



## The Limits of Democracy Protection in Georgia

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In 2024, democracy broke down in Georgia as it experienced ‘the largest one-year decline’ since its independence (Nord et al. 2025). As a result, Georgia joined the list of electoral autocracies in the world. Paradoxically, Georgia’s democratic breakdown happened during its first year as an official candidate country for membership in the European Union. With the enlargement’s recently regained momentum in the EU’s foreign policy agenda, Georgia’s case thus raises questions over the EU’s credibility in the region. Georgia also serves as an important case in point about the consequences of Europe’s inaction or doing too little to support those locally resisting autocratization.

### **Georgia’s Path Towards Autocratization: From a Democratic Breakthrough to a Democratic Breakdown?**

2024 may have been the most dramatic year for Georgian democracy, as the Georgian Dream party adopted authoritarian laws, stole elections, and, for the first time in the country’s history, officially reversed Georgia’s decades-long pursuit of European integration. However, as in many other cases around the world, Georgian democracy did not die overnight, but ‘by a thousand cuts’. As V-Dem institute’s 2025 report states, the

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autocratization episode in Georgia started already in 2017 (Nord et al. 2025). However, up until 2023, it advanced gradually. Indeed, Georgia's score in the Freedom in the World report has dropped from 64 in 2017 to 55 in 2025. The 2024 report from Freedom House warned that Georgia was on its way to becoming 'a semi-consolidated authoritarian regime' (Smeltzer and Karppi 2024).

Until 2018 the Georgian Dream party pursued a democratization agenda closely intertwined with the country's progress in Europeanization. Throughout 2013-2017, Georgia recorded some progress in judicial independence, civil liberties, and freedom of speech (Nord et al. 2025, 27) . It also signed an Association Agreement with the European Union, gained visa-free access to the Schengen zone and scored well in terms of 'regulatory alignment with EU *acquis*' (Delcour and Wolczuk 2015, 465).

If the 2012 power transfer through constitutional means represented a potential opening for a genuine democratic change for some, it soon became apparent that it was 'not sufficient to cause a democratic breakthrough' (Berglund 2014, 470). Informal politics, a long-standing problem of the Georgian political system, 'acquired a new level' as Bidzina Ivanishvili became the de facto ruler of the country from 2013 (Kakachia and Lebanidze 2016, 152). However, the reversal from the democratization path started to become apparent in 2018 (Nord et al. 2025). The signs of reversal have been reported in the fields of elections, independence of the judiciary and political rights (Chkhetiani 2023, 46). By 2017, Georgian civil society organizations were already raising the alarm about the signs of informal political control over the judiciary (Coalition for an Independent and Transparent Judiciary, 2017). Under the disguise of complex waves of reforms, the judiciary in Georgia has been captured, politicized and packed with regime loyalists (Tsereteli 2024). The judiciary is now an important agent of autocratization and a tool to suppress dissent in the country.

The quality of elections in Georgia also deteriorated (Klarhoefer 2024), with various reports pointing towards unlevel playing field, voter intimidation, or misuse of administrative resources from the ruling party during the 2018 Presidential and 2020 Parliamentary elections (OSCE 2019; 2021). However, the 2024 Parliamentary elections saw an unprecedented scale of vote manipulation, leading opposition parties to boycott the results and spiralling the country into the largest political crisis of the last decade (Chikhladze 2025).

If Georgia's judiciary and electoral systems have never been strongly developed in the first place and always represented its *Achilles' heel*, in contrast, civil society has acted as an

important democratic accountability actor (Andguladze 2025). The last decade has especially witnessed growing diversity within civil society actors in Georgia. Alongside institutionalized civil society, new grassroots actors have also emerged in recent years, and together, they have served as important mobilization sources for various waves of protests in Georgia (Panchulidze and Youngs 2025). Until 2023, Georgian Dream's approach towards civil society representatives has been antagonistic. However, in 2023-2024 civil society became the main target of legislative repression and state-orchestrated discreditation campaigns. In 2024, as a part of its pre-electoral campaign, Georgian Dream also transformed into an anti-gender actor, instrumentalizing political homophobia against the country's marginalized queer communities, civil society actors and opposition political parties (Tskhadadze 2024).

