

WORKINGPAPER

No. 11, 2024

Georgia's Path Towards Gender Equality: The Interaction Between its EU Ambitions and Local Values

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Abstract

Ever since its independence, Georgia has worked on enhancing its relationship with the EU, officially becoming a candidate member in 2023. These efforts include increasing equality – particularly regarding women and LGBTQ+ rights – in the country. However, many of the new policies that the successive Georgian governments have introduced throughout the 21st century clash with the conservative attitudes that are dominant in Georgia's society and the powerful Georgian Orthodox Church.

This working paper examines this tension. In light of this, it maps out the different policies which were introduced in Georgia and discusses what reactions this has received from the Georgian public. In doing so, it outlines current gender norms in Georgia and shows how these interact with the wider world, both specifically regarding the EU and geopolitically in general. In this discussion, I juxtapose the policies introduced with the gender norms that are currently dominant in Georgia and the position of the current Georgian government. These domestic developments are also put in their wider context regarding the current geopolitical polarization surrounding issues of gender and sexuality and the anti-gender movement.

The paper finds that Georgia has done a lot to increase equality in a legislative sense, but the vast majority of these new laws and policies were never properly implemented and, thus, barely had an impact on the ground. Women continue to be less independent than men and bear a double burden of both productive and reproductive labour. Furthermore, violence against LGBTQ+ people continues and is even on the rise. Nonetheless, attitudes are evolving and growing more accepting, but this happens very slowly.

Keywords

Georgia, EU, Gender, Gender Equality, LGBTQ+ rights, geopolitics

Table of Contents

Abstract	3
Table of Contents	4
1. Introduction	5
2. The Political Situation of Georgia (and Gender)	6
2.1 A European Future and the Anti-Gender Movement	6
2.2 A Complicated History with Russia	7
3. Attitudes towards Gender and Sexuality in Georgia	7
3.1 A More Equal Legislation in a Patriarchal Society	7
3.2 Representation in Politics and Education	8
3.3 Productive vs. Reproductive Labour	9
3.4 LGBTQ+ Rights	10
4. The Politicisation of Gender in Georgia	11
4.1 (Liberal) Democracy and Conservative Values	11
4.2 Religion and the Orthodox Church	13
5. Conclusion	14
References	15

1. Introduction

Since December 2023, Georgia is officially an EU candidate state. The ambition for EU membership is the next step on the pro-European course that Georgia embarked upon after its independence (Gamkrelidze, 2021; Lejava, 2021). Simultaneously, Russia is trying to keep Georgia within its sphere of influence (Gürcan, 2020; Lomia, 2020) and the current Georgian government has gradually undertaken a rapprochement with Russia. This regularly leads to tension, most recently with the “foreign agents law” that the Georgian government adopted on 28 May 2024, which has many similarities to Russian policy (Bornio, 2024; Temnycky, 2024). This law is likely to increase the control of the current Georgian Dream (GD) government over civil society and weaken the opposition (ibid.). The Georgian people reacted to the law by flooding the streets in protest. These were grassroots demonstrations “with the pro-European sentiment of the population [as] the main driving force” (ibid.). They do this out of fear that the law could hamper their country’s EU ambitions (Theander Olsson, 2024) but also because, by controlling civil society, the law could harm democracy in their country (Temnycky, 2024). Amongst the people opposing the bill is Georgia’s president Salome Zurbisvili (ibid.). The situation surrounding this law is made even more complex and controversial when considering Georgia’s geopolitical position between the EU and Russia (Shevtsova, 2023). However, it is also crucial to look beyond the (seeming) Russian connection and acknowledge the GD government’s own agency and interests in adopting this law.

At the same time, the GD government has done a lot to improve Georgia’s relationship with the EU and has introduced several new policies in this context, many of them aimed at reducing discrimination and increasing equality. The EU has turned values such as gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights into “a mandatory – albeit declaratory – condition for countries seeking association” (Shevtsova, 2023, 163). In the case of Georgia, the government has tightened its anti-discrimination legislation throughout the 2010s in the context of the dialogues with the EU about potential Association Agreements and visa liberalisation (ibid.). However, despite the overwhelming pro-EU attitudes amongst the Georgians, these measures receive a lot of criticism from the Georgian people, particularly those tackling issues involving gender and sexuality (Mestvirishvili et al., 2017). The people opposing these measures argue, amongst others, that the policies in favour of this are incompatible with Georgian traditions and culture (Lejava, 2021). This working paper will study what this tension between Georgia’s wish for a European future and the resistance against certain measures taken to work towards this future, concretely looks like. It will do this by analysing the concrete steps undertaken by the Georgian government to increase gender equality as well as the resistance these measures have encountered. Concretely, it will try to answer the following two questions:

- What steps have been undertaken by the government to increase (gender) equality in Georgia?
- What is the impact of these steps? What opposition did they encounter, and how can this be explained?

The focus will be on the last twenty years, from the Rose Revolution in 2003 until now, particularly zooming in on the last twelve years under the GD government. Sometimes, especially in the beginning, I will also refer to earlier decades.

The main thread throughout this entire argument will be the big gap between the steps taken by the Georgian government to increase equality and the existing social norms in the country. The working paper will discuss the different steps that have been undertaken by the Georgian government to increase equality – most of these taking the form of legislative changes. Subsequently, it will compare these new policies to the dominant social norms in Georgia and, therefore, play a big role in determining the public perception of these changes. The goal of this investigation is to obtain more insight into the tension between Georgia’s conservative values and its EU ambitions. As will be illustrated in the first section, this discussion is often conducted in overly general and simplified terms, while the situation on the ground is much more complex and layered. This working paper will, therefore, unpack this situation by zooming in on several core aspects of the gender debate in the Georgian context and analyse these from both the legislative/governmental and public opinion perspectives.

