Fukuyama's "End of History," and Ikenberry's discourse on the international liberal order, to see how they apply to Georgia's complicated political terrain. In addition, we will look at the origins and implications of the Foreign Influence Law, drawing comparisons with similar legislation in Russia, and examine its influence on civil society, media freedom, and public dissent in Georgia. Finally, we will examine patterns of public discontent and protest movements, with a focus on demonstrations against perceived Russian influence and the role of grassroots organizations in resisting authoritarian shifts. We will also assess the influence of Western institutions, such as the EU and NATO, on public trust and the consequences of disillusionment caused by unmet expectations.

### ***2.2.1. Democratic Backsliding***

Democratic backsliding, also known as democratic erosion or autocratization, is the process by which democratic institutions, norms, and practices are gradually eroded or demolished, often by democratically elected leaders (Bermeo 2016). Unlike unexpected coups or revolutions, democratic backsliding usually occurs gradually through legal and procedural systems, making it more difficult to detect and prevent. This phenomenon has received significant scholarly attention, particularly in post-Soviet republics where democratic consolidation is fragile and vulnerable to both internal governance failings and external geopolitical pressures (Ginsburg & Huq, 2018).

To examine the democratic backsliding in Georgia, this study utilizes the analytical paradigm proposed by Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) in their seminal work *How Democracies Die*. Levitsky and Ziblatt contend that democracies frequently fail not as a result of violent overthrows, but rather as a result of the gradual erosion of democratic standards by elected

leaders who use legal means to reinforce power. They highlight four major behavioral characteristics that suggest authoritarianism and democratic decline:

1. *Rejection of Democratic Rules of the Game*: This includes undermining constitutional standards, attempting to change electoral rules to benefit incumbents, and disrespecting judicial independence. Legislative initiatives such as the Foreign Influence Law in Georgia represent attempts to undermine democratic ideals disguised as legal improvements (Freedom House, 2023a).
2. *Denial of the Legitimacy of Political Opponents*: Leaders with authoritarian tendencies frequently delegitimize opposition leaders, framing them as risks to national security or accusing them of foreign allegiance. The Georgian Dream's ongoing vilification of opposition parties and civil society organizations follows this trend, portraying dissenting voices as disruptive forces (Transparency International Georgia, 2023).
3. *Toleration or Encouragement of Violence*: Democratic destruction is accelerated when governments condone or fail to prohibit political violence, particularly against opposition organizations or underprivileged communities. This signal is exemplified by violent protest crackdowns in Georgia, as well as the implicit endorsement of far-right hostility against LGBTQ+ activists (Human Rights Watch, 2024b).
4. *Readiness to Curtain Civil Liberties*: Authoritarian leaders frequently restrict free speech, press, and assembly. Georgia's suppression of independent media outlets and the passage of laws restricting civil society activities reveal a purposeful attempt to undermine civic freedoms (Reporters Without Borders, 2024a).

This study applies Levitsky and Ziblatt's methodology to carefully analyze the mechanisms of democratic backsliding in Georgia, looking at how the legislative and political actions of the Georgian Dream match up with authoritarian traits. For example, the Foreign Influence Law is a legal tool that undermines civil society, whilst vilifying opposition leaders is consistent with efforts to delegitimize political opponents. This approach identifies the internal factors that contribute to democratic deterioration and puts Georgia's experience in the context of the global trend of declining democracies.

**Broader Scholarly Context.** While Levitsky and Ziblatt's paradigm is a powerful tool for understanding democratic backsliding, it is supplemented by other scholarly viewpoints that provide more nuanced insights into the matter. Bermeo (2016) divides backsliding into three categories: promissory coups, executive aggrandizement, and strategic electoral manipulation, noting that modern democratic erosion frequently occurs through juridical procedures rather than overt authoritarian takeovers. Similarly, Ginsburg and Huq (2018) claim that democratic institutions' endurance is dependent on the strength of constitutional safeguards and the political commitment to sustain them.

In the context of post-Soviet republics, Way (2015) emphasizes the concept of competitive authoritarianism, in which formal democratic institutions exist but are consistently undercut by incumbents by manipulation and force. This approach is especially pertinent in Georgia, where the appearance of democratic processes frequently conceals deeper authoritarian tendencies. For instance, Georgia's electoral manipulation and use of state resources to favor incumbents is similar to behaviors reported in Hungary and Poland, where democratic backsliding has followed a comparable trajectory (Grzymała-Busse, 2019).

Furthermore, Ozan Varol's (2015) idea of stealth authoritarianism emphasizes how legal means and institutions are used to consolidate power while retaining a facade of democratic legitimacy. Georgia's Foreign Influence Law highlights this matter, as it reportedly encourages transparency while suppressing opposition and controlling civil society. This is similar to strategies used in Russia's Foreign Agent Law, which targets NGOs and the media under the pretense of combating foreign involvement (Subhashree, 2023).

### **Historical and Global Perspectives on Democratic Transitions and Backsliding.**

These frameworks offer insights into democratic erosion, but understanding Georgia's experience requires a broader perspective that incorporates historical and geopolitical contexts. The post-Cold War era saw the rise of theories like Samuel P. Huntington's "Third Wave of Democratization" (1991) and Francis Fukuyama's "End of History" (1992), which predicted that liberal democracy and capitalism would become universally dominant. Huntington's theory emphasizes the importance of factors like legitimacy crises in authoritarian regimes, economic development, and international pressure for democratic governance. However, Georgia's political development has not followed this predicted path, calling into question these assumptions.

Initially viewed as a potential post-Soviet democratic success story, Georgia's path has been plagued with internal disputes, civil wars, and governance issues. Its proximity to Armenia and Azerbaijan, combined with its own internal struggles, highlights the vulnerability of democratic transitions in historically and geopolitically volatile regions. Despite the hopeful expectations of the 1990s, Georgia's experience demonstrates that democratization is not linear or assured. This departure from the expected course of the Third Wave highlights the limitations of universalist democratization theories.

Francis Fukuyama's 1992 "End of History" theory suggested that liberal democracy had become the final form of human governance, leading to a period of political stability and ideological unity. However, democratic movements in Georgia and other post-Soviet states

challenge the idea that history has a predetermined outcome. The ongoing presence of authoritarian tendencies, electoral manipulation, and civil rights suppression in Georgia shows the difficulties of establishing a stable democracy, as well as the lasting impact of historical, cultural, and geopolitical factors. Georgia's reversal of democratic progress is an early sign that Fukuyama's thesis is flawed, proving that the global shift toward liberal democracy is not a certainty.

Ikenberry's (2011) study examines the international liberal order, highlighting the external factors that contribute to democratic backsliding. As Ikenberry (2011) notes, the post-World War II liberal democratic system, built on institutions that promote democracy, free markets, and international cooperation, is facing increased pressure from both domestic disillusionment and external authoritarian challenges. Georgia's democratic decline mirrors a larger trend, where the weakening of liberal norms and the rise of authoritarian influences, especially from Russia, exacerbate internal governance problems. The declining influence of Western institutions and the European Union in promoting democratic reforms in Georgia shows how global changes in the liberal order affect democratic development at the national level.

By examining Georgia's democratic decline through the lens of these theoretical frameworks, this study offers a comprehensive analysis of the structural and agency-driven factors that erode democratic standards. The integration of varied scholarly perspectives provides a nuanced understanding of Georgia's political evolution.

### ***2.2.2. Foreign Influence Law***

Foreign influence laws, also called "foreign agent" laws, promote transparency by revealing the activities of individuals and organizations that act on behalf of foreign entities within a host country. The laws' main purpose is to inform governments and the public about foreign efforts to influence domestic policies, public opinion, and political processes. By

requiring openness about these activities, the laws help protect national sovereignty and security (Human Rights Watch, 2024c).

The concept of foreign influence legislation has its roots in the early 20th century. In 1938, the United States enacted the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) in response to concerns about Nazi propaganda efforts before World War II. Under FARA, individuals and entities engaged in political or advocacy work on behalf of foreign principals must register with the Department of Justice. This registration requires them to disclose their relationships, activities, and financial transactions (U.S. Department of Justice, n.d.). By doing so, FARA aims to promote transparency about foreign influence in the United States, enabling the government and the public to identify the source of information intended to shape American public opinion, policy, and laws.

In recent years, numerous countries have either implemented or suggested foreign agent laws, frequently citing the necessity to safeguard national security and avert external interference in their internal matters. However, the way these laws are executed and enforced differs greatly among various jurisdictions. In certain instances, such regulations have faced criticism for potentially being employed to stifle dissent and restrict the functions of civil society groups. For example, Russia's 2012 "foreign agent" law mandates that non-profit organizations receiving foreign funding and participating in "political activity" register as "foreign agents," a label that carries adverse implications and has been utilized to undermine and dismantle independent organizations and media outlets (Human Rights Watch, 2024c). The roots of these laws frequently lie in historical circumstances where authorities saw a necessity to manage foreign influence inside their territories. Although the declared aim of these laws is to improve transparency and safeguard national interests, their implementation can differ significantly, with

certain governments utilizing them as a means to stifle political dissent and restrict the functioning of civil society.

In recent years, Georgia has also enacted laws that closely resemble Russia's stringent restrictions on civil society, particularly aimed at non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and independent media. The "Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence," which was passed in 2024, requires that any organization receiving over 20% of its funding from foreign entities must register as an organization "serving the interests of a foreign power" (OSCE, 2024a). This change has significant consequences for Georgia's civil society and necessitates a thorough analysis of its origins, comparisons with Russian legislation, and differences from the United States' Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA).

Georgia's foreign influence law is strikingly similar to Russia's "foreign agent" statute, passed in 2012. Russian legislation requires NGOs that receive foreign funds and engage in "political activity" to register as "foreign agents," a phrase with negative connotations and connotes espionage (Freedom House, n.d.). This legislation has helped to repress dissent and control civil society in Russia, resulting in the discrediting and dissolution of independent groups and media outlets (International Press Institute, 2022).

While proponents of Georgia's bill have drawn parallels with the FARA in the United States, they have distinct differences. FARA requires individuals and corporations acting on behalf of foreign principals in a political or quasi-political role to disclose their affiliation and activities to the US Department of Justice. But registration isn't required solely due to foreign funding - it's necessary when a foreign principal directs or controls an individual's or organization's political activities (Civil Georgia, 2024a).

Under Georgia law, a group that receives foreign donations is viewed as a foreign agent, regardless of its goals. This means that organizations working solely to benefit Georgians may still be stigmatized (Civil Georgia, 2024a). In contrast to FARA, Georgia's law does not offer exemptions for specific organizations or activities, including those funded by governments, humanitarian groups, or academic institutions (Foreign Policy Centre, 2024).

Georgia's foreign influence law poses a major challenge to the country's civil society. The law, which requires groups to register as agents of foreign powers, undermines trust in non-governmental organizations and independent media, portraying them as serving foreign interests rather than promoting democratic values and human rights. The law's effect on media freedom is especially concerning. Independent media outlets relying on foreign funding may need to close or change their coverage to avoid government monitoring. This loss of media independence deprives the public of access to diverse information and weakens investigative journalism, which is essential for keeping those in power accountable.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Justice is authorized by law to monitor and investigate organizations due to alleged foreign connections, resulting in self-censorship and a decline in civic participation (European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, 2024a). The ambiguity surrounding what constitutes "foreign influence" creates an uncertain climate, causing NGOs to hesitate to engage in legitimate activities that may be perceived as political or oppositional.

International organizations have criticized these foreign agent restrictions for violating freedom of association and discriminating against non-profit organizations and the media. The United Nations Human Rights Committee and the European Court of Human Rights have determined that such laws contravene fundamental human rights and are incompatible with democratic values (Human Rights Watch, 2024c).

In conclusion, Georgia's foreign influence law represents a significant step towards authoritarianism, mirroring Russian strategies for suppressing civil society and criticism. The law's roots and parallels with Russian legislation expose a disturbing pattern of democratic backsliding in the region. Its implications for media freedom, NGO operations, and public dissent put democratic ideals at risk and erode Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration goals.