In parallel to autocratization, the Georgian Dream party actively undermined relations with the EU. It has pursued antagonistic discourse against members of the European Parliament and government representatives of certain member states, and made accusations that European funds were being used to interfere in Georgia's internal affairs (Tsuladze 2024). In contrast, the Georgian Dream party has successfully learned authoritarian tactics from the likes of Viktor Orbán and has applied similar anti-liberal populist politics and policies in the country (Sabanadze 2024).

## **The EU Between Action and Inaction**

The EU, on the other hand, has been facing a credibility dilemma vis-à-vis Georgia (Brandt et al. 2024). In this renewed momentum for enlargement, the geopolitical dimension is at its forefront rather than in the background. Following this logic, the European Commission in 2022 swiftly reacted to three Eastern European countries' applications and granted candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova. However, Georgia was recognised as having European perspective and was given twelve conditions to implement first. Later, in 2023, based on the Commission's recommendation, the European Council granted Georgia candidate status despite the apparent lack of genuine progress with those conditions. The geopolitical logic of the enlargement and the Georgian people's consistent and unwavering support for European integration could explain the European Council's 2023 decision on Georgia's candidate status.

Studies show that the EU conditionality mechanism is most effective once a country is given a credible perspective on joining the EU (Steunenberg and Dimitrova 2007). However, it was met with the opposite in the Georgian case, as the Georgian Dream party, only months after receiving candidate status from the EU, engaged in an accelerated autocratization. Despite the EU's high-level engagement with the political crisis in Georgia in the past (Panchulidze and Youngs 2021), its half-hearted response to Georgia's autocratization risks creating a credibility gap for its ambitions to be both a geopolitical and normative power in the region. Based on a content analysis of the EU's statements, resolutions, decisions and reports from 2022 to 2025 (=23 documents), we identify patterns characterizing European institutions' response to Georgia's backsliding. While each institution's position was shaped through their specific nature and competences within the European governance system, overall, the EU's response to Georgian crisis can be assessed as a delayed reactive approach, lacking preventive and proactive measures to protect democracy in Georgia.

***Advocate for coercive measures:*** The European Parliament has been the most vocal EU institution regarding the situation in Georgia and has advocated for the protection of Georgian democracy through coercive measures such as sanctions. It has pointed out substantial signs of backsliding and called on the European Commission and EU member states to adopt sanctions as punitive measures. Throughout 2022-2025, the European Parliament has adopted six resolutions on Georgia. Already in 2022, for the first time coming from the EU institution, concerns were raised regarding 'the destructive role played by the sole oligarch, Bidzina Ivanishvili, in Georgia's politics and economy' and called for the imposition of personal sanctions against him (European Parliament 2022). As the situation worsened in Georgia, the EP's resolutions became more critical, and calls for sanctions expanded beyond Ivanishvili, including 'all those responsible for undermining democracy in Georgia' (European Parliament 2024). The EP has also called on the Commission to assess Georgia's fulfilment of visa liberalization benchmarks, thus suggesting another potential sanctions route. In its last resolution, the European Parliament urged the member states to consider imposing bilateral and coordinated personal sanctions against Georgian officials (European Parliament 2025).

***Cautious ally:*** In contrast, the European Commission and the EU's High Representative have taken an overly cautious approach, calling on Georgian authorities 'to reverse' and 'return firmly on the EU path' (European External Action Service, 2024a). They asked for an independent investigation of electoral irregularities of the 2024 Parliamentary elections and urged for dialogue between political parties (European External Action Service, 2024b). Such

statements fell short of fully grasping that the country is currently in a political deadlock, with almost no room for dialogue. Furthermore, their lukewarm tone does not do justice to the ongoing protests, in which, for more than 100 days, thousands of citizens have tirelessly been participating despite increasing repressions. At the same time, the Commission cautiously engaged in some coercive measures by withholding €121 million of assistance funds as a reaction to backsliding, and reallocating a part of these funds to civil society aid. It froze its support from European Peace Facility, suspended high-level meetings with Georgia and recommended a partial suspension of visa-free facilitation agreement for Georgian authorities. Still, none of these measures have been effective to slow down or avert Georgia's autocratization.

