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THE GENDERED EROSION OF DEMOCRACY: EVIDENCE FROM GEORGIA****

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ABSTRACT: This article explores how regression in gender equality has become an integral feature of democratic backsliding. Focusing on Georgia, it identifies the interconnected ways in which the ruling Georgian Dream party has rolled-back previous gains in equality and inclusion. The past two years have seen gender become both a target and a tool of illiberal politics, including the weaponisation of equality policies and institutions, the sanctification of retrograde gender roles, as well as measures to undermine the country's long-standing international commitments towards anti-discrimination and the rule of law. Evidence from Georgia confirms that attacks on gender equality are firmly part of the 'autocratic playbook', which is being deployed across the globe. This article makes an original contribution to comparative research on processes of autocratisation by showing how the demise of gender politics is a reliable indicator of democratic decay.

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INTRODUCTION

Whilst democratic backsliding and the regression in women's rights is prevalent across much of the world, including several European countries and the United States, gender remains marginal in most discussions of democratic decline. As a counterweight this article brings gender to centre stage by using the Republic of Georgia as a case study to argue that the undermining of equality and anti-discrimination measures is, in fact, an integral feature of the Georgian Dream (GD) party's concerted effort to rollback democracy and relinquish accountability and oversight. Crucially, Georgia's departure from its former gender and anti-discrimination standards has also led to a sharp divergence from European and international norms in this sphere.

In October 2024, the GD secured a fourth term amidst significant international electoral criticism. Consequently, most opposition parties refrained from assuming their mandates and in February 2025, parliament rescinded the mandates of 49 opposition MPs, thus establishing a one-party system.¹ During this time, there has been a marked escalation in anti-LGBTQ+ rights and equality initiatives.

This article explores the gendered content of democratic backsliding in Georgia, which as will be discussed, is far from peripheral to the country's autocratic turn. The article is guided by the following research question: How are gender and equality mobilised as 'tools and targets' within Georgia's democratic regression?

REVIEW OF CURRENT SCHOLARSHIP

By focusing primarily on formal political structures, many scholars overlook the gendered dimensions of democratic backsliding. In response to this gender blindness, feminist researchers have reframed the debate by

¹ The opposition Gakharia for Georgia Party (twelve mandates) also declared the election illegitimate but did not decline its mandate. It does not, though, participate in parliamentary activities.

showing how autocrats weaponize women's rights to consolidate power (Chenoweth & Marks, 2022; Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2022). Wayden (2015) argues that mainstream analyses neglect how institutions, representation, and participation are inevitably shaped by gendered hierarchies, and that democracy's erosion cannot be understood without accounting for women's political participation. From this perspective, attacks on gender equality institutions, women's NGOs, and reproductive rights emerge as reliable early warning signs of democratic decline (Wang et al., 2017) with democratic backsliding often unfolding through gender policy rollback, where rights related to equality are targeted from the outset (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2018, 2019; Roggeband & Krizsán, 2020). Suteu (2025) likewise observes that studies of Europe's rule-of-law crisis are often unifocal and neglect the central role of gender within the authoritarian playbook.

The instrumentalization of gender is evident across a range of national contexts. In Hungary, Orbán's 2021 'child protection' law accompanied anti-gender rhetoric portraying Western liberalism as a threat to Hungarian values (Grzebalska & Pető, 2018; Pető, 2021). Poland's PiS used 'anti-gender ideology' to justify abortion restrictions and to question the Istanbul Convention, framing the 'West' as morally corrupt in the process (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). In the United States, state-level attacks on abortion, DEI, and transgender rights follow similar scripts (Quinan, 2025; Restar et al., 2024). Anti-DEI campaigns fuel moral panic (Dechman et al., 2024; Conyers & Wright Fields, 2025), while abortion bans are framed as preserving traditional roles (Lantz et al., 2023). As Stein (2023) and Cooper (2017) show, these efforts mobilise family-protection rhetoric, while Brown (2019) and Butler (2021) argue that such narratives legitimise exclusion under the guise of democratic cohesion.