### ***2.2.3. Public Discontent and Protest Movements***

The passing of Georgia's "Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence" in May 2024 sparked widespread public demonstrations, which were met with heavy official violence. Even though protests are not a new concept in Georgia, it is necessary to examine the protest movements that began both in May 2024 and November 2024 as they have been ongoing for nearly three months as of February 2025, and the techniques used by the government to quell them are brutal. This section gives a detailed conceptual and analytical framework for understanding the state's coercive methods against protestors, including violence, fines, and arrests, as well as an examination of the ramifications for civil liberties and democratic values.

The relationship between state repression and protest movements is an important topic of research in political sociology. The "Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence" requires organizations that receive more than 20% of their money from foreign sources to register as "agents of foreign influence," which many view as a tactic for suppressing civil society and independent media (Human Rights Watch, 2024a). This act has sparked large-scale protests across Georgia, with demonstrators voicing concerns about the erosion of democratic rights and the country's shift in geopolitical orientation.

Georgian authorities used a variety of oppressive techniques in reaction to the protests. Law enforcement has used excessive force, including the use of water cannons, tear gas, and

rubber bullets, against mostly nonviolent protesters. According to reports, hundreds of people have been arbitrarily arrested, and detainees are frequently subjected to physical violence and denied fair trial rights (Amnesty International, 2024a). Such tactics are part of a broader attempt to discourage dissent by imposing high personal costs on participants.

The "Law of Coercive Responsiveness" states that governments, particularly those with authoritarian inclinations, are more likely to use coercion in reaction to challenges to their power. This strategy seeks to repress dissent and discourage future mobilization by raising the perceived costs of participating in protest actions. In Georgia, the government's use of water cannons, tear gas, and rubber bullets against mostly nonviolent protesters shows this coercive tactic. Such techniques are meant to increase the immediate physical and psychological costs for demonstrators, discouraging future participation and deterring potential protesters. This is consistent with findings that governmental coercion is frequently used to maintain political order in the face of protest (Davenport, 2007).

Contrary to expectations, empirical research suggests that repression may have the opposite effect, motivating more resistance. According to the "Backfire Effect" idea, when official repression is regarded as unjust or disproportionate, it can evoke sympathy for demonstrators, broaden support for the cause, and increase mobilization efforts. The conspicuous and violent suppression of peaceful demonstrators in Georgia has sparked international outrage and may have increased local opposition to the government's actions. This tendency arises when oppressive activities are viewed as unjust, which can lead to increased support for the movement and additional mobilization (Hess & Martin, 2006).

The Georgian government's oppressive policies have far-reaching consequences for civil society and the larger democratic landscape. The stigmatization and legal harassment of

non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and independent media weaken the plurality required for a functioning democracy. Furthermore, the degradation of judicial independence and the normalization of police brutality foster an environment of fear and self-censorship, suffocating public debate and dissent. The international community's response is essential in determining the course of such domestic disputes. Sustained diplomatic pressure, combined with backing for civil society actors, can serve as a check on authoritarian behaviors. In the case of Georgia, worldwide activism for the protection of human rights and democratic standards is critical to preventing further regression and bolstering the resilience of its civil society.

#### ***2.2.4. Western Involvement in Georgia: Strategic Necessity, Inconsistencies, and Russian Counteraction***

Western engagement in Georgia has long been considered crucial for the country's democratic consolidation, economic modernization, and alignment with the Euro-Atlantic realm. However, this cooperation has faced obstacles due to inconsistencies, ambiguities in policy, and the failure to counterbalance Russia's ongoing hybrid warfare strategy. The West's policy, which has veered between aggressive involvement and deliberate disengagement, has created vulnerabilities that the Kremlin has continually exploited. This section explores the strategic significance of Western assistance, the constraints on its engagement, and how Russian influence has evolved in response to these dynamics.

Since the early 2000s, Western institutions have regarded Georgia as a critical state in the post-Soviet sphere, both in terms of democratic transition and regional security. The United States and the European Union (EU) have offered significant financial, technical, and diplomatic support, with a focus on democratic reforms, governance improvements, and military cooperation. Between 1992 and 2023, the United States alone provided approximately \$6 billion

in assistance to Georgia, with significant sections aimed at enhancing civil society, judicial independence, and military capabilities (U.S. Department of State, 2023). The EU attempted to anchor Georgia inside the European normative order with mechanisms such as the Eastern Partnership and the Association Agreement, providing incentives for reforms in exchange for greater economic and political relations (European Commission, 2024).

Despite these efforts, the EU's relationship with Georgia has frequently been influenced by broader geopolitical concerns rather than a strong commitment to democratic consolidation. While Georgia has met several technical requirements for accession discussions, political barriers and strategic hesitations have put the country in limbo. The EU's 2024 decision to halt accession talks due to Georgia's democratic backsliding was a direct response to domestic authoritarian trends, but it also weakened pro-European factions within the country, allowing anti-Western narratives to gain traction (European Parliament, 2024a).

Western involvement has been plagued by a major flaw: its reactive nature. Rather than taking proactive steps to influence the political situation in Georgia, the EU and NATO have consistently reacted to crises as they emerge. For example, the 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit promised Georgia future membership, but it did not provide a detailed plan, leaving the country exposed to Russian invasion (Asmus, 2010). Likewise, although the EU and the US condemned the 2024 Foreign Influence Law and the subsequent crackdown on civil society, their punitive actions, including visa restrictions for Georgian officials, did not exert sufficient pressure on the ruling elite (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024).

Russia's strategy in Georgia has been complex, utilizing military, economic, and soft power techniques to undermine the country's pro-Western trajectory. The 2008 war demonstrated Russia's willingness to use force to block Georgia's NATO aspirations, but the following actions have been more subtle, depending on hybrid warfare and political infiltration. Information warfare has proven to be one of Russia's most successful tools. Kremlin-backed media sources,

like as Sputnik and RT, have played a critical role in spreading narratives that portray Western institutions as untrustworthy and emphasize Europe's perceived economic and moral deterioration (Media Diversity Institute, 2024). These efforts have been bolstered by local pro-Russian political actors, especially Georgian Dream party factions, which have used Kremlin-style rhetoric to justify limitations on civil society and independent media. The passage of the "foreign agents" law in 2024, which was directly modeled after Russia's 2012 legislation, was a planned measure to repress opposition while retaining a veneer of legal legality (RevDem, 2024).

Despite Georgia's formal economic integration with the EU, Russia maintained economic clout over the country. In 2023, Russia was Georgia's second-largest commercial partner, accounting for roughly 14% of total exports (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2024). The Kremlin has used trade restrictions, energy dependence, and financial incentives to compel Georgia into making policy concessions. The halting of the EU accession process in 2024 empowered Moscow, which has subsequently expanded its diplomatic interaction with Georgian officials while also supporting domestic players that confront the pro-Western opposition.

Russia has also used coercive diplomacy to target major Georgian political personalities with threats and pressure techniques. The 2025 parliamentary crisis, in which opposition leaders were jailed in large numbers, followed a playbook similar to Russian domestic repression, in which legal methods are used to neutralize political threats (Agence France-Presse, 2025). The development of "Titushkebi" (hired thugs) in anti-government protests, which mirrors such groups utilized in Ukraine prior to the 2014 Euromaidan, indicates an increasing dependence on extrajudicial violence to repress dissent (Reuters, 2025a).

The literature on Georgia's democratic history highlights a complex interaction between domestic governance issues and foreign geopolitical pressures. Western intervention has contributed to shaping Georgia's institutional development, yet it has often neglected to tackle domestic democratic backsliding and Russian hybrid warfare. The country's desire for Euro-Atlantic integration has frequently clashed with Moscow's geopolitical goals, resulting in

an unstable and contentious political environment. The democratic backsliding seen in recent years highlights the limitations of external democracy promotion, especially when ruling elites prioritize regime survival over democratic obligations. At the same time, the reappearance of authoritarian behaviors, such as protest suppression and the passage of restrictive laws, brings Georgia closer to the illiberal governance patterns observed in other post-Soviet states. This analysis emphasizes the need for a better understanding of how foreign and internal pressures combine to shape Georgia's political destiny, as the country remains a critical battleground in the larger conflict between democratic and authoritarian forces.

## **Chapter III: Methodology**

The methodology chapter describes the research design, data collection methods, and analytical tools used to investigate Georgia's Foreign Influence Law and its broader implications for public discontent and European integration. This study adopts a qualitative research design, using interviews to provide a thorough human rights analysis and document analysis as secondary data. This study uses an interdisciplinary approach to critically analyze the interaction of legal frameworks, political dynamics, and civic involvement in the context of democratic backsliding.

### **3.1. Research Design**

This study adopts a qualitative research design to investigate the consequences of Georgia's Foreign Influence Law, government limits on civic involvement, and their overall impact on democracy and European integration. The qualitative approach is well-suited to this topic, as it facilitates an in-depth examination of political processes, social movements, and institutional responses through the lens of human experiences and narratives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The primary data-gathering method used in the study was semi-structured interviews with people who are directly involved in or affected by these political changes, such as citizens, NGO representatives, journalists, legal experts, activists, and university students with relevant backgrounds. In addition to these interviews, secondary document analysis was carried out, reviewing legislative texts, official declarations, human rights reports, and international institutional assessments.

This methodological approach is based on the necessity to document both lived experiences and institutional contexts. While document analysis provides important background

information and context, it is frequently constrained by government bias, selective transparency, and the inability to capture current reactions (Bowen, 2009). As a result, interviews are the primary mechanism for providing real-time viewpoints on how these law changes affect civic space, human rights, and Georgia's EU integration chances.

This approach is consistent with previous research on authoritarian shifts and democratic backsliding, which indicates that legal frameworks alone cannot fully explain political transformations; first-hand accounts and stakeholder narratives are required to understand the nuances of power consolidation and resistance (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). By combining both sources, this study ensures a thorough, multifaceted analysis while adhering to a qualitative, single-method framework with many data sources rather than a rigorous mixed-method approach.

### **3.2. Sampling**

Purposive and quota sampling were utilized in this study to collect data from a variety of individuals (Jensen, 1928). This non-probabilistic strategy is frequently utilized in qualitative research to get rich, specific insights rather than wide statistical generalizability (Patton, 2015).

The selection criteria aimed to attract a varied spectrum of participants, including civil society activists, journalists, legal academics, university students, and politically involved persons both inside and outside Georgia. The goal was to gather viewpoints from various backgrounds in order to gain a full understanding of the Foreign Influence Law's sociopolitical impact and broader democratic challenges.

To increase the sample's depth, a snowball sampling strategy was used, which allowed respondents to recommend other participants with relevant insights (Noy, 2008). This was especially effective for reaching out to people who are actively involved in advocacy, legal

defense, or government decision-making, guaranteeing a diverse yet targeted representation of opinions. The inclusion of respondents with diverse educational and professional backgrounds guaranteed that the survey gathered a wide range of perspectives, from professional evaluations to ordinary citizen experiences.

### ***3.2.1. Sociodemographics***

Sociodemographic information was gathered to contextualize participant viewpoints and provide a more comprehensive understanding of how personal traits influence political activity and perceptions of democracy. The variables evaluated were age, gender, education level, and workplace as an indirect measure of economic status. These elements are critical to qualitative research since they influence political engagement, resource access, and vulnerability to state repression (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

***Age.*** Age is a key factor in determining political opinions and involvement. Younger respondents frequently participate in digital activism, social media mobilization, and grassroots movements, yet older respondents provide historical context by commenting on previous democratic revolutions and authoritarian regressions (Norris, 2011). This study captures intergenerational perspectives on governmental authority, repression, and civic resistance by including participants of various ages.

***Gender.*** Gender is another important factor that influences experiences with governance, civic participation, and repression. Gender gaps in political participation persist worldwide, and Georgia is no exception (Waylen, 2013). This study investigates whether male and female respondents had varied experiences with state pressure, constraints, or possibilities for activism, as well as whether gender affects access to platforms for political speech.

***Education.*** Education level has a substantial impact on political awareness, civic engagement, and the ability to critically evaluate government programs. Individuals with postgraduate degrees frequently have superior political literacy, participate in policy conversations, and have greater access to legal and institutional information (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). As a result, the study investigates whether education connects with political agency and opposition to restrictive policies.