***Internally constrained supporter:*** The actions of the European Council and the Council of the European Union have been constrained by the Hungarian and Slovak governments' blockage of the EU-wide sanctions against Georgian officials (European Parliament 2025). In reaction to the adoption of the 'foreign agent law' in spring 2024, the European Council's June 2024 conclusions stated that Georgia's accession process has been 'de facto' halted. In January 2025, the Council decided to suspend the visa facilitation agreement for Georgian diplomats and officials (Official Journal and of the European Union 2025) - a measure that has been viewed as ineffective and only symbolic. Furthermore, compared to the pace and gravity with which Georgian Dream has been advancing autocratization, such a measure can be considered inadequate. However, there has been an attempt at the individual member state level to champion European sanctions against Georgian authorities. Several countries, such as Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia and Czechia, have imposed bilateral sanctions (Liboreiro 2024). Nevertheless, Europe's 'coalition of the willing' has not yet formed to pursue more coordinated measures against the Georgian Dream party.

## **Local Struggles and Expectations for Protecting Georgian Democracy**

Our analysis draws on empirical data collected through 15 semi-structured interviews with representatives of Georgian civil society between 1-4 October 2024 and 1-14 April 2025. We have interviewed both representatives of formal civil society organizations and representatives of informal, grassroots movements and individual activists driving over 100 days of protests to protect Georgian democracy. Despite the fact that autocratization has dramatically advanced in the wake of Georgia's parliamentary elections, the expectations of

Georgian civil society and the public have not changed so dramatically. Three main themes appeared prominent in the discussions with our interlocutors.

*The failure of early warning.* Representatives of formal and informal civil society extensively noted in our discussions that their early warnings of democratic backsliding were unheard by the international democracy support community. This both delayed the international response to incremental democratic erosion in the country and offered unfit responses to anti-democratic actions of the GD government. Existing literature on democratic protection suggests that the signs that an incumbent government is moving towards autocracy include its open attacks on institutions to weaken or dismantle them and alter rules, including electoral systems, to their benefit (Leininger 2022). The GD government gradually tightened its grip over the judiciary, the central election commission, the office of the public defender, abolished the state inspector's service, and continuously attacked the President until it managed to consolidate its loyal power in the last standing critically minded institution.

Despite apparent signs of autocratization, civil society's requests for tougher and more targeted measures were largely ignored by the US, the EU, and European governments. They often prioritized dialogue and consensus-building with the existing government and urged civil society to engage with political parties and the government. As one of the activists noted, "It was obvious that GD would reintroduce the 'foreign agents' law, it was quite clear that GD had plans to rig the elections in 2024, yet we have not seen adequate preventive or reactive responses from the international community" (interview by author, October 2024). Civil society representatives stressed that attempts at "consensus building" existed even after GD intensified attacks on civil society - both verbal and physical - and passed legislation that formally banned or declared illegal civil society's operations, as well as attaching discriminating labels of "agents" serving the interests of another foreign country to civil society organisations.

In particular, CSOs referred to the lack of contextual understanding and noted that the "authoritarian and corrupt system was not open to any dialogue or compromise, and that civil society's cooperation with such a government was virtually impossible" (interview by author, October 2024). Our interlocutors also stressed that such actions, in some instances, provided reasons for the GD authorities to further target CSOs, claiming they were not ready for dialogue or had refused to engage with the government to end the political crisis, while the only solution throughout the process was for the government to revoke repressive

legislation, free political prisoners, and return to the democratic reform agenda in line with Georgia's European integration aspirations.

*Too little too late.* Our interlocutors stressed that international responses to democratic backsliding in Georgia were not adequate for the gravity of the situation on the ground, especially in response to the authorities' brutal and large-scale human rights violations to repress peaceful protests. While the evidence of these violations was well documented by both local and international media and civil society organizations, the responses were "weak, disappointing, and often missing," according to activists on the frontlines (interview by author, April 2025). According to the Human Rights Watch country report, "police repeatedly used excessive force" against protesters, with the majority of those detained at large demonstrations reporting police misconduct (Human Rights Watch 2025).

