Working paper

D7.4: Trust and Social Cohesion in Georgia's Path to Europe: Navigating Democratic Aspirations Amid Authoritarian Drift

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WORKING PAPER

Trust and Social Cohesion in Georgia's Path to Europe: Navigating Democratic Aspirations Amid Authoritarian Drift

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SUMMARY

This paper examines the case of Georgia as a paradigmatic example of a hybrid regime: a "double-edged terrain" where democratic institutions and aspirations coexist with authoritarian practices (Bolkvadze, Gueudet & Machavariani, 2025). Drawing on recent fieldwork, documentary analysis, and trust indicators through survey-vignette data (n = 488), we analyse how deficits in vertical trust (in state institutions) and horizontal trust (among citizens and civic intermediaries) undermine both social cohesion and democratic resilience. Despite formal alignment with the European Union's enlargement agenda, Georgia's democratic trajectory has stalled: the institutional façade of electoral competition remains, but substantive mechanisms of accountability have been hollowed out. The interplay of EU conditionality, domestic patron-client networks, securitising governance, and polarising media narratives creates a context in which reform momentum dissipates and citizen coordination weakens (but does not fully disappear). We argue that the EU's democracy-promotion efforts face a persistent structural barrier: without systemic investment in rebuilding civic trust and cross-camp cooperation, conditionality logic alone cannot catalyse durable democratic change. The Georgian case therefore contributes to the literature on hybrid regimes by foregrounding how societal trust and cohesion, rather than only formal institutions, mediate the effectiveness of external democracy-promotion, and it offers policy lessons for engaging democratisation processes in the EU's eastern neighbourhood.

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Introduction

Democracy promotion has been an integral part of the European Union's external policy agenda since the 1990s (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005), transitioning from a post-Cold War foreign policy approach to a wide-ranging normative framework designed to shape political development in neighboring states. Through instruments such as judicial reform packages, electoral-code amendments, anti-corruption strategies, public-administration modernisation programmes and others, the EU has sought to promote democratic institutions, the rule of law, electoral integrity, and human rights in its prospective member states (Youngs, 2010).

For decades, the European Union approached Georgia through a familiar and deeply embedded logic: strengthen institutions, align procedures, harmonise formal rules, and democratic behavior would naturally follow. Yet Georgia presents a particularly compelling, and contradictory, case within this framework.

Oftentimes hailed as a regional reform leader following the 2003 Rose Revolution, Georgia has demonstrated a remarkable ambition to embrace European values and norms, including integrating into the Eastern Partnership framework, signing the EU-Georgia Association Agreement in 2014, being granted candidate status in 2023, and broadly being acknowledged as a country with strong pro-European aspirations particularly among the large segments of its citizens. (Bermeo, 2016; Levitsky & Way, 2010).

Yet, the democratic trajectory of Georgia has been anything but linear. What appeared to the EU as substantive state-building was, in practice, a thin layer of procedural modernisation overlaying deeply entrenched informal networks and practices. Over the course of past decade, and particularly since 2020, concerns about democratic backsliding have grown substantially (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Bermeo, 2016) - a form of regression characterized by the dismantling of executive power checks and balances, closing space for media freedom, targeting civil society sector, human rights violations and declining judicial independence, widely condemned by both local watchdogs as well as western partners, including the European Parliament, the Venice Commission, and various EU bodies.

This ambiguity, between formal institutional compliance with EU norms and informal undermining of democratic culture, poses a significant challenge to the legitimacy and effectiveness of EU democracy promotion in Georgia. Moreover, the current geopolitical context, characterized by rising Russian influence and increasing pressure on civil society and foreign-funded local NGOs, and mass civic uprising regarding countries' foreign policy vector, underscores even greater challenges to democratic resilience-

building. Those developments put the EU's role into perspective as not only navigating the technicalities of reform but also effectively engaging with the embedded sociopolitical realities that shape citizens' perceptions and levels of trust.

In that context, the EU institutional templates, previously viewed as a possible avenue of transformation, seem to have lost their transformative capacity. In this new political reality, the EU is no longer engaged with a reluctant reformer or a hybrid regime wavering between democratic and autocratic tendencies; the EU is now confronting the government that actively opposes democratic orientation and employs European-style institutional façades in an effort to deflect international criticism while consolidating state capture and autocratic rule.