In Georgia, scholars linking democratic backsliding, gender, and EU integration (Torres-Adán and Buzogány, 2025; Panchulidze & Youngs, 2025; Meladzi & Assaad, 2025; Andguladze, 2021; Tsuladze et al., 2023; Tabatadze & Gigauri, 2025) increasingly view regressive gender politics as a proxy for democratic decline (McInnes & Hunter, 2024). Luciani (2021) highlights how gender and LGBTQ+ issues are also 'geopoliticized', as equality linked to 'Europeanness' clashes with Russia's traditionalist 'gender order', now promoted by Georgia's ruling party. Shevtsova (2022)

similarly links gender equality to foreign policy orientation. Luciani and Shevtsova (2024) argue that under geopolitical pressure, Georgian elites have securitised LGBTQ+ identities as threats to be contained.

DISCUSSION: THE GENDERED ARCHITECTURE OF GEORGIA'S DEMOCRATIC REGRESSION

1. WEAPONISING TRANSPARENCY: THE FOREIGN AGENTS LAW

The introduction of Georgia's *Transparency of Foreign Influence Law*, or *Foreign Agents Law*, demonstrates how 'transparency' has been weaponised to restrict civic and media activity. Initially proposed in March 2023, the bill sought to classify organisations receiving more than 20 percent of their funding from abroad to register as 'agents of foreign influence.' Following mass protests and EU condemnation, GD withdrew the bill after its first reading, only to revive and pass it in May 2024 (Parliament of Georgia, 2024b; iuristi.com, 2024). Although later reworded to label such organisations as 'pursuing the interests of a foreign power' (Council of Europe, 2025), the substance of the law remained unchanged (IRIS Merlin, 2024). Prime Minister Kobakhidze defended the law as a measure of transparency and equality (1TV, 2024a).

Critics drew parallels between Georgia's law and earlier measures in Russia and Hungary, both deemed inconsistent with democratic standards (Venice Commission & OSCE/ODIHR, 2024, para. 38; European Parliament, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024). Enacted on 31 May 2025, the legislation affected the vast majority of Georgian NGOs. Oversight was transferred to the Anti-Corruption Bureau, which the government described as part of a transparency reform; however, observers warned that the change further narrowed Georgia's civic space. Women's rights and LGBTQ+ groups, which were typically dependent on international donors were among the most targeted (Democracy Research Institute, 2024; OSCE/ODIHR, 2025). By mid-2025, several CSOs were accused of breaching the law, threatened with criminal prosecution, and saw their bank accounts frozen (Sapari, 2025).

2. CRIMINALISING DISSENT: THE FOREIGN AGENTS REGISTRATION ACT (FARA)

In April 2025, parliament adopted the *Foreign Agents Registration Act* (FARA), which defines a ‘foreign agent’ as any natural or legal person acting under the direction or benefit of a ‘foreign principal’ (Parliament of Georgia 2025f, Art. 2). The Act introduced criminal liability and non-compliance punishable by up to five years’ imprisonment and fines (OC Media, 2025). Together with the *Foreign Agents Law*, FARA drastically curtailed the agency of CSOs to hold authorities accountable (Kamilsoy, 2025). In June 2025, the Anti-Corruption Bureau gained access to internal data from Human Rights NGO *Social Justice Center*, including personal information about women, LGBTQ+ persons, and ethnic minorities (Protectdefenders.eu, 2025).

3. SANCTIFYING CONSERVATISM THROUGH PSEUDO-RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE

While EU cooperation once promoted equality, conservative domestic actors, particularly the Georgian Orthodox Church, remain powerful opponents of gender and sexual minority rights. The Church’s influence was decisive in the 2017 constitutional amendment redefining marriage as a union between a man and a woman (Constitution of Georgia, 2017). Ahead of the 2024 elections, GD leaders adopted the Church’s rhetoric, portraying family as the nation’s moral core and condemning gender and sexual diversity (Democracy Research Institute, 2024). Prime Minister Kobakhidze and other officials justified these measures as defending Christian identity and national tradition (Civil.ge, 2024). The Patriarchate endorsed them, calling the protection of ‘traditional values’ a positive step (Patriarchate of Georgia, 2024). This fusion of church and state was symbolically reinforced when GD officials joined the *Family Purity Day* celebrations on 17 May, the same day as the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia (1TV, 2025).