***Economic Standing.*** Economic status is another factor influencing political agency. However, simply questioning about the financial situation raises ethical difficulties. Instead, the study looked at individuals' professional backgrounds, acknowledging that occupational sectors frequently correspond with political alignment, access to resources, and vulnerability to governmental influence (Bourdieu, 1986). Understanding whether people work in civil society, academia, the media, or government organizations gives an indirect but significant measure of economic and professional status in the political environment.

By incorporating these sociodemographic characteristics, the study signifies that participants' viewpoints are studied within the larger societal frameworks that determine their involvement in democracy and resistance to authoritarian behaviors.

### **3.3. Data Collection**

#### ***3.3.1. Primary Data: Semi-Structured Interviews***

The primary data consists of semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of people who are affected by Georgia's Foreign Influence Law and broader democratic concerns. Interviews were performed using Zoom and Google Meet, which ensured accessibility and flexibility. All interviews were recorded, transcribed for accuracy, and then evaluated for

thematic trends. Interviewees were given the choice of selecting their chosen language, either English or Georgian, to express their opinions most comfortably.

Ethical considerations and anonymity rules were properly followed. Participants had the option of being identified by their full name and association, initials, workplace/education level, or remaining completely anonymous. Prior to each interview, respondents received an informed consent form from the University of Padova (Appendix A), which was distributed via Adobe. At the beginning of each interview, participants were reminded of their rights and the contents of the informed consent.

Table 1 gives an overview of the nine interview participants, including their preferred representation, age, and interview language:

**Table 1.**

*The demographic information of the interviewees.*

<b>Resp. Nr.</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Field</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Language</b>	<b>Location</b>
1	Natika Kantaria - Human Rights Advocate	34	F	Human Rights Advocate	M.A.	English	The U.S.
2	M.A. in Law and Diplomacy	22	M	Law and Diplomacy	M.A. (pursuing)	English	The U.S.
3	Saba Brachveli - Civil Society Foundation	31	M	Human Rights	Dual Masters	English	Georgia
4	A.K. - NGO	24	F	NGO	M.A.	English	The E.U.

<b>Resp. Nr.</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Field</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Language</b>	<b>Location</b>
	Representative						
5	K.P. - M.A. in Applied Social Psychology	27	F	Office Manager	M.A.	Georgian	Georgia
6	J.M. - Civil Society	58	F	Economics	B.A.	Georgian	Georgia
7	N.G. - Activist	39	F	Activism	Double M.A.	English	Georgia
8	Erekle Poladishvili - Independent Media	23	M	Independent Media	B.A. (pursuing)	English	Georgia
9	G.T. - Civil Society	54	M	N/A	High School	Georgian	Georgia
10	Z.M. - Sports Journalist	35	M	Sports Journalism	B.A.	Georgian	Georgia

**3.3.1.1. Qualitative Interview Question Categories.** The semi-structured interviews employed in this study were intended to investigate many dimensions of political attitudes, democratic backsliding, and civic participation in Georgia. To improve clarity and analytical depth, the questions were divided into the following themes: sociodemographic background, political engagement and media consumption, perception of democracy and governance, the foreign influence law and its implications, and public trust and the future of democracy in Georgia. This structure ensures a systematic analysis of individual experiences as well as bigger political tendencies.

*3.3.1.1.1. Sociodemographic Background.*

The following questions are designed to contextualize participant perspectives by identifying significant sociodemographic factors:

- How old are you?
- How do you identify your gender?
- What is the highest level of education you have completed/are pursuing?
- What is your current occupation or field of work?
- Are you currently residing in Georgia? If so, which city or region?

These questions were included in response to research revealing that age, gender, education, and socioeconomic level all influence political activity, access to information, and vulnerability to repression (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995). Given Georgia's ongoing democratic difficulties, studying how these factors influence attitudes toward government and civic participation is critical (Bermeo, 2016).

### *3.3.1.1.2. Political Engagement and Media Consumption.*

This section looks into how people engage with political information and public discourse:

- Can you tell me about your involvement in Georgian politics, civil society, or public life, and how it shapes your perspective on the current situation?
- Where do you usually get your news and political information (e.g., TV, independent media, social media, government sources, etc.)?

These questions aid in determining civic involvement and information access levels, both of which are important indications of democratic resilience (Norris, 2011). State control over media and public narratives can have a significant impact on political sentiments during periods of democratic backsliding (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

### *3.3.1.1.3. Perceptions of Democracy and Governance.*

These questions explore participants' perspectives on governance, institutional integrity, and democratic stability:

- How would you describe the state of democracy in Georgia today? Have things improved, stayed the same, or gotten worse in recent years?
- Do you think the current government follows the rules of the constitution and respects fair elections? Why or why not?
- How do you think the government views and treats political opponents and critics?
- Have you seen or heard of any cases where the government has ignored or allowed violence against political groups, activists, or protesters? What impact do you think this has had?

- Do you feel that freedom of speech, freedom of peaceful assembly (e.g., protest), and independent media are being restricted in Georgia? Can you give examples of where this might have happened?
- How much do you think outside influences, like Russia or the European Union, have shaped recent political decisions in Georgia?

These questions are consistent with previous research on authoritarian consolidation and democratic backsliding, notably in terms of government repression, the roles of foreign actors, electoral integrity, and civil freedoms (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Barneo, 2016).

#### *3.3.1.1.4. The Foreign Influence Law and Its Implications.*

- What are your thoughts on the Foreign Influence Law? What do you think the government's goal was in introducing it?
- What do you think are the implications of this law on civil society groups, independent media, or public discussions in Georgia?
- Do you think this law supports or goes against Georgia's efforts to join the European Union? Why?
- How would you describe the public's trust in the government before and after the Foreign Influence Law? Has trust increased, decreased, or stayed the same?
- How do you think the Foreign Influence Law affects the country's democracy? Why do you feel this way?

These questions examine perceptions of state rationale against public interpretation of restrictive legislation, using comparative studies on similar laws in different contexts (Venice Commission, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2023a).

#### *3.3.1.1.5. The Future of Democracy in Georgia.*

- What do you believe are the biggest challenges facing democracy in Georgia right now? Are these challenges coming from inside the country or from outside influences?
- What do you think should be done—by the government, civil society, and/or international organizations—to protect democracy and support Georgia’s integration with Western institutions like the EU?
- Is there anything else you would like to add that we have not yet discussed that might be relevant to this topic?

These questions investigate the public's opinion and faith in governance both of which are critical indications of democratic erosion (Norris, 2011).

#### **3.3.2. Secondary Data: Document Analysis**

In addition to the main interview data, document analysis was conducted to provide contextual background, validate the interview findings, and ensure methodological rigor. As a popular qualitative research method, document analysis examines texts to uncover patterns, meanings, and institutional narratives (Bowen, 2009). Its relevance was particularly significant in this study, which focuses on political and legal changes, since legislative texts, policy documents, and institutional reports offer valuable insights into government intentions, international responses, and civil society's interpretations.

The study analyzed the following documents:

- **Legislative and Policy Documents:** To better understand the legal rationale and rhetoric surrounding the legislation, official texts of Georgia's Foreign Influence Law, legislative records, government press releases, and official contacts from the ruling party were examined.

- International Reports and Assessments: External evaluations of Georgia's democratic trajectory were assessed using documents from Human Rights Watch (2023a), Freedom House (2023b), the Venice Commission (2023), and the European Commission's annual reports on Georgia's EU integration progress (2023b).
- Media coverage and civil society reports: Independent Georgian news sites (e.g., Civil.ge, OC Media, Netgazeti) and reports from Georgian and international NGOs shed light on civil society reactions, protests, and the overall political situation.
- Academic and policy literature: Scholarly writings and policy papers on democratic backsliding, authoritarian consolidation, and foreign influence legislation in comparable contexts were reviewed to contextualize Georgia's case within broader theoretical frameworks (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Barneo, 2016).

Incorporating secondary data enhanced the research's credibility, as it enabled triangulation – verifying information through multiple sources (Denzin, 2012). This approach validated the study's conclusions, ensuring that findings from interviews were substantiated by documentary evidence and minimizing the risk of bias or reliance on individual accounts.

### **Data Analysis and Triangulation**

To examine the interview data, a thematic analysis approach was employed, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) methodology. The method included:

1. **Transcription and Familiarization:** Interviews were transcribed and evaluated several times for accuracy and thematic consistency.
2. **Initial Coding:** Key themes were detected using MAXQDA software, which looked for repeating words, phrases, and conceptual overlaps.
3. **Thematic Development:** The coded data was organized into overarching topics

4. Interpretation and synthesis: Themes were cross-referenced with secondary data sources, such as legislative papers, media stories, and foreign assessments, to ensure a strong triangulated analysis (Bowen, 2009).

For document analysis, a content analysis approach was utilized. This combination of thematic and content analysis enabled a careful assessment of how legislative changes and government actions fit into larger patterns of democratic regression. The study uses methodological triangulation by combining primary interview data with document analysis, ensuring the credibility and dependability of the findings (Patton, 1999).

### **3.4. Theoretical Framework: Democratic Backsliding**

This study employs the democratic backsliding framework proposed in Levitsky and Ziblatt's *How Democracies Die* (2018). The authors cite four major signs of democratic erosion:

- Rejection of democratic norms (such as constitutional infractions and electoral manipulation).
- Denial of legitimacy to political opponents (for example, identifying them as foreign agents or traitors).
- Tolerating or encouraging violence (for example, disregarding attacks on activists and demonstrators).
- Civil rights restrictions (for example, media censorship and a crackdown on non-governmental organizations).

This study assesses Georgia's government's democratic decline by analyzing interview responses and secondary data within this framework, focusing on the effects of the Foreign Influence Law on civic space and EU integration efforts.

## Chapter IV: Results

### 4.1. Sociodemographic Analysis

In qualitative research, demographic factors such as age, gender, education level, and residency can have a major impact on people's opinions of political events and policies (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The interviewees in this study came from a variety of demographic backgrounds, providing a nuanced perspective of how Georgia's Foreign Influence Law is seen by different socioeconomic groups. Despite these variations, a common thread emerged: all participants, regardless of demographic background, showed significant hostility to the law and the current government's authoritarian tendencies.

#### 4.1.1. Age-Based Analysis

Age was found to be a key factor in how respondents expressed their opinions of the administration and their views on civic engagement. Younger respondents (22-31 years old) were most involved in protests and civic society. They typically mentioned social media as their primary source of political information and expressed dissatisfaction with the government's crackdown on protests and independent journalism. Their comments showed a strong pro-EU position, highlighting that the Foreign Influence Law is a blatant attack on democracy. This is consistent with research showing that younger generations are more inclined to adopt democratic ideas and civic involvement in transitional democracies (Inglehart, 2018).

Middle-aged respondents (34-39 years old) took a more strategic perspective on political trends. Rather than focusing exclusively on immediate government actions, they addressed long-term democratic backsliding and institutional degradation. The majority voiced dismay with the lack of international intervention, which reflects worries about global democratic responsibility (Levitsky & Way, 2020).

Older respondents (54-58 years old) identified parallels between present government policies and earlier authoritarian regimes in Georgia. Unlike younger participants, they did not directly join in protests but instead expressed significant support for civic movements. Their criticisms of the administration were linked to concerns about economic insecurity, implying that their political participation is impacted by broader social and financial issues (Howard, 2003).

#### ***4.1.2. Gender-Based Analysis***

Gender also influenced attitudes, notably the portrayal of government persecution and civil liberties. Female respondents tended to focus on human rights breaches and the emotional impact of government policy. They regularly mentioned police brutality, repression of free speech, and personal safety concerns. This conclusion is consistent with research showing that women in authoritarian circumstances frequently use a human rights-based lens to critique political oppression (Tripp, 2015).

Male respondents, on the other hand, were more critical of institutions. They talked about legal frameworks, constitutional infractions, and political corruption, demonstrating a structural and policy-oriented perspective. This distinction implies that, whereas women frame the problem in terms of lived experiences, men tend to examine it from a structural governance standpoint (Waylen, 2007).