This paper explores how the EU's democracy promotion interacts with social trust and cohesion in contemporary Georgia, and what this interaction implies for democratic resilience under conditions of deepening authoritarian drift. Based on original qualitative interviews and a 2025 urban survey conducted in Tbilisi and Batumi, we investigate how Georgians perceive EU-supported reforms and through which social channels these perceptions are formed. The paper focuses on the interplay between vertical and horizontal trust, demonstrating how low institutional credibility, fragmented information environments, and selective, network-based forms of solidarity shape civic engagement and citizens' expectations of external actors. Rather than treating the EU's assistance as a purely technocratic lever, the paper argues that democracy promotion is mediated by the social foundations of trust: *when trust is unevenly distributed and civic space is narrowing, the EU's support risks being experienced as distant, elite-captured, or abstract-even when the EU remains a powerful normative horizon.*

Literature Review & Theoretical Framework: Hybrid Regimes as Enduring Forms of Governance

Understanding the character of governance in Eastern Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans requires a conceptualisation that moves beyond the linear expectations of democratic transition. The region's political systems display enduring forms of hybrid governance that fuse formal democratic institutions with informal networks of patronage, rent-seeking, and personal rule. As Bøås, Giske and Osland (2024) emphasise, explaining the resilience of these structures is essential for determining how to constrain the room for manoeuvre that both internal and external illiberal actors exploit to obstruct the European Union's democracy-promotion efforts. Effective engagement must therefore begin from an accurate understanding of how hybridity operates as a durable mode of governance, rather than as a transient deviation from a democratic norm (Bøås, Giske & Rieker, 2024).

The "transitology" paradigm of the 1990s and early 2000s, which conceptualised regime hybridity as a temporary stage between authoritarianism and democracy (Carothers, 2002), has proven empirically obsolete. The expectation that post-socialist states would follow a linear path toward a Western model of representative democracy (Dufy & Thiriot, 2013; McFaul, 2002) has given way to the recognition that many have stabilised as distinct regime types. As Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) demonstrate, the past two decades have seen *"gradual declines of democratic regime attributes"* and the entrenchment of mixed systems combining pluralist procedures with illiberal practices. In Morlino's (2008, p. 7) terms, hybrid regimes are defined by *"ambiguous institutions, lacking one or more essential characteristics of democracy but also failing to acquire those that would make them fully authoritarian."*

Such unsettledness (Bøås, Giske & Osland, 2024) is constitutive, not transitional. Hybrid regimes oscillate between reform and retrenchment, producing what Knott (2018) describes as a *"democratic–authoritarian dynamic equilibrium."* The apparent movement toward either pole, democratisation or autocratisation, is typically partial and reversible, as elite competition occurs within a shared framework of neopatrimonial practice and rent extraction. These cycles of opening and closure recalibrate power among incumbents and extra-incumbents without altering the foundational logic of hybrid governance.

At the heart of this logic lies the entanglement of formal and informal rule. Public institutions coexist with parallel structures of control that operate through patron–client relations, elite networks, and informal exchange. Knott (2018) and Bøås, Giske and Osland (2024) conceptualise these dualities through the metaphors of the *"theatre state"* and the *"shadow state."* The theatre state performs legality and accountability to preserve legitimacy, while the shadow state manages the actual distribution of resources and loyalty through concealed channels of influence extending from national centres of power to peripheral municipalities. This coexistence allows regimes to maintain an appearance of democracy while preserving a highly centralised and personalised mode of governance.

The interpenetration of formal and informal institutions generates complex nexuses linking politics, business, media, and in some cases organised crime. These cross-cutting alliances blur the boundary between state and society, transforming public office into a resource for private accumulation. The result is a system in which access to rents determines political participation and policy outcomes (Hale, 2014). Rent-seeking, clientelism, and neopatrimonialism are thus not aberrations but core mechanisms through which hybrid regimes reproduce themselves.

