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GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS

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The Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) is a Tbilisi-based non-profit, non-partisan, research and analysis organization. GIP works to strengthen the organizational backbone of democratic institutions and promote good governance and development through policy research and advocacy in Georgia. It also encourages public participation in civil society-building and developing democratic processes. The organization aims to become a major center for scholarship and policy innovation for the country of Georgia and the wider Black sea region. To that end, GIP is working to distinguish itself through relevant, incisive research; extensive public outreach; and a bold spirit of innovation in policy discourse and political conversation.

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GEORGIA FROM HYBRID TO AUTHORITARIAN CONSOLIDATION – DOES THE PUBLIC UNDERSTAND THE SCALE OF THE RISK?

Shota Kakabadze¹

Lately, democracies around the world have been facing a significant crisis. According to Freedom House, Global Freedom declined for the 19th year in a row in 2024. Last year, indicators of human rights and civil liberties in 60 countries around the globe worsened, while only 34 countries demonstrated improvement in this regard (Gorokhovskaia & Grothe 2025). Unfortunately, the state of liberal democracy in Georgia closely follows this so-called ‘de-democratization’ wave, marked by the ruling party’s shift to authoritarianism. Since the 2024 parliamentary elections – the legitimacy of which remains in question – “Georgian Dream” has proposed a package of legislative amendments that further strengthen the threat of authoritarian consolidation in the country (Caryl 2024; Civil Georgia 2025).

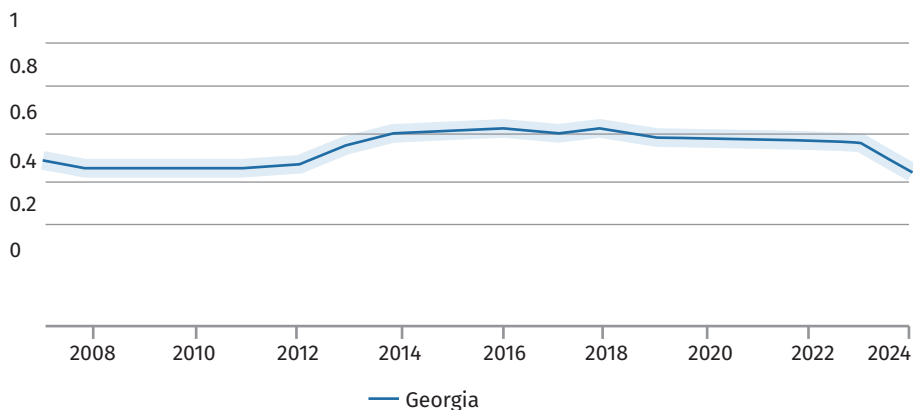
However, while there is an ongoing shift towards authoritarianism by “Georgian Dream”, there have also been non-stop protests in the country for more than three months. These protests are characterised by self-organization and horizontal mobilization that also mean a shifting focus from opposition parties and leaders. This policy memo aims to briefly give an overview of challenges to democracy in Georgia during the last year, while also examining to what extent perspectives of the political elite, civil society, and the public converge. Furthermore, this text explores the connection between popular support for a European integration-oriented foreign policy and democratization.

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2024 IN FIGURES

In recent years, Georgia has experienced democratic backsliding and is now even showing signs of authoritarian consolidation. According to Freedom House's Nations in Transit report in 2023, Georgia's score dropped by three points, while Moldova and Armenia saw improvements (Nations in Transit 2023). Another well-respected organization, V-Dem, reported that in 2024, the country's Liberal Democracy Index reached its lowest point in the past twenty years (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Liberal Democracy Index