#### ***4.1.3. Education-Based Analysis***

Participants' educational backgrounds influenced how they expressed their worries about the Foreign Influence Law and democratic government. Respondents with a Master's degree or higher indicated extensive knowledge of international law and governance. They regularly referred to EU legal frameworks, constitutional principles, and human rights conventions, emphasizing how the Foreign Influence Law violates democratic standards. Their views were

frequently phrased in the context of a comparative comparison of other nations undergoing democratic decline, such as Hungary and Russia (Kelemen, 2020).

Participants who had a Bachelor's degree or less were more concerned with practical, everyday issues. They talked about economic hardship, job insecurity, and direct government persecution, including police assault and fines for protesters. This group's replies are consistent with research indicating that people with less formal education may engage in political debate through direct lived experiences rather than academic frameworks (Dahl, 1998). This shows that highly educated individuals take a theoretical and legal perspective, whereas those with less formal education concentrate on the practical effects of government activities.

#### ***4.1.4. Location-Based Analysis***

The location of respondents had a substantial impact on their perceptions of government actions, EU integration, and civic involvement. Respondents from Georgia provided more emotionally charged feedback. They regularly mentioned fear, intimidation, and direct experiences with repression. Many people were frustrated with Western inactivity, claiming that the EU and the US should take harsher action against the Georgian government. This is consistent with findings showing citizens living under authoritarian administrations have heightened political urgency and emotional investment in civic movements (Diamond, 2021).

Respondents who lived overseas (EU, US) provided a more distanced, comparative viewpoint. While they remained critical of the administration, their primary focus was on international responsibility, democratic deterioration, and broader geopolitical ramifications. They were very vociferous on how the EU should handle Georgia's political crisis, reflecting a global advocacy approach (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). This dichotomy emphasizes how firsthand

experiences with government repression form a more immediate and visceral response, whereas those overseas engage in a deliberate, analytical critique of democratic backsliding.

#### ***4.1.5. Occupation-Based Analysis***

##### **Civil society representatives and NGO workers (Respondents 1, 3, 4, and 6).**

Individuals working in civil society and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) saw the law as a direct attack on their freedom to function. They cited government harassment, financial restrictions, and heightened legal impediments, arguing that these tactics undermine Georgia's democratic foundation and civil liberties. Many pointed to similar regulations in Russia, saying that Georgia was adopting the Kremlin's totalitarian playbook.

**Journalists and Media Professionals (responses 8, 10).** Journalists expressed great worry about the law's impact on press freedom, stressing that independent media already faces significant financial and legal restraints. They described an increase in government intervention, reporter harassment, and state-aligned media dominance. These concerns are consistent with global research on media repression in hybrid regimes, in which governments exploit legal frameworks to muzzle critical voices (Reporters Without Borders, 2023).

**The Activist (Respondent 7).** The activist expressed their objections in highly emotive and urgent terms, alleging police violence, penalties, and government surveillance as direct results of their efforts. Unlike other groups, the activist prioritized personal safety and physical intimidation over legal or institutional concerns. This is consistent with research indicating that activists in semi-authoritarian nations risk more personal dangers than those working in established civil society organizations (Howard, 2003).

**Academics and Researchers (Respondents 2, 5).** Academics and researchers saw the bill through a broader theoretical lens, assessing it in the context of Georgia's democratic

backsliding and international political tendencies. They cited comparative examples from Eastern Europe, specifically Hungary and Poland, where similar legislation was utilized to strengthen state power and limit academic independence (Kelemen, 2020).

**The General Citizen (Respondent 9).** A participant who was not linked with formal institutions expressed raw displeasure with the administration but lacked the legal or theoretical context employed by experts. Instead, they highlighted economic suffering, distrust in institutions, and direct repression of demonstrators. Their replies resemble the experiences of working-class and unemployed individuals in authoritarian nations, where economic hardship and governmental oppression exacerbate political unrest (Dahl, 1998).

#### ***4.1.6. Unanimous themes***

Despite the demographic variations mentioned above, a broad consensus emerged across all respondents:

1. The Foreign Influence Law is considered anti-democratic and detrimental to civil society. Every participant, regardless of their background, saw the bill as a tool for suppressing independent voices, silencing criticism, and impeding Georgia's EU integration.
2. The government is usually seen as authoritarian. Participants regularly denounced the Georgian Dream party for consolidating power, manipulating elections, curtailing civil freedoms, and suppressing opposition in the way of Russia.
3. Russia is criticized for exerting significant external influence. While respondents accepted that Western institutions had not provided adequate support, the prevalent narrative was that Russia's influence over the Georgian government was undermining democracy.

4. EU integration is regarded as the only possible road forward. All attendees voiced hope for a European future, pointing out that the Foreign Influence Law is incompatible with EU membership standards.

These shared concerns show that, despite demographic variations, all participants reject the law and government practices.

## **4.2. Thematic Analysis**

This part provides a detailed thematic and code analysis of the interview data, organized according to the themes discussed in the methodology section. The research employs Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step technique, which identifies repeating patterns within participant replies while using actual, direct quotes. The primary themes are Political Engagement and Media Consumption, Perceptions of Democracy and Governance, The Foreign Influence Law and Its Implications, and Georgia's Democratic Future. The findings are contextualized within the current literature on democratic backsliding, civil society repression, and media control (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Norris, 2011).

### ***4.2.1. Political Engagement and Media Consumption***

This theme investigates people's involvement in politics, civil society, and sources of political knowledge.

**4.2.1.1. Levels of Political Engagement.** The majority of respondents claimed active participation in political conversations, protests, and civil society organizations. Some people, while not directly involved in protests, enthusiastically supported those who did.

**Indirect Support for Protests:** Respondent 6 (J.M., 58, F, Civil Society) recognized her indirect participation:

*“I may not be able to attend protests myself, but I fully stand with the people who do, and I hope they succeed in changing things for the better.”*

**Direct Activism:** Some responders routinely attended protests. Respondent 7 (N.G., 39, F, Activist) reported:

*“have been involved in protests and working with NGOs to counteract government overreach.”*

Similarly, Respondent 10 (Z.M., 35, M, Sports Journalist) stated:

*“I’ve always been against this government, but in the last few years, I’ve become more actively engaged in protests. I attend demonstrations, speak out against government overreach, and use my platform as a journalist to inform people about what’s happening.”*

**Civil Society and Media Involvement:** Some respondents had a professional stake in the activity, such as Respondent 3 (Saba Brachveli., 31, M, Civil Society Foundation), who stated:

*“We finance a lot of activities within the civil society sector. We also help new and up-and-coming activists start working.”*

Several respondents, including Respondent 8 (Erekle Poladishvili., 23, M, Independent Media), described their position as bridging gaps between diverse stakeholders:

*“I meet government officials, ruling party leaders, opposition figures, civil society representatives, and fellow journalists. My primary role is to ensure that information flows between these groups...I see this as my duty as a journalist.”*

This is consistent with research on civic resistance and democratic backsliding, which found that both active and passive engagement contributes to political mobilization (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015).

**4.2.1.2. Sources of Political Information.** All respondents used alternative media, with a clear preference for NGO reports, and independent and social media sources, and emphasized the lack of trust in state-run television.

**Social Media as a Primary Source:** Younger respondents, particularly journalists and activists, preferred social media platforms like Facebook, Telegram, and YouTube as primary sources of information. Respondent 10 (Z.M., 35, M, Sports Journalist) stated:

*“Mostly social media and independent media sources. Government-controlled TV is just propaganda. I follow opposition politicians, independent journalists, and NGOs that provide real-time updates.”*

Similarly, Respondent 8 (E.P., 23, M, Independent Media) echoed this by saying:

*“I no longer watch TV as much as I used to. Nowadays, I primarily get my information from social media—platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and sometimes Telegram. These are my main sources.”*

**Independent Journalism and NGO Reports:** Civil society activists and NGO representatives placed a stronger emphasis on structured reports and independent journalism. Respondent 4 (A.K., 24, F, NGO Representative) reported:

*“I rely on a combination of independent media, TV, international news, and reports from civil society organizations.”*

**Government Misinformation and Propaganda:** Multiple participants mentioned the government's attempts to sway public opinion through mainstream media. Respondent 1 (Natika Kantaria, 34, female, human rights advocate) stated:

*“The government skillfully manipulates public opinion through misinformation and propaganda, using several media outlets to spread disinformation.”*

This validates the results of Freedom House (2023b) and Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), who suggest that media control is a key tool in democratic disintegration.

#### **4.2.2. Perceptions of Democracy and Governance**

This section looks at respondents' perceptions of Georgia's democratic integrity, government behavior, and the role of external factors in affecting political results.

**4.2.2.1. Decline in Democratic Standards.** All respondents agreed that Georgia's democracy has deteriorated, with rising authoritarianism, persecution of opposition, and electoral manipulation.

**Authoritarian Shift:** Respondent 3 (Saba Brachveli, 31, M, Civil Society Foundation) stated:

*“In recent years, we have gone from a mid-level democracy to, I don't know, I would say partial authoritarianism. We might be seeing a full authoritarian regime very soon—if not already.”*

Respondent 1 (Natika Kantaria, 34, F, Human Rights Advocate) also stated:

*“This is a fully authoritarian regime that we must not ignore.”*

All of the study participants disagreed with the 2024 elections and claimed that the current government manipulated the results and that the elections were illegitimate. For example, Respondent 2 (M.A. in Law and Diplomacy, 22, M) claims:

*“I do not think that the current government follows the Constitution, even though they amended it at some point. I also do not think that elections in Georgia are fair.”*

**Suppression of Opposition:** All of the participants stated that the current government is violent and trying to silence its opposition. They have also identified harassment of political

opponents as a crucial indicator of diminishing democracy. Respondent 7 (N.G., 39, female, activist) stated:

*“They view us as enemies. They use smear campaigns, arrests, and even violence to silence critics....a journalist was struck on the head live on air and had their skull fractured. I watched live as the police dragged the unconscious journalist to the police vehicle. Also, during a raid at midnight, a journalist was attacked by a riot police officer dressed in black. Excessive use of force mostly occurred when the number of citizens was decreasing, or when MPs were in parliament and needed to leave the area.”*

**State Violence Against Protesters:** All of the respondents have also stated that the government is violent against the protesters in the country while most of them also provided firsthand accounts of police brutality. For example, respondent 3 (Saba Brachveli, 31, M, Civil Society Foundation) stated:

*“During the first Russian law in 2023 protests. Then later, in the spring of 2024 protests against the reintroduction of Russian law. Now, after the November 28 protest, many people have been arrested. Previously, when Salome Zourabichvili was the President, at least these persons had a glimmer of hope that after nine months of pretrial detention, they would be pardoned by the President. Now, that is impossible, and they remain in prison.”*

These findings are consistent with Barneo (2016) and Levitsky & Ziblatt (2018), who argue that authoritarian administrations frequently consolidate power by undermining judicial independence, suppressing protests, and manipulating elections.

**4.2.2.2. Foreign Influence: Russia vs. The West.** Participants debated the importance of foreign influence in molding Georgia's political scene. Every single respondent saw Russia as having a negative effect, accusing it of encouraging authoritarian tendencies and stifling

Georgia's democratic progress. However, perspectives differed on whether Russia was the fundamental cause of Georgia's democratic downfall or whether the Georgian government carried greater blame.

***Russia: The Driving Force Behind Georgia's Democratic Backsliding?*** Most participants felt that Russia's influence was negative and deliberate, intending to weaken Georgia's democratic institutions and keep the country in its geopolitical orbit. Respondent 10 (Z.M., 35, M, Sports Journalist) was extremely vocal:

*“Russia has a massive influence, whether directly or through people like Ivanishvili.”*

Similarly, Respondent 1 (Natika Kantaria, 34, F, Human Rights Advocate) stated:

*“Russia's influence on Georgia's government is undeniable.”*

Many cited pro-Kremlin language, disinformation, and the Foreign Influence Law as evident signs of Russian-style administration coming into Georgia. Respondent 3 (Saba Brachveli, 31, M, Civil Society Foundation) reported:

*“Russia was the only country to publicly support and congratulate the Georgian government for introducing and adopting this law. In contrast, every strategic partner and traditional ally of Georgia has opposed it, urging the government to reconsider or abandon it altogether.”*

These worries are consistent with research into Russia's use of soft power and legal repression to weaken democratic institutions in post-Soviet states (Silitski, 2010).