The social foundations of this equilibrium are found in the distribution of trust. The quality of vertical trust, citizens' confidence in governmental institutions and political leaders, and horizontal trust, the interpersonal and inter-group trust that underpins social cohesion, directly shape political stability and democratic resilience (Bøås, Giske & Osland, 2024). Persistent deficits in both dimensions weaken accountability and increase the reliance of elites on informal instruments of control. Where vertical trust is low, rulers substitute legitimacy with patronage; where horizontal trust is eroded, citizens fragment into enclaves of selective solidarity, unable to coordinate collective action for reform. As Boese et al. (2021) argue, democratic resilience depends not merely on institutional continuity but on the societal capacity to *"bounce back from autocratisation."* In hybrid regimes, this capacity is constrained by the pervasive absence of trust, which transforms uncertainty into a governing resource.

Since the early 1990s, Georgia has epitomised this dynamic. Each has experienced recurrent fluctuations between democratic advances and authoritarian reversals, reflecting the competitive interplay of domestic elites embedded in overlapping formal and informal networks. The persistence of these equilibria has institutionalised hybridity as a mode of rule: formal institutions provide external legitimacy and access to international resources, while informal ones guarantee internal cohesion and rent distribution. Over time, this arrangement has become self-reinforcing, with governing elites selectively adapting to external demands - often "cherry-picking" elements of conditionality in ways that preserve core informal practices rather than transform them (Bolkvadze 2016; 2025).

The institutionalisation of hybridity thus shapes not only domestic governance but also the degree of permeability to external influence. Regimes sustained by informal power and low trust depend on external rents, recognition, and security guarantees, creating openings for foreign actors to embed themselves within existing patronal networks. In such systems, external interference does not occur in a vacuum; it operates through the very structures that uphold hybrid rule (Bolkvadze, Gueudet, Machavariani 2025). The same elite configurations that manage internal competition also mediate external engagement, converting foreign linkages and resources into instruments of domestic control. Consequently, the internal logic of hybridity and the external strategies of authoritarian powers become mutually reinforcing, blurring the distinction between domestic and foreign arenas of governance.

Within such settings, the distribution of trust, both vertical and horizontal, plays a decisive role in conditioning the permeability of regimes to external influence. Low vertical trust weakens the legitimacy of public institutions, while fragile horizontal trust undermines social cohesion and collective action. Following Stollenwerk, Börzel, and Risse (2021), democratic resilience requires high levels of both; where they are absent, the social fabric becomes porous to foreign interference. Trust deficits thus interact with the structural features of hybridity to produce an environment in which external actors can exploit informal networks and institutional ambiguity to advance their interests.

The literature on linkage and leverage developed by Levitsky and Way (2005, 2010) offers a useful framework for understanding these dynamics. *Linkage* refers to the density of economic, social, and informational ties connecting a country to external actors, while *leverage* denotes the capacity of those actors to exercise influence through coercion, dependency, or conditional incentives. In contexts dominated by a single liberal pole of attraction, strong Western linkage and leverage historically fostered democratic diffusion. Yet in today's plural geopolitical field, multiple sources of external influence compete for dominance, generating what might be termed competing authoritarian interferences. The simultaneous presence of authoritarian and democratic linkages undermines the clarity of incentives and expands the strategic room for manoeuvre of domestic elites.

Actors such as Russia, China, and Turkey have become key black knights, a term used by Levitsky and Way (2010, p. 41) to describe external powers that bolster authoritarianism rather than democracy. In the broader literature, these actors are also identified as "autocracy promoters" or "negative external actors" (Ambrosio 2009; Tolstrup 2009, 2014, 2015). Their involvement often takes covert or informal forms: financial patronage, strategic investment, information operations, or the manipulation of energy and trade dependencies. By engaging in such practices, black knights sustain or deepen authoritarian tendencies in target states, shaping the balance between formal and informal power.

Although Russia's role as an autocracy promoter in its neighbourhood is well established, the literature also highlights that democratic powers may act as black knights under certain conditions. As Ladwig (2017), Downes (2021), and Scott (1972) show, even liberal states may support illiberal incumbents, sponsor regime change, or engage in patron–client relationships when these serve strategic objectives. The analytical distinction, therefore, lies not in the regime type of the external actor but in the purpose and effect of its engagement: whether it strengthens or weakens the prospects of accountable governance in the recipient state.