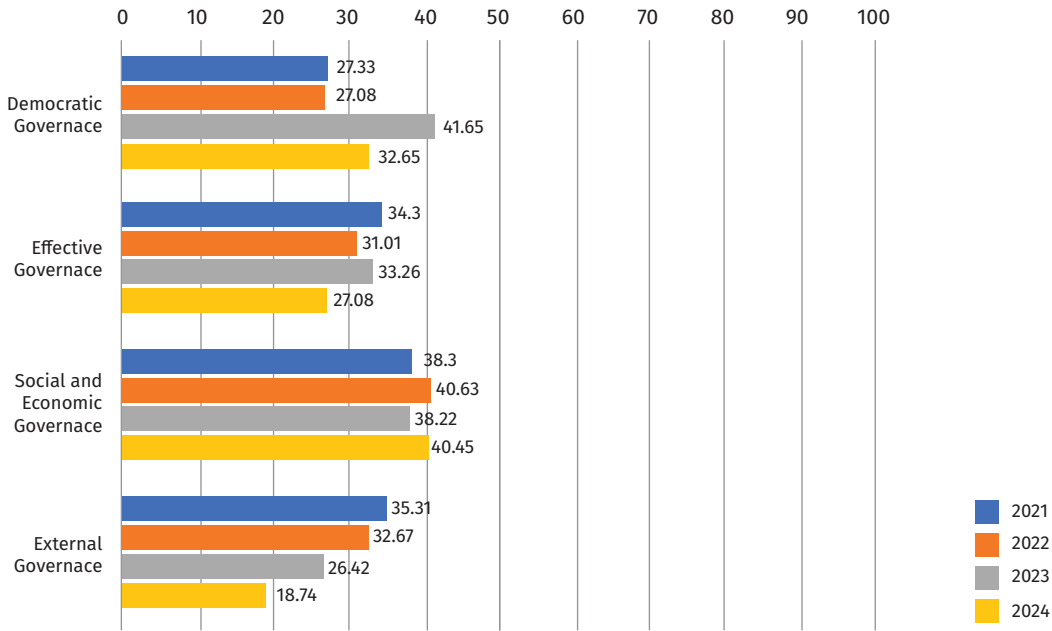
Source: V-Dem 2024. Available at: https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/VariableGraph/

The annual Georgia Governance Index (GGI) from the Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) also reveals that the overall GGI score for good governance is the lowest in the history of the index (GIP 2025). As in other fields, experts agree that in terms of democratic governance, the situation has significantly worsened since 2023 (Figure 2).²³

2. The Georgia Governance Index is based on two components: expert survey and narrative analysis. The survey is anonymous and evaluations are aggregated to create an overall score, as well as look at specific fields and institutional effectiveness points.

3. The expert survey was conducted in October-November. Thus, it doesn't reflect concerning trends after 28 November 2024.

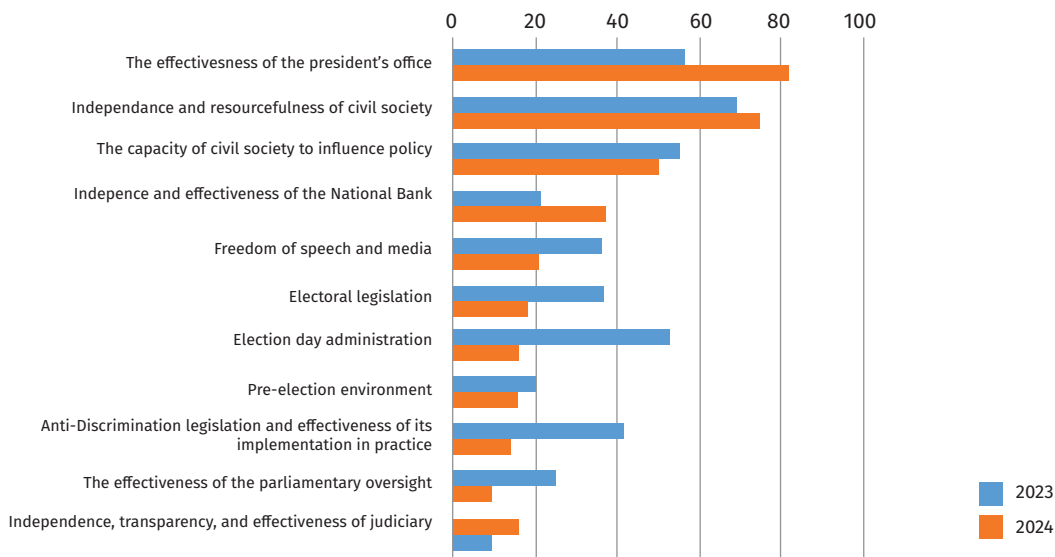
Figure 2: How would you assess Georgia's performance in the governance areas in 2024 (standardized on a scale of 0-100 (best)?