4. INSTITUTIONALISING INTOLERANCE: THE LAW ON THE PROTECTION OF FAMILY VALUES AND MINORS

Adopted on 17 September 2024 with 84 votes and no opposition, the *Law on the Protection of Family Values and Minors* prohibits positive portrayals of LGBTQ+ identities, same-sex marriage, adoption by LGBTQ+ individuals, and gender-affirming care. It also bans LGBTQ+ demonstrations and restricts related content in education and media (Law of Georgia, 2024). The explanatory report equated LGBTQ+ identities with incest, an analogy condemned by the Venice Commission as stigmatising and unfounded (Venice Commission, 2024a). CSOs including the Equal Rights Coalition and WISG denounced the law as unconstitutional and incompatible with international standards (Equal Rights Coalition, 2024; WISG, 2024). The law narrows civic space, undermines anti-discrimination guarantees, and promotes censorship and stigma (CSO Meter, n.d.).

5. ERASING GENDER FROM LAW AND POLICY

In 2025, GD further advanced its illiberal project by erasing the term ‘gender’ from national legislation and the constitution (Law of Georgia, 2025). References to gender equality were replaced by ‘equality between men and women,’ and gender was removed as an aggravating factor in hate-crime law (Parliament of Georgia, 2025b). Proponents framed gender as a foreign, NGO-driven concept. One author of the draft described it as “madness” and “foreign-funded” (Macharashvili, 2025). Despite condemnation from international actors (Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, 2025, para. 62), the changes entered into force in April 2025.

6. DISMANTLING EQUALITY ARCHITECTURE: THE END OF THE PARLIAMENTARY GENDER COUNCIL

By erasing gender, GD abolished the requirement to maintain gender equality councils in Parliament, autonomous republics, and municipalities (Parliament of Georgia, 2025a; Law of Georgia, 2025). The Equality Council, established in 2010, had monitored gender mainstreaming and

supported National Action Plans in line with CEDAW, the EU–Georgia Association Agreement, and the Istanbul Convention (Legislative Herald of Georgia, 2010). Its dissolution marked a decisive break with international norms. The government’s substitute, the *Interim Parliamentary Commission on Women’s and Children’s Issues* (Parliament of Georgia, 2025d), was given a short-term mandate and narrow agenda, focusing on digital safety, women’s participation, and demographic issues (Parliament of Georgia, 2025e), thereby stripping away its institutional permanence and broader equality remit.

7. ROLLING BACK REPRESENTATION: ENDING GENDER QUOTAS

In April 2024, parliament repealed the *gender quotas* introduced in 2020, which required one in four candidates on party lists to be of a different gender (Parliament of Georgia, 2024a). Financial incentives for compliance were also removed. Despite claims that quotas were ‘insulting to women’ (1TV, 2024b), the move signalled a deeper shift toward conservatism and anti-Western nationalism. The repeal undermined previous efforts to advance women’s political participation and entrenched patriarchal norms in electoral politics.

8. SILENCING CIVIL SOCIETY: THE END OF MANDATORY CSO PARTICIPATION

In February 2025, GD eliminated mandatory CSO participation in public decision-making (Parliament of Georgia, 2025g). Amendments to parliamentary rules removed NGOs’ formal roles in selecting and vetting candidates for key judicial and oversight bodies, weakening transparency and accountability. Though CSOs may still be invited to consultations, their participation is now discretionary, diminishing both oversight and inclusivity. This measure eroded one of the last institutional checks on executive power and further restricted the policy influence of women’s and LGBTQ+ organisations.

ASSESSMENT

Our assessment of the evolving situation revolves around the following points. First, the Foreign Agents Law and FARA have together created a climate that feels increasingly hostile for gender equality. In doing so, they push Georgia further out of alignment with international norms such as the Istanbul Convention and CEDAW. As civic space shrinks and freedoms of association and expression come under renewed pressure, Georgia's path increasingly conflicts with the ECHR and EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, the very instruments that safeguard those freedoms.