Within hybrid regimes, gatekeeper elites, those controlling access to resources, information, and decision-making, mediate external influence. As Tolstrup (2013) argues, foreign powers exert leverage only insofar as domestic elites are receptive; where they are not, external actors remain peripheral. Hybridity heightens such receptivity. The prevalence of clientelistic relations and rent-seeking networks creates multiple entry points for external manipulation, reducing the cost of influence and blurring distinctions between domestic and foreign interests. Consequently, foreign interferences are filtered through local power structures that transform external inputs into internal political capital.

The interaction between hybridity and foreign interference is thus mutually reinforcing. Hybrid regimes provide fertile ground for authoritarian linkages and leverage, while sustained external interference consolidates the hybrid equilibrium by legitimising informal power holders and perpetuating distrust. The result is a feedback loop in which low trust, concentrated patronage, and external dependency reproduce one another. In these conditions, the resilience of states and societies against negative external action remains markedly lower than in consolidated democracies, which depend on credible institutions, legitimate intermediaries, and robust social cohesion (Stollenwerk et al., 2021).

Understanding authoritarian foreign interference therefore requires situating it at the intersection of domestic hybridity and international competition. Theories of linkage and leverage explain the external vectors of influence; studies of hybrid regimes illuminate the internal channels through which that influence operates. Where both meet, amid weak vertical and horizontal trust, external engagement transforms from a source of democratic consolidation into an instrument of authoritarian diffusion.

Rethinking the EU's Approach to Enlargement

In the context of pervasive hybridity and competing authoritarian influences, the EU's enlargement policy faces the dual challenge of promoting democratic consolidation while safeguarding its neighbourhood from external manipulation. Traditional models of EU democracy promotion, linkage, leverage, and governance, have each contributed to partial successes but have failed to fully address the complex realities of hybrid regimes. As scholars such as Freyburg et al. (2015) and Lavenex and Schimmelfennig (2013) have shown, these approaches largely operated under assumptions of linear democratization, privileging formal institutions over the informal structures that actually shape political behaviour in many candidate countries.

However, as Giske and Rieker (2025) underline, hybridity and low social trust constitute structural barriers to effective democracy promotion. The EU's previous emphasis on conditionality and institutional alignment, the "carrot-and-stick" logic of leverage,

often reinforced, rather than dismantled, informal patronal networks by empowering entrenched elites capable of mimicking compliance without substantive reform (Richter & Wunsch, 2019). In this sense, EU interventions risked consolidating *stabilitocracies* rather than fostering genuine democratic resilience.

In response, the RE-ENGAGE framework aligns with the embedded democracy model, which reconceptualises enlargement as a process of fostering resilient governance rather than simply institutional convergence. This approach foregrounds two dimensions essential for democracy promotion in hybrid contexts: (1) the interaction between formal and informal institutions and (2) the levels of vertical and horizontal trust within society. Trust, understood as both citizens' confidence in institutions and interpersonal solidarity across societal cleavages, becomes a critical determinant of resilience against authoritarian tendencies and external interference (Inglehart, 1988; Croissant & Lott, 2024).

Under this approach, EU engagement must move beyond conditionality to incorporate bottom-up mechanisms of resilience-building, strengthening independent media, civic participation, and local governance, while promoting transparency and accountability at all levels. Democracy support is thus reframed as an *embedded process*: one that integrates social cohesion, institutional adaptation, and proactive counteraction to authoritarian influence.

Ultimately, the EU's enlargement strategy can no longer rely on the assumption that formal compliance will translate into democratic consolidation. In regions marked by entrenched hybridity and strategic competition, the effectiveness of enlargement depends on the EU's capacity to engage with the hybrid logic of governance itself, addressing the informal networks, trust deficits, and societal vulnerabilities that enable both internal illiberalism and external interference. The embedded democracy model provides the conceptual foundation for such an approach, situating enlargement not only as a geopolitical tool but as a long-term investment in democratic resilience across the EU's neighbourhood.