Source: Georgian Institute of Politics. Available at: <https://gip.ge/publication-post/the-georgia-governance-index-ggi-2024/>

A detailed breakdown of survey data reveals that despite limited space to operate, civil society and the president's (Salome Zurbashvili) administration received the highest points (Figure 3).

Figure 3: How would you assess Georgia's performance on the following issues related to democratic governance in 2024 on a 100-point scale, where 100 means very effective and 0 means very ineffective?



Source: Georgian Institute of Politics. Available at: <https://gip.ge/publication-post/the-georgia-governance-index-ggi-2024/>

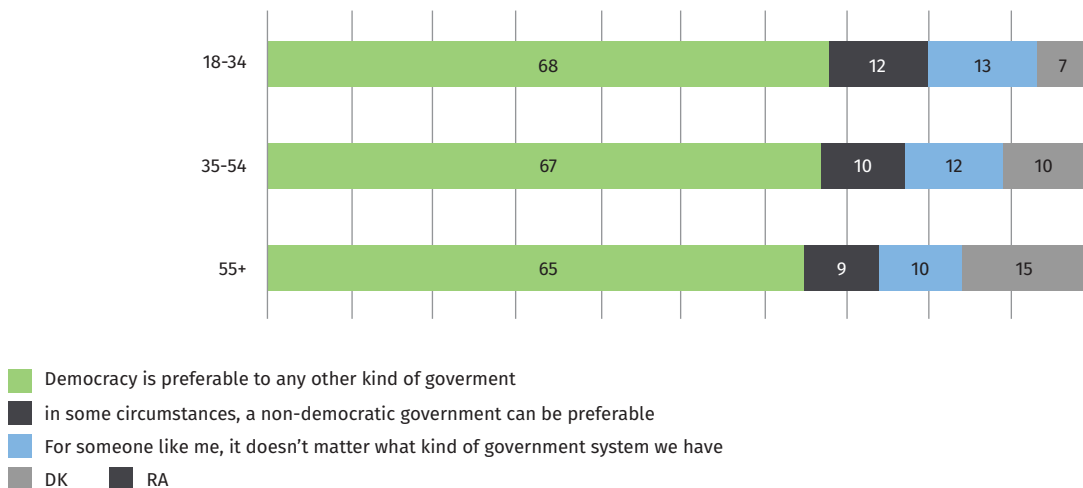
However, later in 2024, when the electoral college — composed solely of “Georgian Dream” members — elected a candidate loyal to the ruling party as president, the last independent institution ceased to exist. Furthermore, if the legislative package proposed in February 2025 is adopted, it will significantly constrain, and possibly even eliminate, the operational space for critical media and CSOs (Civil Georgia 2025).

PUBLIC PRIORITIES

Despite the dramatic decline of democracy in the country over the past 2-3 years, 2024 data reveals that the absolute majority of the public favors democracy as the preferred form of government. Namely, data from the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC)’s annual surveys reveal that regardless of age (Figure 4), settlement type (Figure 5), or political sympathies (Figure 6), the vast majority of the population considers democracy the best form of government (CRRC 2024).

Figure 4:

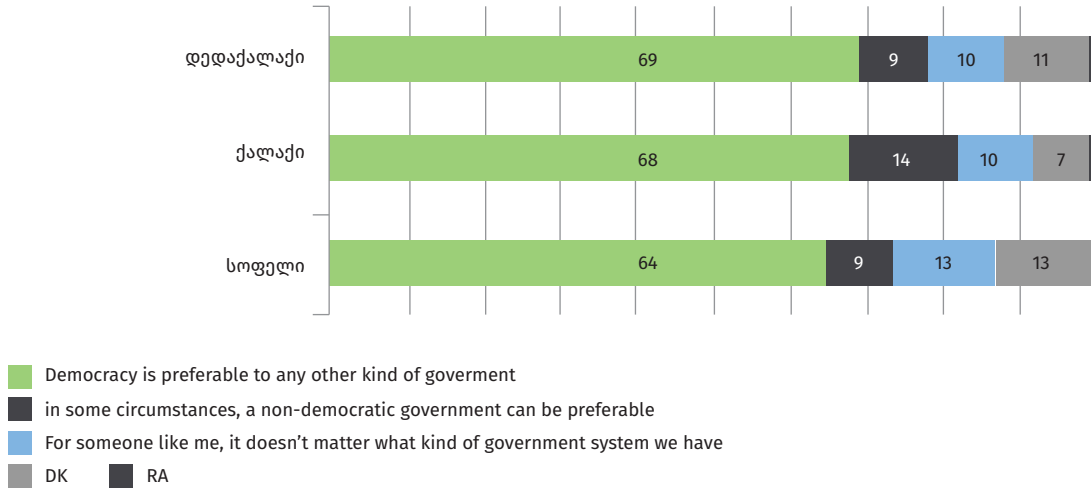
ATTDEM: Which of these three statements is closest to your opinion?
by AGEGROUP: Age of the respondent (%)



Source: Caucasus Barometer. Caucasus Research Resource Center.
Available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org>

Figure 5 :

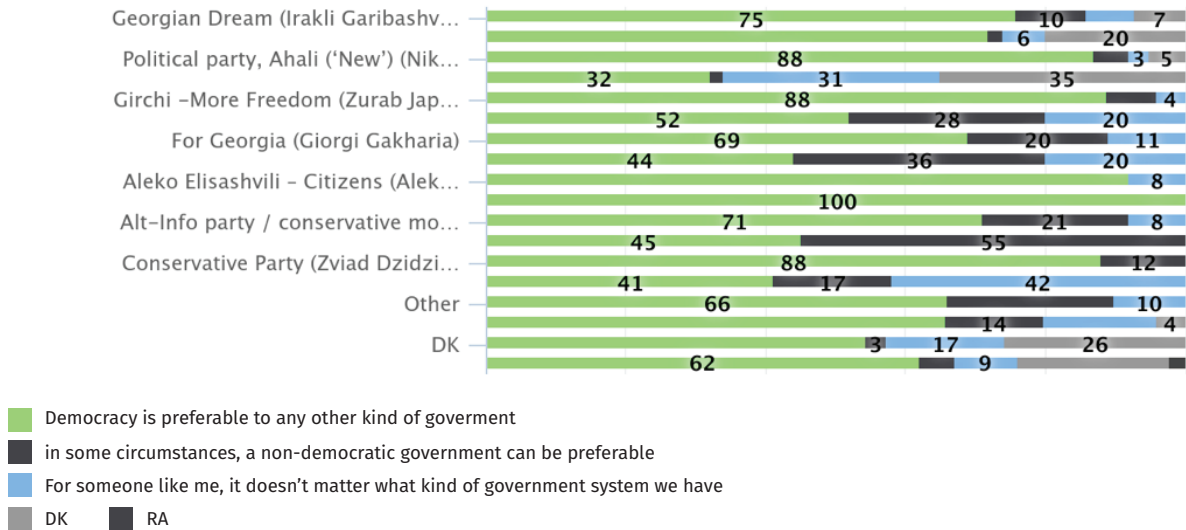
ATTDEM: Which of these three statements is closest to your opinion?
 X SETTYPE: Settlement type (%)



Source: Caucasus Barometer. Caucasus Research Resource Center.
 Available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org>

Figure 6 :

ATTDEM: Which of these three statements is closest to your opinion?
 X PARTYSUPP: Which political party is closest to you? (%)