I will start by providing a short overview of Georgia’s current geopolitical position. In the second section, I will present the situation that women and LGBTQ+ currently face in Georgia. Finally, I will use this information to discuss the different ways in which gender is being politicised in the Georgian context and what impact this has on the Georgian people, government and the country’s geopolitical position.

2. The Political Situation of Georgia (and Gender)

In the literature on the country, Georgia is often referred to as an “in-between country.” This is in reference to the country’s geographical and geopolitical position between the EU and Russia. Shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia took an explicit pro-western stance and pivoted its attention towards the European Union (e.g. Lomia, 2020; Gamkrelidze, 2021; Lejava, 2021). In later years, it repeatedly emphasised that Georgia’s future is European (Kakachia & Minesashvili, 2015), for instance, during the Rose Revolution in 2003. Before the Rose Revolution, the Georgian government had mostly adopted a balanced and pragmatic approach, but during and after the uprising, the pro-western choice became more explicit (Gelashvili, 2022). This event led to a new government under the leadership of Mikhail Saakashvili, which improved its ties with the West by strengthening the country’s institutions and organisations and liberalising the economy (Kakachia & Minesashvili, 2015; Gamkrelidze, 2021; Lejava, 2021). In sum, this government introduced a lot of reforms in service of this goal (Luciani, 2021a).

Nonetheless, the country’s relationship with the EU remains complex (Lejava, 2021). Georgia’s pro-western choice was mostly motivated by the fear of losing its national sovereignty to Russia and economic considerations (Gürcan, 2020; Lomia, 2020; Lejava, 2021). Despite this situation and Russia’s attempts to keep Georgia within its sphere of influence, Georgia has persisted in its pro-western policy (Kakachia & Minesashvili, 2015), making its relationship with Russia even more tense (Shevtsova, 2023). The most well-known instance of these attempts is the 2008 war and the subsequent “creeping annexation” of Georgian territories, particularly South Ossetia and Abkhazia, by Russia (Lomia, 2020). In this section, I will briefly introduce the different building blocks that shape Georgia’s relationship with the EU and Russia. These are necessary to understand the position that issues of gender and sexuality – the topic of this working paper – currently have in the political landscape of Georgia.

2.1 A European Future and the Anti-Gender Movement

Georgia’s choice for a European future – especially in the context of EU association and EU membership – comes with certain expectations and demands from the EU, the so-called conditionality. Many of these are related to matters of democracy, liberalism and inclusivity, particularly in relation to gender equality and the LGBTQ+ community. In recent years, it has become mandatory for countries that want to associate with the EU to – at least declaratory – work towards an equal society; this also applies to Georgia. This is, amongst other things, because the EU has turned values of liberal democracy and inclusivity into a cornerstone of its identity and a required trait for anyone who wants to become a member (Kahlina, 2015; Aničić, 2018). Subsequently, the Georgian governments introduced these changes but framed them as top-down demands from the EU to sell their policies to the conservative population (Shevtsova, 2023). An example is the legislation on the protection of LGBTQ+ rights that was introduced in the context of the Eastern Partnership (Luciani, 2021a). This, in turn, led to an increase in anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination because these policies were introduced before there was sufficient support for them within society itself (ibid.). This process already started under Saakashvili and only grew more polarised under the GD government (ibid.).

This kind of politicisation of gender and sexuality is not unique to Georgia but is part of a global development in which gender has become a central component of the geopolitical power struggle (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Ziemer & Roberts, 2024). On the one hand, there is the West – particularly the EU – which has associated itself with the promotion of liberal values of inclusion and (gender) equality (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). On the other hand, there is what is commonly referred to as the “anti-gender movement”, which frames the West as decadent and in need of saving (ibid.). This is a narrative in which Russia plays a significant role, both directly and indirectly, as it positions itself as a protector of traditional Christian values against the degenerate “Gayropa” (Luciani, 2021a, 2023; Gelashvili, 2022; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). These two positions have by now become so ingrained that a country’s policies towards “gender and sexual equality became linked to a country’s foreign policy choices” between Russia and the West (Shevtsova, 2023). However, the situation remains complicated, especially in an in-between country such as Georgia (ibid.). It is also important to remember that, although this polarisation is geopolitical, its execution is done by “local political actors, using taken-for-granted patriarchal and heterosexual discourses to reclaim local masculinities and their political legitimacy” (Ziemer & Roberts, 2024, 3). In the case of Georgia, these two models meet in a very interesting way, especially amongst the population, which – according to surveys by the CRRC in 2020– dreams of a European future but is also conservative and patriarchal (Lejava, 2021; Radnitz, 2022).

2.2 A Complicated History with Russia

Despite Georgia's conflict-riddled history with Russia (Gelashvili, 2021), the relationship between these two countries has fluctuated significantly. On the one hand, the Georgian people explicitly chose a European future during the Rose Revolution in 2003, but on the other hand, the country retained many ties with Russia. It remains, for instance, Georgia's biggest trading partner (Kakachia & Minesashvili, 2015; Lomia, 2020). Consequently, the economic blockade that Russia imposed as a reaction to the Rose Revolution and Saakashvili's subsequent foreign policy strategy hit the country hard (Lomia, 2020). Economic relations were partially restored during the 2010s (ibid.), but in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Georgia suffered another economic hit. Again, it was only able to recover from this one by "partially restoring economic relations with sanctioned Russia" (Bornio, 2024). In more recent years, relations have once again improved, despite Russia's strategy of "creeping annexation" of certain parts of Georgia and its continued meddling in Georgian politics (e.g. Gordon, 2020; Gürcan, 2020; Radnitz, 2022). The current GD government – which has been in power since 2012 – has a more "pragmatic" approach to foreign policy and Russia, especially when compared to their predecessors during the 2000s (Lomia, 2020, 118). Overall, the influence of conservative powers, not in the least Russia, in Georgia remains significant (Shevtsova, 2023).