Methodology and Fieldwork

Survey Implementation

The survey methodology of the RE-ENGAGE project pins on unpacking perceptions and trust among citizens concerning political institutions, media habits, contemporary EU engagements, external agency interventions, and general trust of local actors in communities. The survey-vignette module seeks to capture the relationship between vertical and horizontal trust on the micro-level; trust between authorities and people and trust in close agencies (i.e., kin). The results yield assumptions about Georgian

resilience against hybridity, and how the ongoing EU engagements are viewed among ordinary citizens.

We embedded a vignette section in the survey instrument where the interviewee is presented a fictive, yet plausible, story about an impending crisis harming the Georgian economy. The vignette story is replicated – though tweaked accordingly to contextual factors – in all the Western Balkans case countries (Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina) as well as Moldova and Georgia. The fictive scenario illustrates an economic crisis affecting the country, including trade deficits, rising costs of living, rapid increase in inflation and possibility of state default. To assist the Georgian government, the EU alongside the 'black knights' (non-democratic external interventionists competing with the EU): Russia, China and Turkey, offer three plausible rescue packages respectively. The bundles range from economic support packages to membership in the EU or BRICS, as well as debt relief plans or removal of certain tariffs. For each vignette, the respondent is requested to rank the support packages offered by each geopolitical player on a scale from "1" to "5" in terms of the perceived impact the support packages may play to address the economic crisis (i.e., from "very good impact" to detrimental impact"). Part II of the vignette allows the respondent to select three of the most preferable rescue packages of their choice offered by the geopolitical actors. The vignettes seek to measure both implicitly and explicitly, perceptions of four different geopolitical actors in a crisis situation. The vignettes yield assumptions about how much traction the different geopolitical players have among Georgians, and how people see hybrid actors competing for influence at the expense of the EU.

A quota sampling design was implemented, with sample allocation stratified by gender (male and female), age group (18–29, 30–54, and 55+), and educational attainment (primary education or below, secondary or vocational training, and higher education). To address the non-proportional allocation applied in this approach, whereby certain subgroups were oversampled, post-stratification weights were applied. Post-stratification weights were computed using the raking procedure in *SPSS* version 27.0.

To mitigate potential clustering effects arising from interviewers or fixed survey sites, we randomized the assignment of sample quota characteristics across survey locations and interviewers. This procedure helps ensure that no single interviewer or site becomes disproportionately associated with specific demographic profiles, thereby reducing bias. By dispersing quota characteristics in this way, the sample better approximates random variation and enhances the representativeness of the data. For each location, a certain number of quotas were applied to be completed by the interviewers.

Additionally, we applied a filter criterion for choosing interviewees, that the respondent must be a passport holder of the country (citizenship). Prior to the fieldwork, the

National Statistics Office of Georgia was unable to acquire us GIS/boundary data. The locations were thus picked based on local knowledge. The recruited interviewers were operating in urban areas for practical reasons (i.e. easy access to interviewees), but in two different cities: the capital city Tbilisi and a secondary city, Batumi. Tbilisi represents the political and administrative center of Georgia, concentrating national political institutions, major media outlets, and high-intensity protest and advocacy networks. While Batumi functions as an alternative hub shaped by its Black Sea port geography, cross-border connections, and a development model heavily oriented toward tourism and investment. Batumi is well-within the conception of a secondary city given its peripheral location to Tbilisi, and functions as an economic metropole distinct from the capital (see Markusen *et al.* 1999). We combine data collected from both cities for analysis, thus mitigating the bias of only collecting data in the capital and vice versa. The census data was collected by EECMD and subsequently delivered to NUPI for quota stratum calculations. Accordingly, the quotas were randomly assigned to the different urban data collection sites.

Data collection officially started on March 21st, 2025. However, the process was halted on June 3, 2025, due to the "Foreign Agents Registration Act' which entered into force on May 31st. EECMD recruited 13 enumerators, in which 7 was assigned to Tbilisi, and the remaining 6 was assigned to Batumi. A total of 10 urban survey locations were randomly picked in Tbilisi, and 6 locations in Batumi were selected.