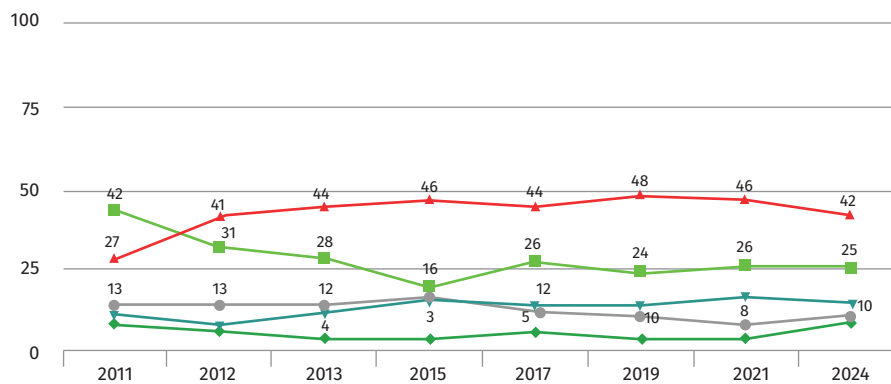


Source: Caucasus Barometer. Caucasus Research Resource Center.
 Available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org>

It is also interesting to note that the majority of Georgians do not consider the country a full democracy. Namely, according to the same surveys, 42% of respondents consider Georgia as a democracy but with major problems, 25% consider that the country is a democracy but with minor problems, 14% consider that it's not a democracy at all, while only 9% think that Georgia is a full democracy (CRRC 2024). It is noteworthy to mention that this number has remained relatively unchanged since the change of government in 2012 (Figure 7).

Figure 7:

CNTRDEM: How much of a democracy is Georgia today?
(%)



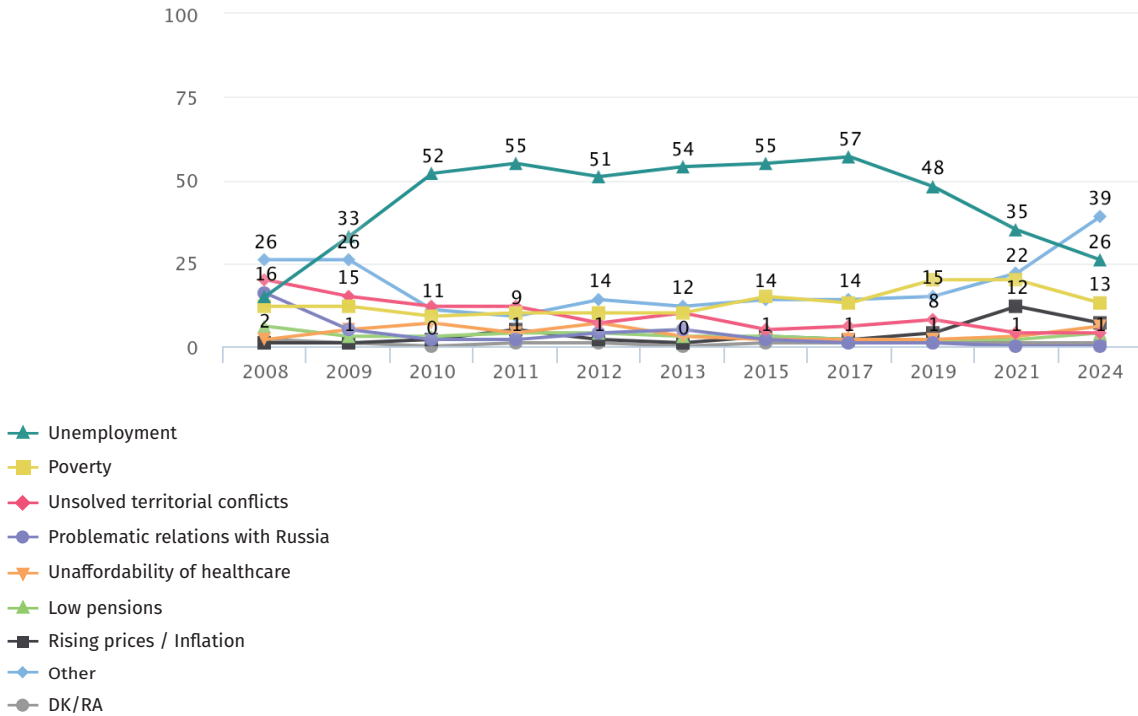
- Not a democracy
- A democracy but with minor problems
- A democracy but with major problems
- A full democracy
- DK/RA

Source: Caucasus Barometer. Caucasus Research Resource Center.
Available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org>

However, the most interesting trend is that, despite strong public support for democracy and widespread acknowledgement of its challenges, respondents do not rank democracy among the most pressing issues/challenges that the country is facing at the moment (Figure 8).