***Georgia's Government: A Bigger Threat Than Russia?*** Some respondents, although acknowledging Russia's negative effect, put more blame on the Georgian government. These participants contended that the ruling party was making deliberate, self-serving actions to

undermine democracy and that Russia was simply a convenient scapegoat. For example, respondent 5 (K.P., 27, F, M.A. in Applied Social Psychology) stated:

*“I think the initiative of introduction or adoption of such laws is more on the Georgian government.”*

Similarly, respondent 6 (J.M., 58, F, Civil Society) responded to the question on the influence of foreign nations such as Russia:

*“it is on the government. The door usually breaks from the inside and that is what is happening here.”*

This internal-external argument reflects a larger pattern in post-Soviet republics, where authoritarian rulers justify harsh actions by blaming or uniting with international adversaries (Diamond, 2019).

**4.2.2.3. Criticism of the EU: Missed Opportunities and Weak Responses.** While respondents largely saw the EU as a good factor, some opposed its attitude toward Georgia, claiming that Western leaders had not done enough to combat democratic backsliding.

Respondent 1 (Natika Kantaria, 34, F, Human Rights Advocate) stated:

*“The European Union’s strategy is, in my opinion, weak. The narratives surrounding EU membership are not well-communicated to the Georgian public.”*

Some believed that the EU was too late to respond to Georgia's authoritarian trend, allowing the government to consolidate power without major consequences. These complaints are consistent with research on the EU's challenges in upholding democratic principles among prospective member states (European Commission, 2023a).

### **4.2.3. The Foreign Influence Law and Its Implications**

All respondents overwhelmingly criticized the Foreign Influence Law, seeing it as a direct attack on civil society, independent media, and democratic liberties. The bill has consistently been presented as a tool for restricting criticism rather than an attempt to increase transparency, as the administration maintains.

**4.2.3.1. Motivations Behind the Law.** Respondents overwhelmingly believed that the government's primary goal in enacting the law was to stifle opposition and consolidate power. Many noticed parallels with Russia's 2012 "Foreign Agent Law," which was also used to target NGOs and media. Respondent 2 (M.A. in Law and Diplomacy, 22, M) claimed the following:

*“This law directly undermines democracy. It is a copy-paste version of Russian legislation designed to suppress opposition, NGOs, and independent media.”*

Similarly, respondent 9 (G.T., 54, M, Civil Society) stated:

*“It’s a Russian-style law meant to destroy civil society and silence critics. The government wants to control everything, and this law gives them another way to attack NGOs and independent media. It’s not about transparency; it’s about power.”*

While several respondents admitted that laws governing foreign influence exist in democratic countries, they contended that the Georgian version differs greatly in aim and application and resembles the Russian version. Respondent 3 (Saba Brachveli., 31, M, Civil Society Foundation) stated:

*“There is the American version and the Russian version. The American version applies to lobbyists of all kinds, stating that they should not approach public officials if they are directly paid to do so. It does not apply to NGOs or media organizations that have internal independence, even if they receive foreign funding...In the Russian case, starting in 2012, the law*

*was rewritten to directly target NGOs and media, essentially the entire civil sector, branding them as agents of foreign influence...The same has happened in Georgia. This law is not targeting lobbyists, which would not have caused any major controversy, but rather civil society, NGOs, and media.”*

Respondent 5 (K.P., 27, F, M.A. in Applied Social Psychology) also said during her interview:

*“as I know, some European Union countries themselves have this law very lightly.”*

**4.2.3.2. Impact on Civil Society and Media.** Respondents predicted serious effects on NGOs, media outlets, and public discourse. Many people believed that the law would instill fear and discourage civic engagement. For instance, respondent 9 (G.T., 54, M, Civil Society) stated about Foreign Influence Law:

*“It will silence many organizations that have been fighting for democracy. NGOs and independent media will struggle to operate because the government will label them as enemies. People will be afraid to speak freely.”*

Comparably, respondent 4 (A.K., 24, F, NGO Representative) claimed:

*“the law undermines core democratic principles such as freedom of speech and media independence. This law shifts the country toward a more authoritarian model of governance, not democratic at all.”*

**4.2.3.3 Public Trust.** According to a unanimous opinion (10/10 respondents), public trust in the Georgian government has dropped severely. The Foreign Influence Law was considered a watershed moment that fueled suspicion, particularly among young and politically active residents.

Several respondents stated that suspicion had been increasing before the law was enacted, but its passage reaffirmed fears that the government was forsaking democratic norms. For example, respondent 2 claimed (M.A. in Law and Diplomacy, 22, M):

*“Personally, I have always been against the government, so my perspective hasn’t changed. However, from what I have observed, this law has made some people reconsider their trust in the government.”*

Respondent 6 (J.M., 58, F, Civil Society) emphasizes that the trust in the government had already been low. Yet, this law has influenced the major decline in trust in the government:

*“It has decreased even more if that’s even possible. People don’t trust this government anymore. They only serve themselves.”*

#### **4.2.4. The Future of Democracy in Georgia**

**4.2.4.1. The main challenges to democracy in Georgia.** Participants recognized several key threats to democratic governance. When participants were asked what the main challenges to Georgia’s democracy were, they displayed somewhat similar responses. Out of ten participants, eight mentioned that the biggest (or one of the biggest) threat was the government itself.

On top of these eight responses, respondent 2 (M.A. in Law and Diplomacy, 22, M) mentioned ongoing protests and the government’s inaction as the main threat nowadays:

*“One of the biggest challenges is the ongoing protests—more than 80 days of non-stop demonstrations with no response from the government...The government must take action, or I don’t know what will happen.”*

Additionally, Respondent 1 (Natika Kantaria, 34, female, human rights advocate) identified the lack of basic human rights imposed by the Georgian government as the main threat:

*“In terms of human rights violations, freedom of expression, and the shrinking space for non-governmental organizations...justice system,...apart from civil and political rights, I would say that social and economic rights are crucial. About 1.5 million people in Georgia are living in poverty, so social and economic rights are not in good shape either. There is no quality education and no quality healthcare system. The unemployment rate is drastically high...democracy is when people in a country flourish...but who are the decision-makers here? It’s the Georgian government.”*

The Russian influence as the main (or one of) threat was mentioned 5 times.

**4.2.4.2. What Should Be Done to Protect Democracy?** Participants recommended a number of ideas to protect democracy and align Georgia with Western institutions. All of the participants focused on the ideas related to the change of government and/or its actions, getting rid of the one-party rule and/or holding new elections. For instance:

*“The first thing the government should do is announce new elections.”* Respondent 1 (Natika Kantaria, 34, female, human rights advocate)

*“The government should step down, but we know that won’t happen easily”* - Respondent 6 (J.M., 58, F, Civil Society)

When asked what should be done, Respondent 8 (E.P., 23, M, Independent Media) focused on the country’s path to the European Union:

*“to ensure Georgia’s EU membership. The government must uphold the 78th amendment of the Constitution”*

Eight respondents (1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10) also focused on the international pressure. For example:

*“International support is very important to have a stronger ally—not just against our own government but against Russia as well. Someone has to apply pressure.”* - Respondent 1 (Natika Kantaria, 34, female, human rights advocate)

*“The EU and other Western partners need to take stronger action—sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and real consequences for those undermining democracy.”* - Respondent 10 (Z.M., 35, M, Sports Journalist)

Some of the respondents also focused specifically on the anti-western laws being repelled:

*“The laws that Georgian Dream has adopted—from the Russian law to the one in January that curtails the right to protest, the right to assembly, and the right to free speech—should be repealed.”* - Respondent 3 (Saba Brachveli., 31, M, Civil Society Foundation)

#### 4.2.5. The Code Analysis

**Table 2.**

*Key themes and frequencies of agreement according to the code analysis.*

<b>Code (Key Themes)</b>	<b>How Many Agree?</b>	<b>Who Agrees?</b>	<b>Who somewhat agrees?</b>
Democratic Backsliding	10/10	R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8, R9, R10	N/A
Media Censorship & Suppression	9/10	R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8, R9	R10 (acknowledges pressure but argues some media outlets still operate independently)
Foreign Influence Law as a Tool of Repression	10/10	R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8, R9, R10	N/A
The Government is	10/10	R1, R2, R3, R4, R5,	N/A

<b>Code (Key Themes)</b>	<b>How Many Agree?</b>	<b>Who Agrees?</b>	<b>Who somewhat agrees?</b>
Authoritarian		R6, R7, R8, R9, R10	
Russian Influence is Significant	10/10	R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8, R9, R10	N/A
The Foreign Influence Law Harms EU Integration	9/10	R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8, R9	R10 (agrees but criticizes the EU for being ineffective in its response)
Election Manipulation & Fraud	9/10	R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8, R9	R10 (believes elections were always flawed, but acknowledges worsening trends)
State Violence Against Activists & Opponents	8/10	R1, R2, R3, R4, R6, R7, R8, R9	R5 (believes intimidation is more common than direct violence), R10 (sees violence but also opposition provoking tensions at times)
Freedom of Speech & Assembly Being Restricted	9/10	R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8, R10	R9 (acknowledges restrictions but argues alternative means of expression still exist)

To support the thematic analysis, the study also conducted a code analysis. According to Table 2, the coding analysis of the interviews suggests a broad consensus that Georgia is experiencing democratic backsliding, with respondents citing media censorship, election manipulation, government authoritarianism, and Russian involvement as important concerns. Media censorship and suppression were generally acknowledged, with respondents highlighting the silence of critical voices as well as financial pressures on independent publications. The

Foreign Influence Law was unanimously rejected as a coercive policy rather than a legitimate transparency attempt, with respondents believing that it is intended to undermine civil society and limit independent media. Similarly, all respondents felt that the bill hinders Georgia's EU integration, adding to fears that the government is actively distancing itself from European democratic values. The vast majority of respondents described the current government as authoritarian, citing state violence against activists, opposition politicians, and journalists as clear proof of repression. Furthermore, most participants felt that elections are rigged to keep the ruling party in power, with examples of vote-buying, intimidation, and control over electoral processes identified. All respondents stated that freedom of expression and assembly is being restricted, citing severe fines, arbitrary detentions, and police crackdowns on protests. While all respondents saw Russian influence as strong, others blamed Georgia's ruling party, claiming that it actively adopts authoritarian measures rather than being pressured from outside. Only a small number of people condemned the EU's response, claiming that Western actors did not apply enough pressure to offset the democratic loss in Georgia.

Overall, the data show that there is no major disagreement among respondents about the state of Georgia's democracy; everyone agrees it is deteriorating. The main distinction is whether Russian influence or internal authoritarianism is the primary cause of this deterioration.

However, there is no debate on the core issue: democratic freedoms in Georgia are under attack.

#### **4.3. Frequency Analysis**

##### **Table 3.**

The table shows the frequency of the themes that emerged in respondents' responses and their examples.

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Examples of Key Terms Used</b>
Democratic Backsliding	23	"democracy is collapsing," "erosion of rights," "backsliding"
Media Censorship & Suppression	17	"media is under attack," "government controls TV," "journalists targeted"
Foreign Influence Law as a Tool of Repression	25	"law is a weapon," "NGOs under pressure," "restricting civil society"
The Government is Authoritarian	19	"autocratic rule," "one-party control," "dictatorship"
Russian Influence is Significant	27	"Russia is behind this," "Kremlin's interests," "Ivanishvili serves Russia"
The Foreign Influence Law Harms EU Integration	21	"This kills EU hopes," "contradicts EU values," "isolating Georgia"
Election Manipulation & Fraud	15	"rigged elections," "voter suppression," "fraud"
State Violence Against Activists & Opponents	22	"beatings," "police brutality," "protesters arrested"
Freedom of Speech & Assembly Being Restricted	20	"can't protest," "intimidation," "no free speech"

The findings show that Russian influence (27 mentions) and the Foreign Influence Law as an instrument of repression (25 mentions) were the most commonly mentioned concerns. Most respondents stated that the Georgian administration was aligned with Russian interests, with Respondent 7 (N.G., Activist) noting, "Everything this government does benefits Russia." The law comes straight from their script."