The predetermined sample size of the survey-vignette component in each of the case countries of RE-ENGAGE is 560, in which the majority of them (i.e., 360) is allocated to the capital city, and the remaining 200 samples is allocated to the secondary city. However, given the 'foreign agents' bill, the project was forced to halt and subsequently terminate the data collection process due to risks of prosecution. The total sample size in the Georgian dataset is thus 488 (Tbilisi: n = 360, Batumi: n = 128).

Project Process-tracing methodology: the focus group sessions

In addition to the survey component, we conducted process-tracing of EU-funded projects implemented by local partners and directed toward clearly identified beneficiary groups. Below we outline the focus group protocol used as part of this methodological approach.

The focus group sessions brought together two representatives from the EU (or additional participants when a co-funder was involved), two to four representatives from the implementing partner(s), and approximately four beneficiary representatives. Each session lasted around two hours and was facilitated by one researcher from NUPI together with two researchers from the relevant work package. Three to four additional

researchers, all directly involved in the project, took detailed notes throughout the session.

The purpose of the focus groups was to capture how participants reflected on the project's origins, implementation processes, and their respective roles within it. We were particularly interested in the dynamics that emerged when funders, implementers, and beneficiaries discussed the project together. To structure the discussion, we drew on prior desk research and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) to develop a thematic battery of issue areas that had surfaced during preliminary analysis. These themes were presented to participants to elicit their perspectives, reactions, and interactions. The moderators' role was to introduce the themes and guide the conversation in an open and non-directive manner, ensuring that the discussion remained participant-led rather than researcher-steered.

We were fully transparent with invitees regarding the purpose of the focus groups. We emphasised that the sessions were **not** designed as project evaluations. Our objective was instead to gain insight into how projects of this type emerge, how different actors understand their roles and contributions, and what they perceive as the key lessons learned. These conversations also allowed us to explore how project design and implementation are shaped by structural factors beyond the control of those directly involved. The invitation therefore framed the session as an opportunity for collective reflection and mutual learning, rather than monitoring or assessment. Participants were informed that they would receive the session transcripts and that no quotations would be used without their explicit written consent.

Anonymity and Ethical Considerations

All interview-based material in this study is presented in anonymized form. The decision not to disclose respondents names or identifying characteristics reflects the increasingly restrictive and polarized political environment in Georgia, where participation in critical public discourse, particularly on issues related to democratic governance, elections, and the judiciary, may expose individuals to professional, legal, or personal risks. Anonymization was therefore necessary to ensure the safety of respondents and to prevent any potential retaliation or intimidation. To further reduce traceability, this paper does not report specific dates or times for individual interviews. This approach was communicated clearly to all participants prior to data collection, thereby enabling candid engagement while minimizing harm.

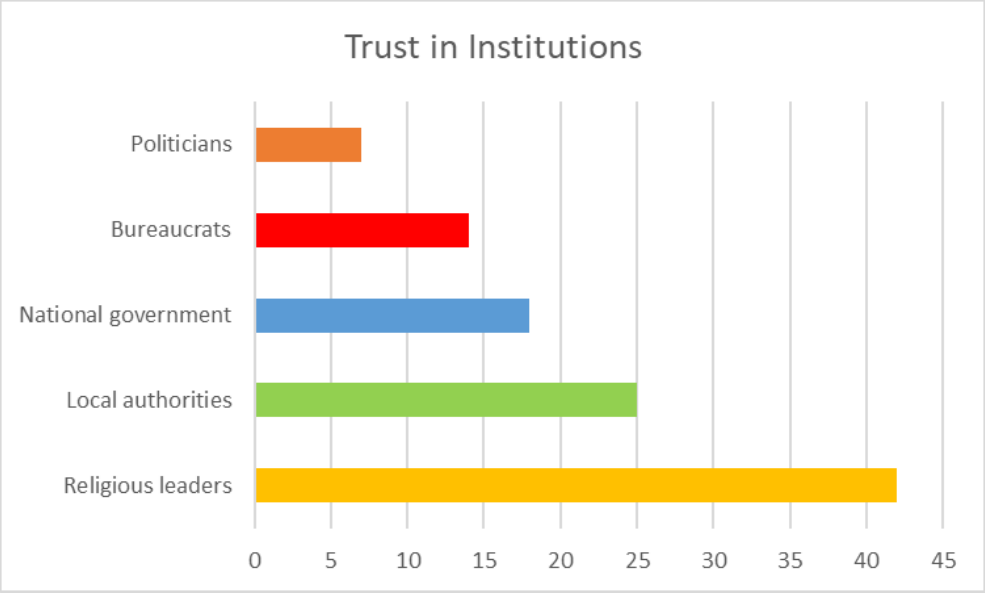
Relating Democracy Promotion to Social Trust and Cohesion