Figure 8:

IMPISS1: Most important issue facing Georgia (%)



Source: Caucasus Barometer. Caucasus Research Resource Center.
 Available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org>

The data reveals that socio-economic issues, such as poverty, unemployment, inflation or access to healthcare, are ranked among the most pressing issues/challenges of the country. This may be attributed to severe social conditions and economic hardships. While the beneficiaries of social assistance in the country make up around 18% of the population (სოციალური სამართლიანობის ცენტრი, 2023), respondents don't rank freedom of expression or political pluralism as priorities. Though, as the second part of this paper illustrates, the state of democracy is directly linked to economic welfare.

HOW DOES DEMOCRACY RELATE TO WELFARE?

At a glance, it seems logical that the population facing economic hardships and daily problems, despite its support for democracy, doesn't consider the lack of democracy as a primary challenge. However, the two are closely linked, and progress in socio-economic development can't be achieved without democratization. This section discusses and explains major factors that show how these two are interconnected.

Mechanisms of checks and balances and their role

First of all, democratic institutions with effective checks and balances ensure that state institutions spend budgets with greater transparency and accountability. When citizens participate in decision-making processes at local, municipal, or national levels, it also ensures that budgets are allocated to public priorities, such as access to healthcare, expansion of social services, or infrastructure projects. Most importantly, a free media, a strong civil society, and opposition political parties hold the state accountable for addressing the issues prioritized by the public. In other words, transparent and fair elections serve as a tool for changing the government.

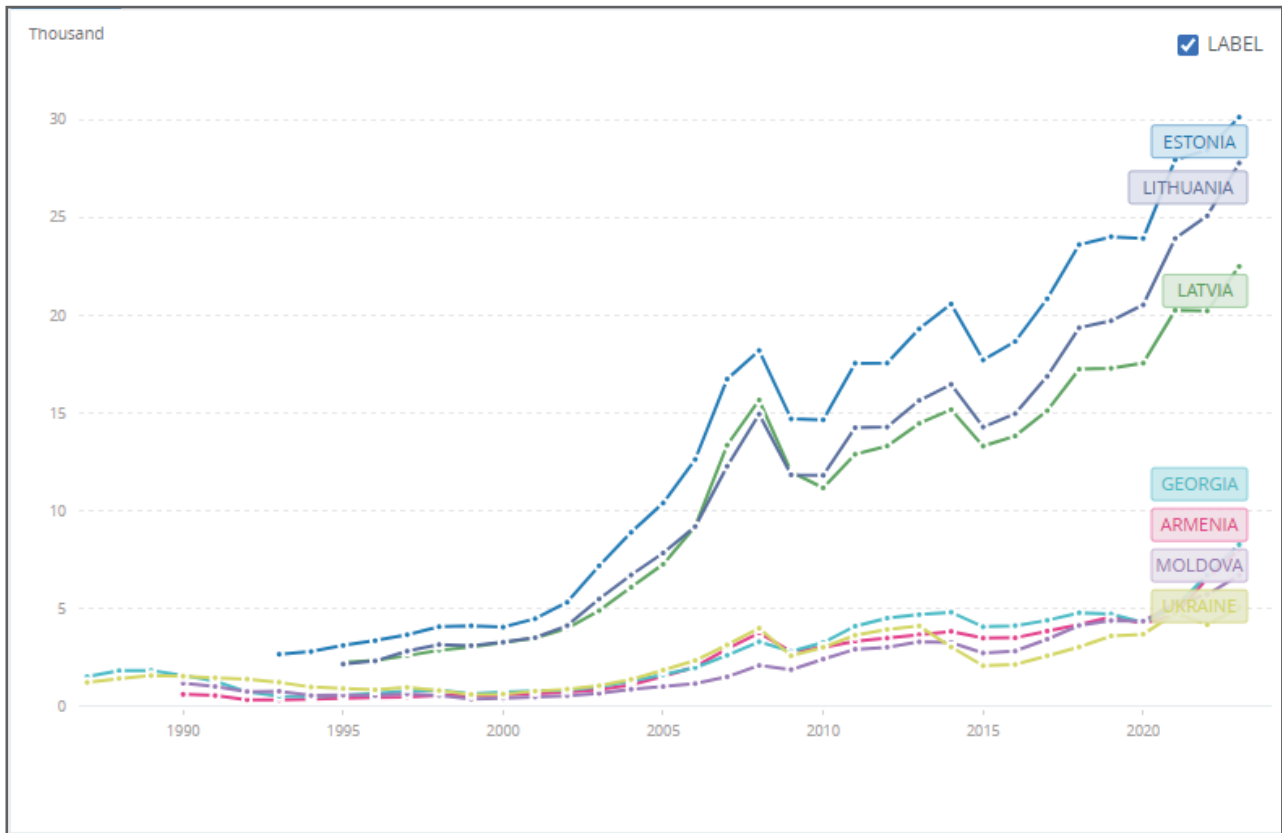
Democratization and European Integration