Georgia itself has a very diverse and heterogenic society with large clusters of ethnic minorities, mostly of Armenian, Russian or Azeri descent (Gorgadze, 2020; Gürcan, 2020). A big part of this section of the population has vastly different relationships with and attitudes towards Russia and the EU than the majority of the population. Generally, the less advantaged groups in society – particularly older or poorer people, those displaced by the 2008 war and ethnic minorities – are more sceptical of and ambivalent towards Europe (Lejava, 2021). These minorities are also more vulnerable to Russian soft power, which currently mostly takes the form of "[widespread] disinformation and promotes pro-Russian and anti-Western rhetoric" (Lomia, 2020, 122). With this strategy, the Kremlin particularly targets its diaspora in neighbours and former Soviet republics (Radnitz, 2022).

3. Attitudes towards Gender and Sexuality in Georgia

Above, I introduced Georgia's geopolitical circumstances that frame the gender debate in the country. In this section, I will discuss the current situation regarding women's and LGBTQ+ rights in Georgia. The focus will be on the legislation, the public's attitudes toward these laws and the people they address. I will start by briefly introducing the legislative changes that the Georgian government introduced in order to increase equality in the country. I will also discuss the prevalence and nature of gender norms in Georgia. Subsequently, I will zoom in on two core aspects of the current track towards gender equality – representation and the labour market – and finally, I will discuss the situation concerning the LGBTQ+ community.

3.1 A More Equal Legislation in a Patriarchal Society

Since its independence in the early 1990s, and especially throughout the twenty-first century, Georgia has undertaken many steps to make its legislation more inclusive. This process started with the ratification of the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1994 and of the Beijing Declaration in 1995 (Gorgadze, 2020). In 2000, homosexuality was decriminalised with the annulation of the "anti-sodomy law" (Kuenning, 2019; Ziemer & Roberts, 2024). After the Rose Revolution, a number of new laws were introduced to promote equality: a law against domestic violence (2006, updated in 2016), a gender equality law (2010), a law banning all forms of discrimination (2014), an equality clause in the constitution (2017), and a sexual harassment law (2019) (Kuenning, 2019; Gorgadze, 2020; Kajaia et al., 2023; Abesadze et al., 2023; Ziemer & Roberts, 2024). Furthermore, several relevant strategies have been adopted in recent years. The National Strategy for the period 2014-2020 foregrounded the importance of the protection of human rights (Mestvirishvili et al., 2017; Luciani, 2021a). The 2021-2025 Development Strategy also strives to improve female entrepreneurship, while other strategies aim to "develop evidence-based policy recommendations to support the Georgian government's aims towards the elimination of gender inequalities" (Kajaia et al., 2023, 6). Finally, the country ratified the Istanbul Convention – which strives to combat violence against women and domestic violence – in 2017 (Shevtsova, 2023; Ziemer & Roberts, 2024).

So, at least on the institutional level, Georgia is visibly working to increase gender equality. However, there still is a lot of work to be done because the current system "remains inadequate and ineffective, especially for employed women" (UN Women, 2022, 12). Much has been done, but there remain a lot of significant gaps in the legislation (UN Women, 2020; Kajaia et al., 2023). Generally speaking, this new legislation aims to increase women's access to the public sphere and decrease discrimination

experienced by both women and LGBTQ+ people. However, changing legislation is one thing, but changing a society and its values is something entirely different and requires much more time and effort (Mestvirishvili et al., 2017). Moreover, these new laws do not tackle the structural obstacles and societal attitudes that hinder the path to equality. Furthermore, there are doubts on how genuine these changes are, because many have interpreted these laws as a “checkbox exercise” (Ziemer & Roberts, 2024, 11). They make it seem like the Georgian government is working on it without introducing actual meaningful change (Kuenning, 2019; Ziemer & Roberts, 2024). One of the arguments in support of this idea is the fact that many of these laws have been linked to international organisations. The 2010 gender equality and 2014 anti-discrimination laws have, for instance, been interpreted as motivated by the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Kajaia et al., 2023). Similarly, the 2014-2020 Strategy has been linked to dialogues with the EU concerning visa liberalisation (Luciani, 2021a).

Georgian society remains very patriarchal, with deeply ingrained gender roles, which illustrates both the need to change the country’s gender legislation and why this is difficult. Women may have obtained more equality in the public sphere, but this does not extend to the private sphere (Torosyan et al., 2015). In fact, as happened in many post-socialist countries, the transition to liberal democracy has actually made things worse for women in many ways by decreasing their access to the public sphere and simultaneously reinforcing “traditional values” (Ó Beacháin Stefańczak, 2015; Torosyan et al., 2015). In post-soviet Georgia, a lot of social welfare and public services have been rolled back (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). Under the influence of the dominant traditional values, women have taken up the majority of this labour, and this increased burden of unpaid, reproductive labour is pushing women out of the public sphere and back into the home (Torosyan et al., 2015). These values include, amongst others, the framing of women as mothers and caregivers first and foremost while the men are the masters of the house (Torosyan et al., 2015; Mestvirishvili et al., 2017; Tabatadze, 2023), an emphasis on (Orthodox) Christianity (Gelashvili, 2022) and the expectation of heterosexual families with many children (Zamanov, 2021). The powerful Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) plays a large role in this promotion by defending “traditional values and gender roles”, thus opposing “liberal” values such as gender equality (Ó Beacháin Stefańczak, 2015; Luciani, 2021a). This is especially important and impactful because of the high levels of trust the GOC enjoys among the Georgian public (Mestvirishvili et al., 2017). For women to have equal access to the labour market, the burden of reproductive labour needs to be reduced, but for that to happen, the Georgian people will need to change their attitudes and expectations concerning gender.