Our CSO representatives were critical of the EU's official statements for not being political enough or delivering a clear message to the government and those responsible for democratic backsliding and severe human rights violations. As one of the activists noted, "In response to the brutal police handling of peaceful protests, the EU statement was so vague that one reading it would place the same responsibility on peaceful protesters and government" (interview by author, October 2024). Throughout the political crisis, only authorities were responsible for the grave human rights violations, but this was not always evident in official statements. Some CSO representatives also noted that they wanted to see EU member state ambassadors being more active on the ground and more supportive of Georgian citizens' peaceful fight for democracy. They particularly charged the EU ambassador to Georgia with ambivalence and distance from critical stands. In terms of punitive measures, CSO representatives and activists referred to the positive impact of individual decisions by EU member states from the Baltic countries to impose sanctions, but criticized the EU for its inability to provide any meaningful response to severe democratic erosion in the candidate country. Those CSOs aware of the EU's legal system referred to the EU's Human Rights Sanctions Regime and the EU's reluctance to use it against well documented human rights violations, while its US equivalent, the Magnitsky Act, was used by the state department against government officials and high-level political figures in the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Special Security Services of Georgia. Our CSO interlocutors spoke positively about the UK sanctions. They stressed that as an international partner, the UK is not as present in Georgian politics compared to the EU and the US, yet their responses provided a clear message to Georgian politicians responsible for democratic erosion.

**Democracy protection.** Given the growing autocratization trend globally, the importance of democracy protection and autocratization prevention has become central to the field of democracy support (Leininger 2024). While democracy support strives to advance the democratization process, the key focus of democracy protection is on measures to counter autocratization (Leininger 2022). These measures often include diplomatic pressure, sanctions, withdrawal of aid to the government, and the halt of commercial agreements. The literature on democracy support suggests that the effectiveness of these measures varies based on context, but the combination of targeted sanctions and increased financial aid to civil society has proved to be the most successful (Corda and Cassani 2025).

Most of our interlocutors noted that they are ready for the long fight for democracy and consider the support and “protection” from international partners crucial to the outcome of their fight. Our respondents stressed that the responsibility to safeguard democracy is the primary duty of Georgian citizens, yet they consider that the people’s fight alone cannot stop a consolidated autocracy with an extensive state apparatus and expanding control over political life. At the same time, the international democracy support community is also at a crossroads, given the Trump administration’s decision to freeze USAID funding and retreat from political and diplomatic measures to protect democracy outside the US. The absence of US diplomatic engagement means the role of the EU and European governments will be even more critical in Georgia’s fight for democracy. While the lessons of early action and tough measures were prevalent globally, the international community can also learn from Georgia’s democratic backsliding over the past year. Our interlocutors almost certainly expect the situation to worsen and democracy to break down to its lowest level. The key ask of civil society is tougher measures and sanctions for GD officials and clear political statements on developments in the country.

## **Conclusion**

Lack of preventive measures and later, indecisiveness in dealing with the major political and democratic crisis in a candidate country creates a credibility gap for the EU. While the EU has been slow and reluctant to elaborate on a comprehensive response and credibly support Georgian democracy, Georgian Dream has embarked on consolidating authoritarianism in Georgia after self-claiming victory in the 2024 Parliamentary elections. Georgia serves as yet another sobering case calling for an urgent rethinking of not just a democracy support paradigm but also the one of countering autocratization in Europe.

Georgia's case reinforces the significance of early warning signs of governments shifting towards authoritarianism, the need for the international community to listen to local voices, and the importance of immediate measures against incremental democratic erosion. The international community has a strong ally in the fight for Georgia's democracy in its resilient public and civil society, yet their vibrant protests at home require strong backing through international punitive measures in response to severe backsliding from democratic principles.

Examples of countering autocratization in similar contexts suggest that international sanctions, in combination with increased financial and technical support for civil society, have proved successful in countering governments' attempts to consolidate autocracy. In the global reordering of the international democracy support community and the absence of US political backing, the role of the EU and European governments will be decisive for democracy protection in Georgia.

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