Second, the Law on the Protection of Family Values and Minors represents a setback for anti-discrimination and LGBTQ+ rights and runs counter to the EU's Copenhagen Criteria. The Venice Commission concluded that the law fails to meet European and international standards and warned it could create a hostile environment for LGBT+ individuals in Georgia. By promoting a narrowly defined, heteronormative vision of the family, the law violates Article 21 of the ECHR, which prohibits discrimination on various grounds (Venice Commission, 2024, para. 38). The Commission also noted that it excludes same-sex couples and adopts a restrictive understanding of gender, contradicting the broader interpretation established in the case law of the ECtHR (Venice Commission, 2024, paras. 36). It further deemed the law incompatible with Article 9 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, which guarantees the right to marry and establish a family (Venice Commission, 2024, para. 31).

Equally significant are the law's practical implications. Across Europe, the way states handle Pride events reflect their broader commitment to democratic principles and EU values. In Georgia, the cancellation of Tbilisi Pride symbolises the nation's departure from these values.

Third, the legal erasure of 'gender' places Georgia further at odds with the EU's *Acquis Communautaire*, complicating its alignment with EU directives. Reflecting these gaps, the European Commission's 2024 enlargement report identified the absence of effective mechanisms for implementing gender equality and noted its limited integration across policy domains (European Commission, 2024a). The Commissioner for Human Rights similarly warned that removing 'gender' and 'gender iden-

tity' from national legislation weakens anti-discrimination protections and further marginalises vulnerable groups (Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, 2025). These developments contradict Georgia's obligations Under Article 5(a) of CEDAW, which calls on states to dismantle cultural norms that reinforce gender stereotypes (CEDAW, 1992), as well as the Istanbul Convention's definition of gender as a social construct and its mandate to prevent gender-based violence (Council of Europe, 2011, Article 3). The combined effect is both symbolic and structural: by deleting gender from law, Georgia not only narrows the language of equality but also undermines the institutional pathways through which those rights are realized.

Fourth, the dissolution of the parliamentary Equality Council established in 2010 and the rollback of electoral gender quotas, marks a significant regression. The EU requires both members and candidates to maintain independent, adequately resourced institutions for gender equality and non-discrimination. EU Directive 2024/1500 (14 May 2024) sets new minimum standards for national equality bodies, emphasising full independence from political or external interference, stronger legal powers, the capacity to enforce EU gender equality laws, and investigative authority (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2024). Although not immediately binding for non-EU states, the Directive's standards constitute critical benchmarks that Georgia would need to meet and integrate into national legislation should EU accession negotiations resume.

Georgia's recent institutional reforms have moved in the opposite direction. The creation of the interim Parliamentary Commission on Women's and Children's Issues in May 2025 (Parliament of Georgia, 2025d), which replaced the Gender Equality Council, marks a sharp break from EU standards. While the former council functioned as a permanent parliamentary mechanism aligned with EU and UN frameworks, the new commission was established with only a three-month mandate (later extended), undermining the continuity and stability required by the EU, CEDAW, and the Council of Europe. By restricting its remit to women and children, it omits broader equality concerns such as gender identity, LGBTQ+, and intersectional discrimination.

The abolition of electoral gender quotas in 2024 was viewed by EU institutions as a regression from the *acquis* and a direct breach of the ninth of Georgia's twelve pre-candidacy priorities: to "consolidate efforts to enhance gender equality and fight violence against women" (European Commission, 2022). While the EU's 2023 monitoring report acknowledged some progress, such as gender impact assessments and partial compliance with the Istanbul Convention (European Commission, 2023), significant gaps persisted. By 2024–2025, GD had reversed earlier achievements without introducing new mechanisms to promote women's political participation. The EU described the removal of quotas as undermining prior advances (European Commission, 2024b). ODIHR likewise found the reform inconsistent with Georgia's constitutional and international obligations, citing procedural flaws, lack of stakeholder consultation, and its enactment close to elections (OSCE/ODIHR, 2024).

Fifth, the abolition of mandatory CSO participation in public policy decision-making carries significant gender implications and distances Georgia from EU norms. This change disproportionately harms marginalised groups, as CSOs have been central to advancing anti-discrimination, women's and LGBTQ+ rights. Women's rights groups, legal aid organisations, and advocacy networks have driven progress on domestic violence legislation, gender-responsive budgeting, political quotas, and sexual harassment monitoring (Social Justice Center, 2025). Much of this influence stemmed from their formal inclusion in decision-making bodies; without a seat at the table, these actors lose vital capacity to shape equality laws, allowing the GD government to advance its gender backsliding agenda even further.