These gender expectations contribute, amongst other things, to the chronic underrepresentation of women in positions of power and their economic disempowerment (Mestvirishvili et al., 2017). Moreover, most Georgian women have very little chance to improve this situation because they have only limited access to “productive resources such as land, finance and decision-making”, which are necessary to gain more independence (Kajaia et al., 2023, 6-7). The legislative changes that were discussed earlier, such as the Anti-Discrimination Law and the Gender Equality Law, aim to improve this situation, but the implementation is insufficient at best (Kajaia et al., 2023). On top of that, violence against women remains common (Ziemer & Roberts, 2024). Especially in rural areas, people are often forced into marriage and even child marriages (Gorgadze, 2020; Abesadze et al., 2023). Furthermore, domestic violence remains prevalent and is even on the rise (Gorgadze, 2020; Abesadze et al., 2023; Ziemer & Roberts, 2024).

3.2 Representation in Politics and Education

The above-described dynamics that keep women in the domestic sphere and a subordinate position also affect women’s representation, especially within the realm of politics. Women’s political representation in Georgia is very low when compared to the European average (Ó Beacháin Stefańczak, 2015; Gorgadze, 2020; Lejava, 2021). In the 2020 elections, only one in five of the elected legislators were women (Lejava, 2021). During the 2000s and (early) 2010s, the government has undertaken action to increase the number of women in positions where they get to contribute to the decision-making, but to not much avail and, particularly amongst ethnic minorities, women’s representation remains low (Gorgadze, 2020).

There are several explanations for this persistent issue. Firstly, the party system acts as the most important gatekeeper in which the almost exclusively male leadership decides who is granted access to a political position (Ó Beacháin Stefańczak, 2015). There are mechanisms in place to encourage the inclusion of women, but these are not working. The most important of these is the “soft gender quota” that was introduced in 2012 (ibid., 3). These provide a financial incentive for parties to include more women on the party lists during elections but remain largely unused (Ó Beacháin Stefańczak, 2015). In 2020, mandatory gender quotas were introduced (Ergeshidze, 2024), but these were abolished in 2024 (civil.ge, 2024). Moreover, the women who do obtain visible positions face noticeably more harassment than their male counterparts (Ergeshidze, 2024). Georgia does have a

female president, Salome Zorabidze, but her “political position is weak due to the nature of the constitutional arrangements,” and, therefore, the actual impact she has on policy is limited (Bornio, 2024).

Another important field in the discussion of representation is education. It is a big player in the reinforcement of traditional and patriarchal values while also being a relatively female-dominated field. This shows how more representation does not automatically entail more empowerment on its own. Most teachers in Georgia (88%) and even most school principals (63%) are women (Tabatadze, 2023). Women, therefore, seem to be holding a significant part of the structural power in the Georgian education system (*ibid.*). However, this alone does not necessarily indicate more attention to and progress towards gender equality within education itself. This is because the women who acquire these kinds of positions – especially in a patriarchal context – are often the ones who conform to the values held by those in power, therefore supporting rather than challenging them (Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2022). This means that, despite the significant number of women who are active in the field, the Georgian education system remains “shaped by the past masculine educational system and influential socialising agents such as the church, media, neighbourhood, and family” (Tabatadze, 2023, 13). This extends to the university level, where there also is a clear gender segregation that reflects traditional gender roles: the “hard sciences” are dominated by men, while women primarily opt for programs revolving around care and education (Gorgadze, 2020). This has important consequences for the gender division in the labour market, as will be discussed in the next section.

As one of the major ways in which values, power relations and knowledge are being spread and reinforced in society, education plays a crucial role in the continued dominance of these traditional values (Tabatadze, 2023). Several studies on gender equality have focused on the way traditional gender roles are being reinforced in schools by doing a content and discourse analysis of the textbooks that were used “since the introduction of the new National Curriculum in 2005” (*ibid.*, 2). They illustrate how Georgian education remains very patriarchal, especially content-wise: in the textbooks and classes, men are presented as empowered and superior, while women are put in a passive and subordinate position that revolves around care and the household (Torosyan et al., 2015; Gorgadze, 2020; Tabatadze, 2023). The achievements of women – particularly those in agentic positions – remain underrepresented (Gorgadze, 2020). One example is the achievements of female scientists, who are chronically overlooked while men’s accomplishments are highlighted (Tabatadze, 2023). This invisibility is part of a general trend in which “women are invisible in social interactions, and women are portrayed as passive participants in society, while men are presented as problem solvers and agents of change and development” (*ibid.*, 8).

Steps are being taken to improve the situation here as well, but the success of these measures has been mixed (Gorgadze, 2020; Tabatadze, 2023). Firstly, by now, there is indeed a more equal representation of women and men in the textbooks, at least from a numerical perspective (Tabatadze, 2023). However, even in the textbooks with a more balanced gender representation, women continue to be mostly presented as passive and subordinate (*ibid.*). So, even though steps have been taken to make women less invisible and to eradicate the “negative discourse of gender inequality,” there is still a long way to go to obtain more positive representation (Gorgadze, 2020). This situation results in “an inadequate presentation of women’s roles, contributions, and importance in public and political life” (Tabatadze, 2023, 9). Finally, gender stereotypes are not only perpetuated through the content of the textbooks but also in the way schools and teachers treat their pupils differently based on their gender (Gorgadze, 2016). It can, therefore, be concluded that traditional gender stereotypes continue to be reinforced in schools and are thus carried over to the next generation (Gorgadze, 2016; Tabatadze, 2023).