There was also considerable worry about democratic backsliding (23 comments), media censorship (17 mentions), and violence against activists (22 mentions). Respondents repeatedly assessed Georgia's trajectory as becoming authoritarian, with Respondent 3 (S.B., Civil Society Foundation) stating, "We are watching democracy crumble in real-time."

Concerns about EU integration (21 references) were also prevalent. Many participants expressed dissatisfaction with the government's actions, which opposed European principles. Respondent 5 (K.P., Applied Social Psychology) stated, "They tell us we are still on the EU path, but everything they do suggests otherwise."

Reservations about authoritarian government (19 references) were also widely expressed. Many participants viewed the ruling party as acting contrary to democratic principles, implying that power was consolidated around a single leader or party. Respondent 6 (J.M., Civil Society) said, "This government no longer operates as a democracy—it acts like a dictatorship, silencing everyone who disagrees." Several others pointed to one-party dominance, insufficient institutional checks, and political purges as signs of an authoritarian trend.

This was closely related to the restriction of free speech and assembly (20 references). Many respondents said that protesting had become dangerous, as authorities utilized legal and physical intimidation to quell opposition. Respondent 10 (Z.M., Sports Journalist) stated, "Before, you could protest openly. They will now fine you, arrest you, or do worse. It's all meant to terrify people into quiet. Similarly, Respondent 8 (E.P., Independent Media) stated, "There are police waiting for you at every demonstration." "If they recognize you, you're on a watchlist."

Finally, numerous respondents mentioned electoral fraud and manipulation (15 times), albeit with slightly less emphasis than other worries. Respondent 9 (G.T., Civil Society) stated, "Elections are just a performance at this point."

Overall, the frequency analysis reveals that all respondents were critical of the administration and the Foreign Influence Law, emphasizing their role in democratic deterioration, civil liberties suppression, and increased alignment with Russia.

The vast majority of respondents offered a grim image of Georgia's political direction, with all ten expressly stating that the Foreign Influence Law and the government's larger policies had undermined democracy and enhanced authoritarian power. The frequency analysis demonstrates that these reservations are not isolated viewpoints, but rather a prevalent narrative among persons of different backgrounds.

#### **4.4. Commonalities With The Secondary Sources**

The key interview findings reflect serious worries about Georgia's Foreign Influence Law, with participants repeatedly underlining its role in democratic backsliding, civil society suppression, and the degradation of the country's Western integration chances. Secondary sources supporting these themes include legislation and policy papers, international reports, media coverage, and scholarly literature. This part combines various sources to back up the interview findings, resulting in a thorough and well-supported study of the Foreign Influence Law's broader ramifications.

Official legislative documents and government statements describe the Foreign Influence Law as a way to increase transparency and protect national security. The Georgian Dream party has continuously characterized the law as a means to curb foreign meddling in internal politics, alleging that foreign-funded NGOs and media outlets serve as extensions of Western influence,

compromising national sovereignty (Parliament of Georgia, 2024). However, international assessments significantly contradict this story, stating that the bill is similar to Russia's 2012 "foreign agents" legislation, which has been severely criticized for its role in undermining autonomous civil society (Venice Commission, 2023).

Primary interviewees indicated considerable concerns about the law's impact on civil society groups (CSOs) and independent media, mirroring larger concerns raised by international watchdogs. According to reports from Freedom House (2023b) and Human Rights Watch (2023a), the law has a chilling impact on NGOs and journalists, deterring external funding and boosting official monitoring. The law's ambiguous language, which defines organizations receiving more than 20% of their money from foreign sources as "agents of foreign influence," has already resulted in self-censorship among activists and media professionals (Civil.ge, 2024).

Furthermore, civil society reports show how the government selectively applies the legislation to opposition-affiliated organizations while allowing pro-government entities with foreign money to function freely (OC Media, 2024b). This selective enforcement is consistent with larger trends of democratic degradation documented in other jurisdictions that have enacted comparable legislation, such as Hungary and Russia (Siksniš, 2024).

Interviewees also expressed concern about the Foreign Influence Law's impact on democratic institutions, particularly related to judicial independence and electoral integrity. The Venice Commission (2023) has specifically declared that the law undermines Georgia's commitment to democratic governance by violating the constitutional norms of free association and communication. Furthermore, international observers, including the European Commission (2023b), have warned that the bill is part of a larger legislative agenda that seeks to consolidate state power and marginalize political opposition.

These legal changes have corresponded with an increase in state repression against protest movements. According to media accounts, security personnel are increasingly using excessive force, mass arrests, and legal harassment against demonstrators (Human Rights Watch, 2024d). Similarly to the interviewees, The European Parliament (2024b) condemned these actions, claiming that the suppression of protesters contradicts Georgia's ambitions for European integration.

According to both interviewees and secondary sources, one of the most problematic aspects of the Foreign Influence Law is how it affects Georgia's Western integration. The European Commission (2023b) has openly connected the bill to Georgia's diminishing EU accession prospects, claiming that it violates democratic norms required for membership. This opinion is supported by the EU's postponement of admission discussions until 2028 and the European Parliament's rejection of Georgia's 2024 parliamentary election results, both of which were directly affected by worries about democratic backsliding (Reuters, 2025c).

Furthermore, Georgia's deteriorating relations with NATO and the EU are mirrored in its increasing isolation on the world stage. According to Council of Europe reports (2025), Georgia's exit from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) is a serious blow to its European trajectory, indicating a shift away from cooperative governance frameworks.

The combination of secondary sources and primary interview findings emphasizes the Foreign Influence Law's negative impact on Georgia's democratic institutions, civil society, and Western integration chances. While the government claims the law protects national sovereignty, overwhelming evidence demonstrates that it is used to consolidate authoritarian power. The alignment of Georgia's legislative trajectory with Russian-style government has sparked

considerable public opposition, as evidenced by continuing protests, and has strained the country's international relations. Finally, the convergence of domestic repression and foreign disengagement has put Georgia's democratic future at a crossroads, with serious consequences for its long-term political stability.

## **Chapter V: Discussion**

This chapter evaluates the study's findings within the larger theoretical context of democratic backsliding. This discussion critically examines the implications of Georgia's Foreign Influence Law and broader democratic regression by incorporating primary data from interviews with civil society actors, policymakers, analysts, and others as well as secondary sources such as legislative documents, human rights reports, and media coverage. The chapter also assesses how these findings fit into Levitsky and Ziblatt's (2018) paradigm of democratic backsliding, emphasizing patterns of institutional weakening, civil society suppression, media control, and electoral manipulation. Finally, the chapter places these findings within the context of Georgia's geopolitical battle, taking into account Russia's and the West's involvement, as well as the public response to democratic backsliding. This discussion directly addresses the thesis's major topics, presenting a triangulated analysis that situates primary findings within existing research on democratic decline.

### **5.1. The Foreign Influence Law as a Mechanism of Democratic Backsliding**

The passage of Georgia's Foreign Influence Law is a clear sign of democratic regression, coinciding with Levitsky and Ziblatt's (2018) four main signs of authoritarian inclinations. The law, which requires organizations receiving more than 20% of their money from foreign sources to register as companies serving foreign interests, has been extensively criticized as a tool for suppressing civil society and independent media (Venice Commission, 2023; Freedom House, 2023a). Primary interviews with human rights advocates, legal professors, and NGO representatives indicated that the law has already had a chilling impact, with many organizations reducing their operations out of fear of government reprisals. According to respondents, legal

uncertainty has prompted some organizations to preemptively shut down in order to avoid persecution, a behavior typical of democratic backsliding in hybrid regimes.

This legislative endeavor is consistent with the first criterion of democratic backsliding: the rejection of democratic norms of the game. As Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) show, democratic backsliding frequently begins with legal measures that undercut institutional checks and balances. The Georgian government has defended the law by emphasizing transparency and national security, a reasoning similar to Russia's Foreign Agent Law of 2012, which has been used to undermine independent civic society (Human Rights Watch, 2024c). However, unlike the United States Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), which applies only to individuals acting under direct foreign control, Georgia's statute uses a broad term, indiscriminately targeting organizations pushing for democratic governance (Civil Georgia, 2024b). According to interview findings, many civil society leaders believe the law is an attempt to eliminate organized resistance to government overreach, assuring the ruling party's long-term political supremacy.

The second symptom of democratic deterioration is the denial of political opponents' legitimacy, which is visible in the legal framework. Civil society organizations and opposition-aligned media have been characterized by government officials as "traitors" or "Western puppets," a technique intended to delegitimize dissenting voices and reduce civic involvement (Transparency International Georgia, 2024b). This language has been repeated in pro-government media, creating an environment in which opposition to the ruling party is associated with foreign involvement, increasing nationalist feelings and weakening trust in democratic institutions. Interviewees consistently stressed the narrative's impact on public perception, pointing out that it has escalated antagonism toward independent journalists and activists, with some getting threats or harassment both online and offline.

Furthermore, the law's passage corresponded with greater suppression of protest movements, which is consistent with the third indicator of democratic erosion: tolerance or promotion of violence. According to interviews, anti-law rallies in 2023 and 2024 were met with excessive force, including tear gas, mass arrests, and harsh penalties for participation (Amnesty International, 2024b). International human rights organizations have reported increased police brutality, including targeted attacks on journalists and activists (Reporters Without Borders, 2024b). These coercive methods act as a deterrent, raising the cost of disagreement while limiting civic participation in governance. Several respondents described firsthand accounts of arbitrary arrest and brutal police responses, raising worries that the government is arming law enforcement to suppress resistance.

Finally, the Foreign Influence Law demonstrates the fourth indicator of democratic erosion: the willingness to restrict civil liberties. The law effectively stifles free expression and association by requiring stringent reporting requirements, allowing arbitrary official inspections, and punishing organizations with large penalties or dissolution (OSCE, 2024b). According to the interview findings, smaller NGOs, particularly those working outside of Tbilisi, have been disproportionately affected, with many stopping activities due to legal uncertainty and budgetary constraints. Several respondents stated that the law has already resulted in increasing self-censorship among journalists and activists, as they fear retaliation for speaking out against the administration. Furthermore, comparisons with international assessments show that the Georgian example fits a larger pattern seen in nations with competitive authoritarian tendencies, where restrictive legislation serves as a pretext for expanding executive power (Levitsky and Way, 2010). In summary, the Foreign Influence Law is a direct instrument of democratic backsliding, reflecting tendencies seen in other hybrid regimes. While the administration

describes the law as a tool to defend national sovereignty, its execution has exposed a larger plan of institutional degradation and political consolidation. The use of both primary and secondary sources indicates that this law is not an isolated strategy, but rather part of a larger effort to restructure Georgia's political landscape in favor of centralized authority. These findings are consistent with theoretical assumptions of democratic degradation, supporting the concept that competitive authoritarian regimes use procedural tactics to remove dissent while preserving a veneer of legitimacy (Levitsky and Way, 2010).

## **5.2. Media Suppression and Control**

International watchdogs have extensively recorded the suppression of independent media in Georgia, which is supported by interview findings. Since the implementation of the Foreign Influence Law, journalists have seen an upsurge in legal and extralegal threats, including politically driven litigation, intimidation, and violence. According to Reporters Without Borders (2024a), the Georgian government has used restrictive legislation to put financial pressure on alternative media outlets, while pro-government stations have had privileged access to state resources. This is consistent with concerns stated in interviews, in which respondents underlined the increasing difficulties of retaining editorial independence due to government meddling and financial restrictions.

The recent passage of the "Family Values Bill" has resulted in severe censorship of media outlets, notably regarding LGBTQ+ topics, infringing on freedom of expression (European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, 2024b). This legislative measure has been criticized for instilling fear in journalists, resulting in self-censorship and a decrease in investigative reporting.

Furthermore, as mentioned previously, independent media outlets have seen severe funding cuts as the Foreign Influence Law effectively stigmatizes foreign-funded media as

agents of foreign interests (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2024). This regulation is similar to Russia's "Foreign Agents" legislation from 2012, which was used to undermine independent journalism and civil society (Human Rights Watch, 2024a). According to interviewees, state-controlled narratives dominate traditional media, pushing alternative voices to rely on digital activity and social media platforms to reach their target audience. However, the government has attempted to regulate online information, further restricting alternative media sources (Freedom House, 2024).