Georgia's social and political life shows many signs of a hybrid system, one where formal democratic institutions exist, but informal power networks still play a major role. People's trust in the system, both vertical and horizontal continues to be shaped by the country's post-Soviet past. Factors such as state capture, regional inequality, and deep political polarization all influence how Georgians view their government and their fellow citizens.

Recent data from the conducted fieldwork in Georgia reveal three interconnected features that undermine conventional democracy support: (1) a deep crisis of institutional legitimacy; (2) horizontal trust concentrated in family and small networks rather than broader civic or public institutions; and (3) strong social cleavages by generation, education and locality that shape how EU assistance is perceived and absorbed. Thus, this chapter explores how these dynamics influence the impact of democracy-promotion efforts and what they mean for the future of civic resilience in Georgia.

Vertical Trust and Institutional Legitimacy

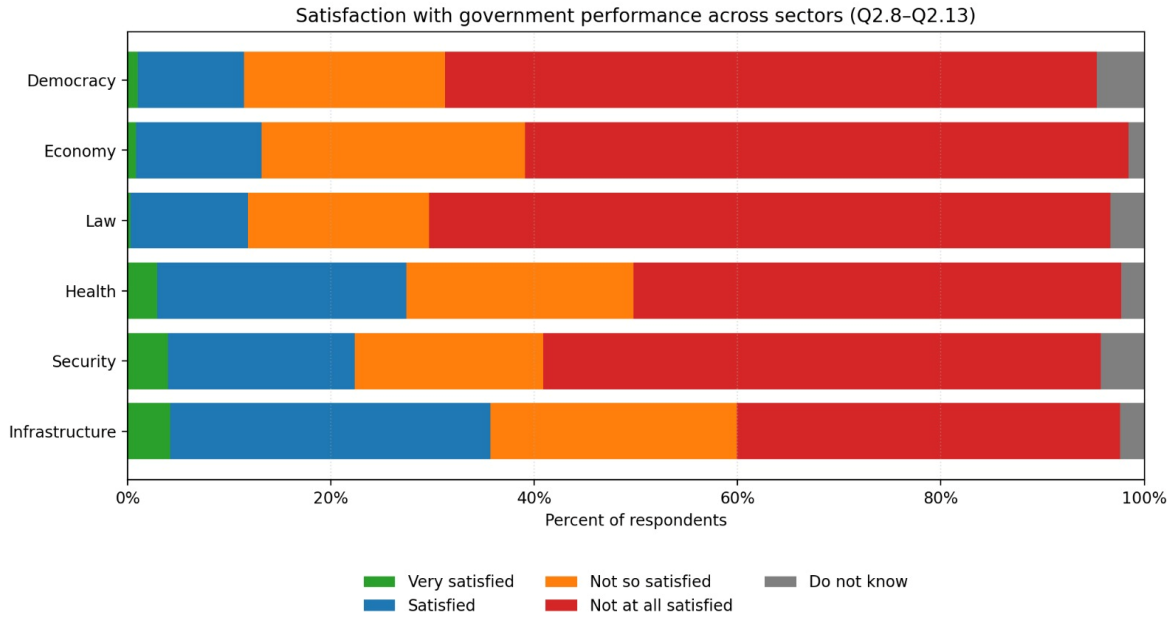
One of the most consistent and striking findings from the field interviews was pervasive fragility of institutional trust within Georgian society (Rothstein & Stolle, 2008; Howard, 2003). Respondents across all demographic groups - regardless of age, gender, income, education, and geography articulated a common pattern of skepticism, disappointment and distance toward formal state institutions, reflecting a deeper erosion of political legitimacy.