3.3 Productive vs. Reproductive Labour

The above-described gender stereotypes are also reflected in the labour market, which continues to be very segregated (Gorgadze, 2020; UN Women, 2020), displays a significant gender pay gap (UN Women, 2020) and has a prominent glass ceiling (UN Women, 2020; Abesadze et al., 2023). The Georgian government is working to improve this situation – at least ostensibly – but the impact is limited. In recent years, Georgia has updated its gender and anti-discrimination legislation to improve gender equality in the labour market, but this law has yet to see practical implementation and results (Abesadze et al., 2023).

There are many reasons for the persistence of this gender pay gap. Firstly, there is the earlier discussed prevalence of gendered expectations in society that tells women what kind of jobs they should (not) desire (Abesadze et al., 2023). Secondly, there is the domestic labour division. Nowadays, about half of Georgian women have a job (Gorgadze, 2020), compared to an estimated two-thirds of men (Kajaia et al., 2023). However, most of these women only work part-time because – due to the dominance of

traditional gender roles – they remain the sole caretakers of the household (Torosyan et al., 2015; UN Women, 2020; Abesadze et al., 2023), especially mothers are heavily underrepresented in the labour market (UN Women, 2020). In the literature, the fact that women are expected to combine productive with reproductive labour is referred to as ‘the double burden’ (UN Women, 2022). This burden affects not only women’s leisure time but also their physical and mental well-being (ibid.). This is part of the explanation for the gender pay gap, but it does not cover the entire picture (Kajaia et al., 2023). Thirdly, there is the segregation of the labour market in which typical women’s jobs – primarily in the service or care industries as well as textiles and education – are also the ones that have the lowest wages and least prestige (Gorgadze, 2020; UN Women, 2020; Abesadze et al., 2023; Kajaia et al., 2023). Finally, there is a big group of women who are not even seeking employment – and thus are not included in the unemployment statistics (Kajaia et al., 2023).

This is part of a general trend of systemic discrimination in which it is very difficult for Georgian women to obtain independence, particularly in rural areas. They, for instance, also rarely own any property (Kajaia et al., 2023). This makes it, amongst other things, more difficult for them to increase their independence or become entrepreneurs. Georgia has by now introduced equal property rights (Kajaia et al., 2023). However, in a similar situation to the labour market, the incorporation of equality in legislation does not automatically translate into practical change (ibid.). Finally, when women do try to perform masculine-coded tasks, they are rarely taken seriously but rather underestimated and ridiculed (ibid.). Despite this lack of respect or inclusion in the decision-making process, these women are heavily involved in farming, where they “sow the crops, harvest, gather wood, plough the land, and milk, clean and feed livestock,” on top of taking care of the entire household and raising their children (ibid., 15). For people with disabilities, especially women, it is even more challenging to obtain any autonomy because they are very dependent on their families because Georgia lacks the “proper support services” (Gumberidze & Kalina, 2022). Even when they are able to do so, these women are often prevented from going outside by their families, let alone obtaining and keeping a job (ibid.). Trans women are also extra vulnerable because, despite the 2014 anti-discrimination law, they remain largely invisible and unprotected in the labour market, limiting their potential employers (Chkareuli, 2020).

Attitudes and policies are evolving and are working to change this, but this change happens slowly. In previous sections, I have illustrated how Georgian legislation is slowly becoming more inclusive, but the implementation of these changes remains lacklustre across the board. This lack of implementation also matches up with the public opinion in which traditional gender norms and expectations remain dominant. Until these attitudes are changed, it is difficult to obtain real change. Furthermore, many of the steps towards increasing equality have been taken in the context of the European integration process and EU conditionality, which is a rather top-down process (Ziemer & Roberts, 2024). Yet, progress is being made. A Caucasus Barometer Survey recorded that throughout the 2010s, the Georgian people have grown more accepting of women living on their own (from 56% against to 36%) and having premarital sex (from 80% against to 63%) (Saldadze, 2020). It has, for instance, been reported that “attitudes towards what is acceptable for women [to do]” are changing (ibid.). Importantly, this evolution occurs across all genders and ages (ibid.). All in all, women are still being judged “for a wide range of different [behaviours] in society, but attitudes are changing” (ibid.).

3.4 LGBTQ+ Rights

The situation regarding gender equality may be slowly improving in Georgia, but in the case of LGBTQ+ rights, the situation is more difficult. Nonetheless, it is difficult to discuss matters of gender equality without incorporating a discussion of the LGBTQ+ community because the people and institutions that try to increase or oppose gender equality tend to do the same for LGBTQ+ rights (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). On paper, the situation appears to be improving, but in practice, these efforts end up being mostly performative. The GD government did make Georgia’s legislation more inclusive, both regarding gender and LGBTQ+ rights (Luciani, 2021a). However, especially in the case of the latter, this process “was accompanied by an almost explicit promise by the governments that implementation would not necessarily follow” (Shevtsova, 2023, 166). This way, they manage to simultaneously appeal to both the EU and the conservatives; it allows Georgia to “portray the country as ‘European’, thus ‘modern’ and [‘civilised’], in opposition to Russia” while simultaneously continuing to appeal to its own conservative audience by not actually taking action (Luciani, 2021b). However, despite everything, support for LGBTQ+ rights is increasing, if only very slightly, amongst young people (Fabbro, 2019).