The consequences go beyond financial suppression. Physical attacks on journalists are becoming more widespread, with countless incidents of media professionals being intimidated, arbitrarily arrested, or even physically assaulted during rallies (Amnesty International, 2024a). According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (2024), at least 30 journalists have been detained since the protests began in 2023, raising major concerns about Georgia's press freedom and the rule of law. These data indicate that media restriction in Georgia is not a byproduct of political battles, but rather a deliberate plan to weaken democratic checks and balances.

### **5.3. Electoral Manipulation and Political Repression**

Interviewees widely viewed Georgia's voting process as flawed, with chronic fraud and political repression tipping the scales in favor of the ruling party. The 2024 parliamentary elections were especially acrimonious, with accusations of vote-buying, voter intimidation, and ballot stuffing dominating public discourse (OSCE, 2024b). Independent observers, notably the European Parliament, have recorded serious irregularities that call into question the election results' legality (European Parliament, 2024c).

Political repression has become a distinguishing feature of Georgia's democratic backsliding. Opposition figures and activists are subjected to ongoing legal harassment,

including politically motivated arrests and defamation cases. The government has also exploited state institutions including the judiciary and electoral commissions to exclude opposition candidates and silence dissent (Council of Europe, 2024).

Beyond electoral fraud, protests opposing government initiatives, such as EU integration and the Foreign Influence Law, have been met with violent crackdowns. The government's response to protests has become increasingly heavy-handed, with several reports of excessive force, arbitrary detentions, and harsh punishments for demonstrators (Associated Press, 2024). Amnesty International (2024a) has documented multiple examples of excessive police force, such as the use of tear gas, rubber bullets, and mass arrests. The interviews revealed that protest leaders and organizers experience targeted harassment, and some have fled the country to avoid prosecution. Notably, the story of journalist Mzia Amaghlobeli, who was detained during anti-government protests and later went on a hunger strike, demonstrates the serious consequences for individuals who challenge the existing quo. Such acts have created an environment of fear, discouraging civic participation and opposition. These findings are consistent with broader tendencies of competitive authoritarianism, in which democratic institutions exist but are deliberately undermined to retain ruling party control (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

#### **5.4. The Role of Russia and the West in Georgia's Political Crisis**

The conflict between Russian influence and Western involvement in Georgia's political environment was a recurring subject in the interviews. Many respondents saw Russia's geopolitical advantage over Georgia as the key cause of democratic backsliding. Moscow wields substantial power over Georgia's political elite due to its economic reliance on Russian trade and energy supply (Sirbiladze, 2024). Furthermore, Russian-backed disinformation efforts have

attempted to delegitimize Western institutions and support myths that Georgia's membership in the EU and NATO will lead to economic instability and security threats (Freedom House, 2024).

However, there was also mistrust toward the West, with interviewees frustrated by unfulfilled EU and NATO pledges. Georgia's delaying NATO admission, despite its contributions to alliance missions and long-standing obligations, is often a source of dissatisfaction (European Commission, 2024). Interviewees saw the EU as a positive entity. Yet many of them mentioned that the union has not fulfilled its promises and commented on their inactions. The EU's varied response to Georgia's democratic slide, which included minimal sanctions and inconsistent diplomatic pressure, further contributed to perceptions of Western disengagement (OSCE, 2024b).

Despite these critiques, participants overwhelmingly backed EU membership and called for increased Western participation. Many saw conditional financial aid and targeted fines against Georgian leaders as crucial moves toward preventing democratic loss. This viewpoint is consistent with proposals from international institutions calling for further Western involvement in promoting democratic administration in Georgia (Human Rights Watch, 2024a; Council of Europe, 2024). Finally, the interaction of Russian pressure, Western hesitation, and local authoritarianism has put Georgia at a geopolitical crossroads, with its democratic future becoming increasingly unclear.

### **5.5. Public Trust and Civil Resistance**

The Georgian government's public trust is diminishing as a result of widespread perceptions of democratic backsliding, corruption, and dissent suppression. According to interview findings, many residents perceived the government's increased reliance on repressive measures - such as media control, electoral fraud, and legal restrictions on civil society - as a

sign of authoritarian entrenchment. This is supported by secondary data from Transparency International Georgia (2024), which indicates that trust in public institutions is dwindling and that state authority is being consolidated in ways that erode democratic accountability.

The resilience of civil society and grassroots movements emerged as a major issue in both interviews and document analysis. Despite increased governmental repression, protests against the Foreign Influence Law, electoral fraud, and general democratic degradation have persisted. According to academic research on civil resistance, public mobilization can act as a counterforce to authoritarian inclinations when institutions fail to defend democratic values (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). The Georgian case highlights how, despite governmental repression, politically engaged people continue to oppose the government's policies through huge rallies, civic involvement, and legal action.

According to empirical data from other transitioning democracies, when governments use excessive force, it can either crush movements or fuel further opposition, depending on the severity and public response (Dahlum & Wig, 2019). In Georgia, police crackdowns, widespread arrests, and violence against demonstrations, particularly in 2024, have instilled fear and increased resolve in opposition groups and civil society activists. International organizations, notably Amnesty International (2024a), have condemned these measures, demanding accountability and tougher protections for free assembly.

## **5.6. Implications for Georgia's EU Integration**

The findings of this study show that Georgia's democratic trajectory has significant consequences for its aspirations for European Union membership. The Foreign Influence Law and other restrictive measures have brought Georgia into direct contradiction with EU democratic principles, causing serious worries among Brussels politicians. Interviews with

Georgian activists, political experts, and civil society leaders reveal a rising dissatisfaction with the EU's perceived lack of strong action in the face of democratic backsliding. Many respondents say that, while EU rhetoric promotes democratic governance in Georgia, concrete repercussions for government acts are lacking.

The European Commission's annual reports on Georgia's EU integration progress (2023a) highlight the need for an independent judiciary, free media, and an engaged civil society as conditions for membership. Georgia's growing authoritarian inclinations, including restrictions on NGO activity and political repression, contravene the EU's Copenhagen Criteria for membership. This mismatch poses a fundamental quandary: although popular support for EU integration remains strong, the government's actions continue to jeopardize Georgia's capacity to achieve membership standards (European Commission, 2023a).

Interviewees expressed particular worry about the EU's apparent inconsistencies in dealing with backsliding nations. While Hungary and Poland have faced financial sanctions and legal action for violating democratic norms, Georgia has yet to face such severe measures, despite its worsening democratic credentials. This disparity fuels concerns that EU membership remains a distant objective, dependent not only on Georgia's internal changes but also on European institutions' political determination to impose democratic conditionality (Vachudova, 2021).

From a policy sense, EU admission is improbable under existing circumstances unless major reforms are made. The European Parliament's resolution rejecting the 2024 elections owing to electoral fraud complicates Georgia's position in Brussels. Furthermore, the suspension of visa-free travel for Georgian diplomats, as well as the developing EU-Georgia diplomatic

split, indicate that unless democratic standards improve, EU integration will stay delayed (Morucci, 2024).

The Georgian situation demonstrates the limits of EU expansion policy in tackling democratic backsliding in candidate nations. Similar tendencies have evolved in the Western Balkans, where regimes publicly support EU membership while eroding democratic institutions (Bieber, 2020). This raises serious concerns about the EU's influence and whether further conditionality, targeted sanctions, or diplomatic interventions will successfully dissuade future democratic deterioration in Georgia.

### **5.7. Comparative Case Study: Foreign Influence Laws and EU Integration in Comparative Perspective**

To have a better understanding of Georgia's Foreign Influence Law and its implications for EU integration, it is helpful to compare its trajectory to those of other countries that have passed corresponding legislation. Hungary, Poland, and Russia are relevant case studies because of their use of foreign agent legislation to limit civil society and their complex interactions with the EU.

#### **5.7.1. Hungary**

Hungary's Fidesz administration, led by Viktor Orbán, has imposed stringent rules on non-governmental groups and foreign-funded organizations. Hungary implemented a "foreign agent" law in 2017 that requires NGOs receiving foreign financing to register and reveal their donors, which was strongly opposed by the European Union (Wahl, 2022). The bill was later overturned by the European Court of Justice, highlighting the EU's ability to resist democratic backsliding within member states (EU Court of Justice, 2021). However, Hungary's refusal to

reintroduce such limitations highlights the challenge of enforcing EU principles when illiberal governments are in power.

### ***5.7.2. Poland***

Poland's Law and Justice (PiS) administration has come under fire for judicial measures that the EU has considered incompatible with democratic governance (Vachudova, 2021). While Poland does not have a specific foreign agent statute, the government has implemented regulations that limit foreign media ownership and restrict NGO activities, reflecting tendencies found in Georgia. The EU has retaliated with financial penalties, withholding billions of euros in assistance unless Poland changes its policy (Baldari, 2025). Georgia's situation varies because it is not yet an EU member and hence has the ability to resist such punitive EU sanctions.

### ***5.7.3. Russia***

As mentioned previously, Georgia's legislation is modeled after Russia's foreign agent law passed in 2012. The law mandates organizations that receive foreign funds to register as "foreign agents" and subject them to rigorous government oversight (Human Rights Watch, 2023b). The law has been expanded several times, now targeting journalists, activists, and even anyone who criticizes the government. Unlike Hungary and Poland, where EU institutions provide some democratic safeguards, Russia's legal framework has been utilized to gradually undermine civil society and independent media (Freedom House, 2023c). Georgia's version of the law follows a similar path, prompting concerns that it would become a vehicle for larger authoritarian centralization.

### ***5.7.4. Comparative Insights and Lessons for Georgia***

The experiences of Hungary, Poland, and Russia highlight broader trends in the employment of foreign influence legislation and other comparable tools to restrict civil society,

repress political opposition, and curtail democratic freedom. While these nations' political systems and connections with the European Union differ, the similarities in their approaches provide useful insights into Georgia's probable trajectory under the Foreign Influence Law.

One significant resemblance is the use of legal limits on civil society and independent media as a strategy for consolidating power. Hungary's 2017 foreign agent law required NGOs receiving foreign funds to register as foreign-supported enterprises, greatly weakening their legitimacy (Wahl, 2022). Despite the European Court of Justice's ruling against the bill, Hungary's government continued to exert pressure on civil society actors. While Poland does not have a formal foreign agent statute, it has put severe limits on foreign ownership of media outlets and established legislation that places legal and financial obligations on independent groups (Baldari, 2025). Russia's foreign agent law, enacted in 2012, has gradually grown to target not only NGOs but also journalists and government critics (Human Rights Watch, 2023b). Georgia's Foreign Influence Law incorporates components of these measures, most notably the stigmatization of foreign-funded organizations and heightened official control.

Another commonality is the European Union's attempt to impose democratic values, even among its member states. Hungary and Poland have faced legal challenges from EU institutions, including infringement proceedings and financial fines, but enforcement has been inconsistent due to political opposition (Vachudova, 2021). In Poland, EU subsidies were withheld to pressure the government to reverse undemocratic judicial reforms, but compliance has been patchy at best (Baldari, 2025). Georgia, as a non-EU member, is especially vulnerable to democratic backsliding because it lacks the institutional limitations and financial ties that have influenced Hungary and Poland. Despite international condemnation, the Georgian government has passed

legislation that violates EU democratic criteria, raising questions about the country's long-term alignment with European institutions (European Commission, 2024).

A third major trend is the gradual growth of repressive laws once they are implemented. Russia's foreign agent statute initially applied only to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) but was later expanded to encompass media outlets, activists, and individuals suspected of working against state interests (Freedom House, 2023c). Following initial crackdowns on NGOs, Hungary's government has also introduced new regulations aimed at universities and judicial independence (Wahl, 2022). Georgia's Foreign Influence Law, while now limited in scope, has the potential to follow a similar path, creating concerns that it may be expanded to cover opposition parties, journalists, and academic institutions in the future. Considering the fact that Georgia introduced the “Family Values” bill a few months after adopting the Foreign Influence law, this might be an accurate assumption of the government’s plans (Reuters, 2024).

Despite these obstacles, Georgia differs from Russia, Hungary, and Poland in one important respect: strong public opposition to democratic backsliding. While protests in Hungary and Poland have had limited success, Georgia's pro-European civil society remains highly organized, as seen by large-scale demonstrations against the Foreign Influence Law (OSCE, 2024a). This means that Georgia still has a chance to achieve democratic resilience if opposition groups, international partners, and civil society organizations maintain pressure on the government. However, if EU institutions fail to take effective action beyond vocal condemnation, Georgia risks moving away from European integration and toward authoritarian control.