The absence of meaningful CSO participation and public consultation also helps explain the rapid passage of the Family Law in 2024, which the EU criticised for breaching accession criteria requiring "inclusive, transparent, and consultative law-making" (EEAS, 2024). With the GD dominating parliament and CSO involvement no longer obligatory, ministries and commissions are under no structural duty to include women's or LGBTQ+ organisations, reducing the likelihood that gender or minority perspectives are integrated across policy areas such as health or employment. This omission not only contravenes EU accession standards but also

weakens international oversight, as institutions such as the EU depend on structured CSO engagement to gauge transparency and inclusiveness.

Finally, a country's adherence to its CEDAW and Istanbul Convention obligations serves as a critical barometer of its commitment to gender equality and protection from violence. Both GREVIO and CEDAW have repeatedly underscored Georgia's deficiencies in these areas. The 2022 GREVIO Baseline Evaluation Report identified continuing gaps ranging from outdated sexual violence legislation to insufficient safeguards for vulnerable groups (GREVIO, 2022). A year later, CEDAW raised similar concerns, highlighting deficiencies in the legal definition of rape, chronic underreporting of sexual violence, and persistently low prosecution rates. It also drew attention to structural barriers to justice for women and the endurance of harmful gender stereotypes that perpetuate impunity (CEDAW, 2023, para. 26a). These findings collectively demonstrate that Georgia's alignment with international gender equality and anti-violence standards remains partial and fragile, signalling the need for stronger national mechanisms and sustained compliance with both CEDAW and the Istanbul Convention.

In its self-assessment submitted to GREVIO in September 2025, the Georgian government said it plans to stay engaged in the Convention's monitoring process. But in the crucial area of sexual violence, progress has barely moved. The government noted that work on revising the legal definition of rape to bring it in line with EU and international standards, specifically the idea of "freely given consent," is still in progress (GREVIO, 2025).

Combining these developments indicate that GD's governance has not only diverged from established European and international standards, but also conflicts with its own domestic policy frameworks. The 2024–2026 Human Rights Action Plan commits to strengthening institutional and legislative frameworks that support gender equality. Likewise, the National Concept on Gender Equality mandates regular reviews of laws to ensure they align with international standards (Parliament of Georgia, 2022). The fight against gender-based violence is a component of the Copenhagen Criteria's rule of law and human rights requirements, which are also found in Cluster One of the accession negotiation framework. The EU itself has

acceded to the Istanbul Convention, which renders its principles a standard for all members and aspiring members to adhere to.²

CONCLUSIONS

This article examined the phenomenon of democratic backsliding in Georgia through a gender lens, arguing that the systematic erosion of gender equality and anti-discrimination norms are not a side effect but a core component of the country's autocratic turn.

In response to our research question - how are gender and equality mobilised as tools and targets within Georgia's democratic backsliding? - our analysis revealed a sustained legislative and political assault by the ruling Georgian Dream party, which accelerated in 2024 in the period that led up to the parliamentary elections. Our analysis also suggested that the GD followed the same anti-gender playbook used by other autocratic-leaning regimes to emphasise traditional family values and gender roles, as well as a conservative national identity discourse to consolidate authoritarian power and forge a consensus amongst conservative, nationalist, and religious groups. The GD's strategy involved repressive measures in the form of the Foreign Agents Law and FARA, which undermine CSOs and particularly women's and LGBTQ+ rights groups that rely on foreign funding. Simultaneously, the adoption of the Law on the Protection of Family Values and Minors institutionalised discrimination against LGBTQ+ and marginalised groups by associating them with immoral western trends, foreign interference and societal decay. Legislative rollbacks were bolstered by the erasure of 'gender' from law, dissolution of the parliamentary Equality Council, and the removal of gender quotas, constituting a dismantling of Georgia's gender equality eco-system in its entirety.

The case of Georgia also supports the claims made by feminist commentators on democracy that attacks on gender and equality are critical early indicators of and constitutive elements of democratic backsliding. The depletion of gender equality, as witnessed in Georgia, is not only inju-

² Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, and Slovakia have not ratified the Istanbul Convention.

rious for the marginalised groups that it directly affects but is also metric for the systemic failure of the rule of law and democratic institutions.

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