One example of this dynamic is the anti-discrimination law that outlaws any “discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity,” which was adopted in 2014 in the context of the negotiations for the EU–Georgia Association Agreement and

the Free Trade Area (DCFTA) (Luciani, 2021a, 5). This law was a clear step by “the state towards the protection of LGBTI rights” (Gelashvili, 2022, 668). However, since its introduction, no practical implementation of this legislation has been observed as there still have not been any recorded court cases on discrimination because of gender identity or sexuality (Shevtsova, 2023). On the contrary, there are reports of homophobic behaviour by law enforcement officials themselves, disregarding and refusing to investigate reported hate crimes, particularly those against trans women (Fabbro, 2019). The law’s connection to negotiations with the EU also opens the door for the argument that this is a “foreign imposition” onto Georgian culture and, thus, a danger to its traditions. This argument is supported by the fact that it is true that “almost all major legal changes regarding equality for LGBTI people have been made under pressure from European institutions, and usually in exchange for clear economic and political benefits” (Shevtsova, 2023, 166). Simultaneously, Georgia’s prime minister uses the existence of these laws to support the claim that the problem of homophobia was “exaggerated” (ibid.).

The reality is, however, very different: homophobic violence remains prevalent and is only increasing (Gvianishvili, 2018; Fabbro, 2019). A painful example of this is what happened on 17 May 2013 – International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHOT) – when a peaceful demonstration was violently attacked, an event that has left its marks and remains vivid to this day (Mestvirishvili et al., 2017; Luciani, 2021a; Shevtsova, 2023). This attack was encouraged and led by the members of the GOC, mostly priests (ibid.). Rather than condemning the violence, Georgia’s politicians from the ruling party blamed the LGBTQ+ people and their allies for the violence, claiming that they provoked it themselves with their “excessive visibility”, which is claimed to go against Georgian culture and the Orthodox Church (Shevtsova, 2023, 170). This fits into a larger pattern where homophobic violence is sometimes verbally condemned by the Georgian government, but this condemnation rarely results in the investigation and prosecution of hate crimes (Mestvirishvili et al., 2017; Shevtsova, 2023). In 2014, the GOC also introduced the “Family Purity Day’ on 17 May, the same day as IDAHOT, as an action of protest against the anti-discrimination law (Luciani, 2021a). This is a clear example of the red thread of this working paper in which the Georgian government introduces new legislation to which it is encouraged through EU conditionality but does not implement it. These laws rarely receive support from the public – despite that public being in vocal support of a European future – and often experience resistance from the very powerful GOC and the rising far right. Consequently, LGBTQ+ rights form somewhat of an obstacle to the “acceptance of European values in Georgia,” but this is hardly unique to Georgia (Lejava, 2021, 6). Rather, it fits in the pattern of the global success of the anti-gender movement.

4. The Politicisation of Gender in Georgia

As was discussed and illustrated above, Georgian society continues to be dominated by patriarchal values. These “traditional values” are being reinforced by politics and education. Their prominence in society creates significant obstacles for women to get ahead. They are by now entering the workforce but do so while carrying a significant double burden in which they have to perform productive labour while remaining responsible for all the reproductive labour at home. On top of that, the labour market is very segregated, and the typical “women’s jobs” tend to pay less. When a woman does try to perform a masculine-coded task, she is underestimated and mocked. All of this makes it very difficult for Georgian women to obtain (more) independence and, thus, for Georgian society to become more equal. Similarly, LGBTQ+ people and their allies are trying to fight for more rights and are met with – sometimes violent – resistance. In both instances, the Georgian government is taking steps to improve the situation, mainly under pressure from the EU. However, as has been illustrated above and will be further discussed below, these efforts have limited results. This section will discuss how both the visibility of LGBTQ+ people and women’s rights have been increasingly politicised over the last few years and have seen significant steps forward but also backwards. To do this, it will mostly focus on LGBTQ+ rights – unlike the previous sections that mostly discussed women’s rights – because this is the aspect of gender equality that is currently the most prominent in the discussion of the topic, both globally and in Georgia itself.

4.1 (Liberal) Democracy and Conservative Values

There is a clear tension between the public’s wish for a “European future” and its resistance to the increased influence of the EU on their country and society. As discussed earlier, Georgia’s pro-western turn was accompanied by the need to liberalise and democratise its society and economy (Mestvirishvili et al., 2017; Tabatadze et al., 2023). This resulted in rapid institutional and political changes, but this happened in the absence of the political culture that is necessary to support them, as values are evolving much slower than policy (ibid.). It, therefore, remains clear that Georgia’s pro-EU turn was mostly motivated by “expectations of economic prosperity [rather] than an endorsement of European values,” as well as the promise of more security

against Russia (Lejava, 2021, 7). Nonetheless, the social policies discussed in the previous section must be introduced to achieve that goal. Georgia's government, therefore, frames these changes as measures to appease the West in order to sell them to the public and other powerful players in Georgia who are opposed to them (Shevtsova, 2023). The most impactful of these conservative forces is probably the GOC, which is especially opposed to the gender aspect of European integration, though not necessarily integration in general. It, for instance, strongly opposed the 2014 anti-discrimination law but eventually could not stop it from being adopted (Chitanava, 2016). At the same time, this law has barely had any practical effect since it was first introduced (*ibid.*). This reality supports the above theory that many of these laws are intended to look good without impacting society.

Particularly, the moves towards increasing gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights are receiving a lot of resistance. In both the Summers of 2019 and 2021, there were violent protests against the visibility of LGBTQ+ people in Tbilisi (Luciani, 2021a, 2023). In 2021, this even resulted in the burning of the EU flag in front of the Georgian parliament and its subsequent replacement by a cross (Luciani, 2023). In 2019, most violence was related to the Tbilisi Pride, which was organised by local activists and encouraged by Western donors and NGOs (Ptskialadze, 2019; Luciani, 2021a, 2021b). This underlines the reality in which most gender equality and LGBTQ+ activism in Georgia is not perceived as a grassroots movement by a big part of society but rather as a "top-down phenomenon tightly connected to the NGO sector and donor community" (Ptskialadze, 2019). In this regard, gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights have grown to represent the (potential) liberalisation – and Europeanization – of Georgia's society and values (Mestvirishvili et al. 2017). On the one hand, these efforts fit into Georgia's EU aspirations, but on the other, they clash with the patriarchal values that are still dominant in its society. This tension also exists within the behaviour of the Georgian government itself, which is very inconsistent at best: they have made their laws more inclusive but do not actually implement these changes, and they condemn violence against women and minorities without taking serious action against it (*ibid.*). Hate crimes and acts of discrimination against women and minorities are still rarely investigated, let alone punished (Chitanava, 2016; Mestvirishvili et al., 2017).