## 5.8. Limitations of the Study

While this study sheds light on Georgia's democratic backsliding and the ramifications of the Foreign Influence Law, it is important to acknowledge a few limitations.

First, the research used semi-structured interviews with ten respondents, which, while allowing for in-depth qualitative analysis, restricts the findings' generalizability. Given the political sensitivity of the subject, interviewees may have exercised self-censorship or offered responses that matched anticipated expectations, thereby increasing response bias (King et al., 2021). Future studies could address this issue by using anonymous survey methodologies or expanding the number of respondents to increase the diversity of viewpoints.

Second, the secondary document analysis component was based on publicly available policy documents, NGO reports, and global evaluations. While these sources provide important insights into legislative objectives and external evaluations, government-controlled media narratives and state-aligned sources were not covered in depth due to accessibility and trustworthiness difficulties. This exclusion may limit the study's capacity to capture all pro-government opinions on the Foreign Influence Law (Transparency International, 2023). Future research could include discourse analysis of pro-government media to further understand state justification strategies.

Finally, because this study is contextually confined to Georgia, its conclusions may not be applicable internationally. While similarities to Hungary, Poland, and Russia give a more comprehensive analytical framework, democratic backsliding emerges differently depending on institutional resilience, historical legacies, and geopolitical posture. Further research should look into cross-regional comparative analyses to discover patterns of resistance and state control mechanisms in different democratic backsliding environments (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

## **5.9. Recommendations**

Several recommendations have been produced to ensure the study's serviceability based on the study's findings and data analysis in comparison to the existing literature.

### ***5.9.1. Recommendations for Georgia***

Georgia must prioritize judicial independence by developing institutional measures to prevent political meddling. This necessitates constitutional reforms to limit presidential influence over judicial appointments and case decisions. International legal experts and European institutions, such as the Venice Commission, could provide guidance in developing and implementing these reforms. Furthermore, judicial training programs that focus on rule of law concepts and European legal norms may help to maintain an unbiased judiciary.

Electoral integrity is an important aspect of regaining democratic legitimacy. Georgia should strengthen election monitoring procedures by allowing international observers, civil society watchdogs, and independent media to participate in all phases of the electoral process. Legislation must be passed to penalize election fraud and establish transparent methods for resolving election-related disputes. Furthermore, improved digital security standards should be implemented to avoid disinformation operations and cyberattacks designed to influence voter behavior.

CSOs and independent media play critical roles in holding the government accountable. To combat the restrictive Foreign Influence Law, Georgia should put in place legal safeguards that prohibit CSOs and media outlets from being branded as "foreign agents." Furthermore, a national fund for press freedom might be established to provide government-independent financial assistance for investigative journalism and public-interest reporting. The Georgian Parliament should work with international press freedom organizations like Reporters Without

Borders and Freedom House to develop media protection policies and combat state-imposed censorship.

Georgia's Foreign Influence Law should be amended immediately to line it with European democratic principles, thereby preventing the persecution of non-governmental organizations and independent media. Civil society actors should be included in the policymaking process to ensure that legislation changes reflect the interests and concerns of citizens. A national commission on human rights and democratic governance made up of legal experts, human rights defenders, and government officials, should be established to oversee reform implementation.

#### ***5.9.2. Recommendations for the European Union and International Actors***

The European Union must be more forceful in tying Georgia's EU entry to particular democratic changes. Strict conditionality mechanisms should be implemented, forcing Georgia to complete judicial reforms, electoral transparency measures, and press freedom safeguards before proceeding with the membership process. The EU should also improve its Enlargement Monitoring Mechanism, which will track Georgia's adherence to democratic principles in real time.

The EU and its Western allies should impose targeted penalties on Georgian officials who are responsible for democratic backsliding, electoral fraud, and human rights breaches. Individuals involved in the suppression of civil society and political opposition should face visa bans, asset freezes, and financial transaction restrictions. A Magnitsky-style sanctions mechanism might be implemented, comparable to those used against despotic regimes in Russia and Belarus (Human Rights First, 2022).

International funders such as the European Endowment for Democracy, USAID, and the Open Society Foundations should expand financial and institutional assistance for Georgian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and independent media. This funding should go toward capacity-building programs that improve investigative journalism, legal advocacy, and civic education. Furthermore, Western diplomatic missions should publicly support and engage with opposition groups, youth-led political movements, and human rights advocates to fight government intimidation.

Given Georgia's geopolitical vulnerability, NATO and Western allies should strengthen security cooperation agreements by providing military training, intelligence sharing, and cybersecurity support to fight Russian influence. The West must ensure that Georgia is not strategically abandoned, as seen by NATO's failure to intervene militarily during the Russian invasion in 2008. A joint EU-NATO task force might be formed to monitor Russian hybrid threats and aid Georgia in improving its national security defenses.

### ***5.9.3. Lessons for Other Countries Experiencing Democratic Backsliding***

Georgia's experience demonstrates the importance of other democracies, particularly Ukraine, Moldova, and Western Balkan states, establishing robust legal protections against restrictive foreign influence laws. These countries should enact constitutional provisions that prohibit governments from weaponizing NGO and media rules in the name of national security.

Georgia's situation demonstrates the intentional use of Russian disinformation and political infiltration to damage democratic institutions. Countries facing similar dangers should create national cybersecurity policies, digital literacy initiatives, and counter-disinformation task forces to prevent electoral manipulation and social divisiveness. Collaboration with EU

cybersecurity authorities and NATO's Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence could improve resilience to external interference.

Georgia's democratic challenges highlight the value of regional collaboration among democracies in combating authoritarian influence. Countries in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus should develop regional coalitions to advance democratic governance, election monitoring, and judicial reform aid. A Democracy Resilience Network might be developed, bringing together pro-democracy actors from throughout the region to share best practices and coordinate lobbying efforts against autocratic dangers.

Georgia's democratic future is dependent on both internal reform efforts and continued foreign participation. While the Foreign Influence Law and other restrictive measures pose considerable hurdles, Georgia's vibrant civil society and tenacious popular resistance show that democratic ambitions are still strong. Georgia may avoid an authoritarian slide and continue on its path to Euro-Atlantic integration by putting in place institutional safeguards, maintaining electoral integrity, and gaining international backing.

## Chapter VI: Conclusion

The study examined how democracy is changing in Georgia, with a focus on the Foreign Influence Law's effects on social groups, media freedom, and the possibility of joining the EU. Using Levitsky and Ziblatt's theory (2018) on how democracies can decline, the research highlighted how government actions, political crackdowns, and weakened institutions are moving Georgia away from democratic values. This law, along with similar legislative actions, is putting civil society and media freedom at risk, making it harder for Georgia to join the EU. The study emphasized the urgent need to recognize these developments and work to safeguard democracy in Georgia. Through interviews and document analysis, the study revealed growing concerns among civil society members, journalists, and political analysts about the suppression of dissent, manipulation of elections, and the diminishing chances of EU membership.

The research pointed to the Foreign Influence Law as a major factor in democratic regression, drawing parallels with Russian governance but distinct due to Georgia's geopolitical setting. A significant number of people interviewed think the law weakens community organizations. Freedom House (2024) and the Venice Commission (2023) support this belief. The study emphasizes attempts to control the media and suppress independent journalism through legal threats. These actions align with the findings of Reporters Without Borders (2024b).

Georgia's situation is unique, yet it shares similarities with countries like Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Romania, all of which are witnessing a decline in democratic practices. In these nations, governments are manipulating legal systems to undermine democratic foundations while maintaining the facade of fair elections. Georgia is notable for its geopolitical location, as it is a small country situated between Eastern and Western influences, making its journey toward

democracy quite complex. This difficulty arises not only from internal political dynamics but also from the failure of Western institutions to deliver on promises of deeper integration. The European Union has not provided a clear pathway to membership, and NATO's commitments are still ambiguous. This absence of strong support has enabled authoritarian forces to establish a presence.

This raises an important question: Can the situation in Georgia serve as a cautionary tale for Ukraine? Georgia's shift from a staunchly pro-Western stance during the 2008 conflict to a nation increasingly swayed by Moscow is concerning. After the conflict with Russia, Georgia expected greater Western support in terms of security and political integration, but these hopes were met with cautious strategies and diplomatic ambiguity. Over time, some people became unhappy with Western countries, which allowed local groups to promote pro-Russian ideas as practical alternatives. Ukraine is experiencing a similar situation today. If support from Western nations falls and Ukraine becomes isolated politically and economically, negative attitudes toward the West might emerge. This could steer Ukraine away from democratic principles, leading to a decline in its democratic values.

Furthermore, Georgia's electoral process was found to be progressively undermined, with interviewees and OSCE reports (2024b) citing charges of voter intimidation, electoral fraud, and politically driven prosecutions. The role of international actors was also examined, with participants expressing dissatisfaction with EU conditionality and Western reactions to democratic collapse, as evidenced by European Commission (2024) judgments.

This study adds to the larger discussion on democratic decay by showing how hybrid regimes use legalistic techniques to cement power. The Georgian instance exemplifies the gradual and systematic nature of backsliding, in which elections are held while institutional

safeguards are weakened and civic freedoms are destroyed (Bermeo 2016). These data provide credence to the concept that contemporary authoritarianism emerges gradually, undermining democratic standards rather than abruptly (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

On a practical level, the study emphasizes the need for civil society and international activism in combating authoritarian trends. While legal restrictions constrain NGOs and independent media, grassroots movements and international pressure continue to be powerful counterforces, as illustrated by continued protests and diplomatic initiatives by the EU and the Council of Europe (2025).

Additionally, the current research emphasizes that Georgia's political crisis is representative of greater democratic challenges worldwide. While the Foreign Influence Law shows the deterioration of democratic standards, it has also sparked public outrage, highlighting the strength of civil society and pro-democracy forces. The interaction of local activism, international assistance, and the changing geopolitical scenario will determine whether Georgia confirms its commitment to democracy or succumbs to authoritarianism.

Georgia is at a crossroads, and its future trajectory will serve as an important case study for understanding the destiny of democracy in transitional governments. This thesis contributes to that conversation by examining the mechanisms of backsliding, resistance, and international engagement, providing insights not only for Georgia but also for broader concerns about democratic viability in the twenty-first century. Yet again, governments change, laws are amended, but Georgia's fight for democracy remains unabated.



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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Informed Consent Document



Università degli Studi di Padova, Via 8 Febbraio, 2 - 35122 Padova - Italy, | +39 049 827 3131

#### Informed consent form

Title of Study: From Western Aspirations to Eastern Shadows: Analyzing Georgia's Path from Perestroika to the Foreign Influence Law and Its Implications for EU Integration

1.	<p>I agree to take part in the above University of Padova research project. I have had the project explained to me, and I have read the participant information sheet, which I may keep for my records.</p> <p>I understand this will involve: be interviewed by the researcher, allow the interview to be audio taped, use a computer to read and approve the transcript of my interview.</p>	
2.	<p>This information will be held and processed for the following purpose: write and discuss a master's degree Dissertation as well as in the prospective publication of the dissertation or part of it.</p> <p>I understand that I will be given a transcript of data concerning me for my approval before it is included in the write-up of the research.</p> <p>I understand that I have given approval for my name and for the name of my workplace and for the role I play in it to be used in the final report of the project, and future publications.</p> <p>I understand that if I request it, my contribution will be anonymous and referred to only with the name of the workplace and if approved by myself, with the role I play (or I have played) in it.</p>	
3.	<p>I understand that my participation is voluntary, that I can choose not to participate in part or all of the project, and that I can withdraw at any stage of the project without being penalized or disadvantaged in any way.</p>	
4.	<p>I agree to University of Padova recording and processing this information about me. I understand that this information will be used only for the purpose(s) set out in this statement and my consent is conditional on the University complying with its duties and obligations under the Data Protection Act 1998.</p>	
5.	<p>I agree to take part in the above study.</p>	

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**When completed, 1 copy for participant; 1 copy for researcher file.**