Notably, the ruling party's decision to suspend the European integration process is directly linked to its steps toward authoritarian consolidation. Progress in European integration is conditioned with democratic advancement and the substance of reforms undertaken. By taking the prospect of opening membership negotiations off the agenda until 2028, "Georgian Dream" has effectively avoided its accountability for implementing democratic reforms.

The dramatic decline of the state of democracy has directly affected relations with Western partners and worsened it, leading to a temporary suspension of the EU accession process. Accession to the EU is based on conditionality, meaning that progress depends on how effectively Tbilisi implements the European Commission's recommendations. The nine recommendations proposed by Brussels as conditions to open accession negotiations are beneficial not only for democratization: they will directly lead to economic benefits. For instance, Moldova has opened accession negotiations and received 1.8 billion euros in financial support (Forbes Georgia 2024).

The example of the Baltic states highlights the long-term benefits of democratization and European integration. World Bank data (figure 9) reveals that despite the same starting points in the late 1980s, the democratic EU members Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are three times wealthier than the hybrid democracies of Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, or Ukraine.

Figure 9: GDP per capita in USD



Source: World Bank.

Available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=EE-LV-LT-AM-GE-MD-UA>

The European Union and its structural funds played a crucial role in the rapid economic development of the Baltic states. According to various estimates, the financial support received from these funds is about 5% of the GDP of these countries (Varblane 2016).

Thus, one of the long-term solutions to economic or social challenges is to accelerate the EU integration process, and leverage the financial support inherent to this process. From 2014-2020 alone, when Georgia wasn't even a candidate country, it received over 900 million euros in financial support, mainly allocated to agriculture and other economic areas and capabilities (რადიო თავისუფლება 2022). Once the accession negotiations are open, this support is expected to increase. Thus, to tackle the challenges ranked by the Georgian public, the most effective and substantial means are democratization and European integration, while a rapid shift to authoritarianism is the greatest threat to this process.

CONCLUSION

Last year was full of challenges for Georgian democracy. In spring 2024, the ruling party reintroduced the so-called Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence and adopted it, despite civil dissent. Dozens of civic activists or opposition politicians were beaten, intimidated or threatened. Even after the October Parliamentary Elections, the legitimacy of which is still in question, the country began swiftly adopting legislation significantly limiting fundamental human rights, such as freedom of expression, assembly or demonstration. The country has shifted from hybrid democracy, with occasional decline and backsliding, to authoritarian consolidation, especially during recent months. Reports from both international and local research organizations highlight these alarming trends.

The consolidation of authoritarianism goes against the will of the vast majority of the public, including supporters of the ruling party. Surveys discussed in this document indicate that most Georgians favor democracy as their preferred form of government. Moreover, EU integration enjoys overwhelming public support, while progress in this direction is directly tied to the quality of democracy. Ultimately, addressing the social and economic challenges identified by the public depends on a return to liberal democracy. Restoring Georgia's democratic path would help resolve the political crisis and ensure stable and substantial economic growth in the long run, leading to the gradual and effective solution of existing social and economic challenges.

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