It is also crucial to remember that not all moves by the Georgian government work towards greater equality and inclusivity. Some actually make this goal more difficult to achieve. For instance, the amendment to the constitution that redefined marriage as "a union between man and woman," thus making it more difficult to introduce marriage equality (Mestvirishvili et al., 2017; Kuenning, 2019; Gelashvili, 2022). This is not something unique to Georgia either because ten years earlier, Serbia did the exact same thing (Kljajic, 2021). This change has been interpreted as a balancing act between the influence of the EU and the conservative powers in Georgia. During the earlier mentioned negotiations for the Association Agreement in 2014, there was a fear that the introduction of the anti-discrimination law would put Georgia on a slippery slope towards the legalisation of same-sex marriage (Gelashvili, 2022), despite assurances from the EU that this would not be the case (Luciani, 2021a; Shevtsova, 2023). It was the GOC that called for this change, arguing it was necessary to safeguard Georgian traditions (Chitanava, 2016). By changing the constitution to hinder marriage equality, the GD government could give the conservative powers in Georgia a win in the discussion of equality without obstructing its European ambitions too much (*ibid.*). In 2024, the GD government also introduced a new anti-LGBTQ+ draft bill that "aims to prohibit people from changing their gender, as well as outlaw same-sex couples from adopting children" (Gavin & Parulava, 2024). This law, too, was perceived as an attempt to gain favour from the GOC (*ibid.*). All in all, Georgia seems to be applying a strategy that is common in Eastern Europe, which revolves around making it seem as if they are working to improve equality in the country without doing the work to introduce actual change (Slootmaeckers, 2017).

This strategy has been linked to the growing prominence of far-right and anti-liberal forces in the region (Gordon, 2020). As Georgia makes its legislation more inclusive, the narrative that LGBTQ+ rights are a "Western conspiracy to destroy Georgian traditions" increases in prominence, as does the violent resistance against it (Luciani, 2021a, 1). Part of the explanation for this hyperfocus on LGBTQ+ rights is the fact that the different groups making up the Georgian far-right are relatively divided in their priorities and origins, but they make an exception for queer people (Gelashvili, 2021, 2022; Ziemer & Roberts, 2024). Generally speaking, Georgian conservatives are united in their opposition to "state-supported, top-down liberalism and its successes" but divided on their solutions (Kinch, 2018). This kind of far-right ethnic and religious nationalism has always existed in Georgia, but since 2012, it has grown in prominence and influence (Gordon, 2020; Gelashvili, 2022). This has been tolerated and, at times, even condoned by the GD government, which contributed to their increased visibility and impact. For the time being, this far-right movement still mostly remains outside of the parliament – apart from the Alliance of Patriots party that was elected in the 2016 elections – but this does not mean it is not massively influential (Gordon, 2020; Gelashvili, 2022). They are successfully

“[shaping] social and political discourse according to their ideological framework,” thus increasingly creating more space for their worldview (Gordon, 2020). According to their mindset, anyone who is not an Orthodox Christian, a native Georgian and who does not conform to heteronormative gender roles and stereotypes is an Other and, thus, a threat to Georgian society (Gelashvili, 2021, 2022).

As was already mentioned earlier in this paper, it is easy to connect this kind of far-right rhetoric to Russian narratives. However, it is crucial to remember that opposition to Western liberalism does not automatically mean pro-Russian attitudes, even if the prominence of these narratives does benefit Russia. Georgian liberals and people in the West often try to discredit the Georgian far-right by (discursively) linking them to Russia (Kinch, 2018; Gelashvili, 2021). This is partially true in that Russia indeed uses its soft power in its neighbourhood to position itself as an alternative to the ‘decadent West’ that aligns more with traditional values (Mestvirishvili et al., 2017). However, linking every opposition to the liberalisation of society in Georgia to Russia is an oversimplification, which overlooks and hides many critical nuances (Kinch, 2018; Gelashvili, 2021). Additionally, it distracts from the socio-economic problems and authoritarian legacy that are at the roots of the current popularity of the far right in Georgia (Kinch, 2018; Lejava, 2021; Shevtsova, 2023). Moreover, the Georgian far right is far from united and should be treated as such by and in the literature (Gelashvili, 2021). It is also important to note that, even though there are many similarities to Russian narratives, most Georgian conservatives look to the West for inspiration and invoke politicians such as Orban, Trump and Bolsonaro (Kinch, 2018; Luciani, 2023). As discussed at the beginning of this paper, values of gender and sexuality may be one of the prominent fault lines in the current polarisation between East and West, but the anti-gender movement is now a global phenomenon and thus moves beyond that.

This is not to say that there is no overlap with Russia at all because there is, especially when it comes to ideology. For instance, the idea of the Orthodox Church as one of the bastions protecting Christian society from Western decadence (Gordon, 2020; Gelashvili, 2021). However, although this narrative is closely associated with Russia, its roots are to be found in nativism and authoritarianism, not Russia specifically (Gelashvili, 2021). Furthermore, the narrative of Western decadence and ‘gender ideology’ is part of what unites the far right across the globe (ibid.). Most Georgians – including the far right – continue to see the West and Europe as their “civilisation homeland,” it is the current policies of Europe they are opposing, not Europe itself (ibid.). This can also be seen in the fact that some far-right groups do indeed have links to Russia, but at least as often, these links are to the West (Gordon, 2020).

4.2 Religion and the Orthodox Church

One of the most influential institutions in Georgia, particularly in the (anti-)gender debate, remains the GOC. After the dissolution of the USSR, the GOC became a powerful political and ideological actor in Georgia. It achieved this by forging a strong discursive, emotional link between religion, Georgian national identity and independence (Mestvirishvili et al., 2017; Shevtsova, 2023). Currently, the GOC’s patriarch receives the most trust from the Georgian people (Shevtsova, 2023), while their trust in the government continues to decrease (Mestvirishvili et al., 2017; Gelashvili, 2022). This decreased trust has several reasons, including the social anxiety and resentment sparked by the liberalisation of the Georgian economy and legislation. Consequently, the government is essentially obliged to – at least demonstratively – have a good relationship with the GOC (Shevtsova, 2023). Every independent government of Georgia has indeed done its best to display this close relationship, albeit to varying degrees. This is especially the case for the current GD government, which has been in power since 2012 and has the GOC “actively participating in formal and informal political processes” (Gelashvili, 2022, 656). The earlier discussed constitutional change and anti-LGBTQ+ law are examples of this dynamic. These developments occurred parallel to the post-Soviet pro-EU pivot that set the country on track towards Europeanization. In the case of gender issues, this means that there was a pro-gender equality entity (the EU) and a pro-traditional values power (the GOC) were simultaneously gaining influence over Georgian society and politics (Shevtsova, 2023).

The GOC uses its influence over Georgian society to further its own conservative agenda. This entails that anything that the GOC does not condone is also opposed by a large part of the people, including values such as gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights (Mestvirishvili et al., 2017; Shevtsova, 2023). The GOC frames policies to increase liberal values, such as gender equality, as a threat to the nation and this way, and this way, it has successfully stopped or at least slowed down the adoption of pro-gender equality and LGBTQ+ measures (Luciani, 2021a; Shevtsova, 2023). At the same time, it has successfully pushed for legislation that makes life more difficult for women and LGBTQ+ people, as was discussed in earlier sections (Chitanava, 2016; Shevtsova,

2023). This way, the GOC successfully counters the West's self-identification as "a source of universal norms" by presenting itself as an alternative, at least in the Georgian context (Luciani, 2021a). Because the Georgian far-right opposes the same liberal values as the GOC, the two are close and often work together (Gordon, 2020).

To achieve these anti-liberal ambitions, the GOC has invoked certain elements of Russia's "Gayropa" narrative (Luciani, 2021a). This strategy has been interpreted as an indication of the continuation of the close relationship between the GOC and Russia (ibid.). The situation becomes even more complex when taking into account that – unlike the Catholic Church – the Orthodox Church does not have a central doctrine or authority (Shevtsova, 2023). Instead, the different Churches each have their own leaders – the Patriarchs. However, although both the Georgian and Ukrainian Orthodox Churches are formally independent from the Russian Orthodox Church, they all maintain close ties (ibid.). These different Churches and their mutual relationships have been affected by the 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia (ibid.). In the current geopolitical context – where Europe/the West has grown to be associated with liberalism and Russia with the opposition to those – the GOC will have to reinvent and redefine itself (ibid.). This was already the case before 2022, but the situation has only become more entrenched in the years since. This includes the acceptance or rejection of gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights. One way it could do this is by accepting some parts of Europeanization while rejecting others (Shevtsova, 2023). It is also important to consider that the GOC has never opposed the idea that the future of Georgia is European (ibid.). Rather, they are trying to redefine what this European future looks like and turn it into something that aligns with their own ideology and worldviews (ibid.). This is also why, even though they regularly push back against measures taken in favour of European integration, they do not oppose this integration as a whole (ibid.).

5. Conclusion

Independent Georgia has redirected its foreign policy to the EU and aspires to EU membership. However, it proves difficult to completely disconnect from Russia, particularly regarding its economy and domestic policies, which continue to be influenced by their neighbour. To fulfil these European ambitions, Georgia is liberalising its society. These efforts clash with the traditional, patriarchal values that are still dominant in Georgian society and, therefore, receive resistance. In this working paper, I investigated this clash by providing an overview of the different steps that had been taken and the opposition they encountered.

The different governments of independent Georgia have underlined the country's pro-western choice by working on growing closer to the European Union and introducing policies accordingly. This includes a lot of policies to improve gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights because this is expected by the EU. They have introduced several pro-equality and anti-discrimination policies. However, this does not show the full picture because there are still many problems. Firstly, the liberalisation of Georgia's economy has decreased gender equality in many ways by reducing social services and thus increasing the burden of reproductive labour on women. Secondly, most of the new policies have not actually been implemented and thus have minimal to no impact. Thirdly, Georgia has a very patriarchal society with deeply ingrained gender roles and expectations. These form significant obstacles for women (and LGBTQ+ people) to increase their visibility and independence in society, for instance, through the gendered labour market, even though there is – technically speaking – legislation in place to prevent discrimination. Georgia's attitudes are growing slightly more accepting, but this develops very slowly. Furthermore, there is the Georgian Orthodox Church that has a lot of power in the country and uses this to further its own, conservative agenda.

This big gap between legislation, society, and the government's unwillingness to implement the new policies has led many to conclude that most of these actions look good, without improving the situation. This puts Georgia in the company of other (Eastern) European countries, such as Serbia, that are pretending to be more equal in order to gain favour with the EU. All of this takes place in a polarised geopolitical context in which a country's attitude towards gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights can be interpreted as a foreign policy choice. This makes it even more important and difficult for Georgia to balance its EU aspirations with those of its conservative society.

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UNU-CRIS Working Paper #11 2024

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Published by: United Nations University Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies

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