Graph 1: Trust in Institutions

Survey data provide a stark empirical picture. Only 18% of respondents report their trust towards the national government, 25% express confidence in local authorities, 14% trust bureaucrats, and a mere 7% trust politicians (Graph 1). In contrast, 42% of respondents' place confidence in religious leaders, an indication that moral authority is increasingly filling the gap left by weak administrative credibility. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025, p. 13)

When asked about government performance in key areas, such as economy, healthcare, justice, law enforcement, and security, between 55% and 67% of Georgians described themselves as *"not at all satisfied"*(Graph 2). Only 11% expressed satisfaction with the state of democracy, while 67% rated the justice system as *"not at all satisfactory."* Many respondents mentioned that the state is less a guarantor of rights and more an actor of partisanship benefitting the political elite for its own survival and patronage. These numbers reflect a profound collapse in the vertical accountability mechanisms that sustain the credibility of public institutions. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025, p. 14)



Graph 2: Satisfaction with government performance across sectors.

In only a small number of cases did respondents express confidence in state institutions, and almost regularly, these exceptions were based on personal proximity to power, such as being a public servant, having family employed in government, or having benefitted directly from state programs.

In addition, the focus group discussions disclosed an institutional trust that had deeply eroded and was embedded in everyday experiences of coercion, surveillance, and impunity. Participants repeatedly referred to how electoral processes, judicial institutions, and public administration became no longer perceived as neutral or

protective but rather as instruments of political control. Such a perception creates fear-driven disengagement whereby citizens might formally comply with what state expectations are while privately retracting trust from the very institutions designed to uphold democratic accountability. According to respondents, such dynamics were especially visible among socially vulnerable groups, public sector employees, and rural communities, where dependency on state resources amplifies susceptibility to pressure and undermines perceived credibility of democratic procedures. *(Focus Group with representatives of different sectors)*

This erosion of institutional trust is not unique to Georgia not is it an unexpected phenomenon in post-Soviet context and transitional democracies with a history of centralized power, clientelism, corruption, and weak rule of law. Although, the institutional reforms of the early 2000s produced visible modernization in Georgia, particularly in administrative capacity, public service provision, and state infrastructure, patron-client relations persisted within state bureaucracies. (Hale, 2014) As a result, many citizens continue to perceive state structures not as neutral guarantor of rights, but as partisan instruments that serve political elites and their networks. As several respondents remarked, the state is "something you must navigate, not something you can trust." *(Interview with an anonymous respondent)*

This widespread mistrust has several implications that are directly relevant for democracy-promotion efforts. First, low vertical trust reduces citizens' expectations of institutional fairness, limiting citizens' demand for reform and accountability, while maintaining stability of hybrid governance. Citizens with low levels of trust in government are less likely to demand accountability, seek legal remedies, less likely to participate in democratic processes, and will therefore primarily engage informally to solve their issues, creating environments that continue to reinforce hybrid forms of governance.

Second, an informal and weak trust environment has an impact on elite behavior. When institutional legitimacy is fragile, it creates strong incentives for political actors to utilize informal means of establishing and maintaining loyalty and control, through patronage, selective enforcement, personalized communication, etc. These practices may temporarily support short-term stability, while at the same time perpetuating long-term stagnation of democracy and reinforcing informal governance and weakening of rule of law.

Horizontal Trust, Kinship Networks, and Fragmented Cohesion

While democratic institutions form the foundation of a functioning democracy, social cohesion, interpersonal trust, common values, and community resilience, is the connective tissue. In Georgia, as in many transitional democracies, the decline of

institutional trust has resulted in people relying on more on interpersonal networks. This shift is not only widespread but also marked by social hierarchy, posing significant challenges to the durability and depth of democratic resilience.

When respondents were asked whom they trust most, the vast majority without hesitation responded: "family." But this trust came with qualifiers. Many clarified that they trusted only certain family members, indicating immediate family only. This revealed a pattern of selective interpersonal trust, shaped by social anxieties and lived experiences of betrayal or division, often rooted in economic pressures or political dynamics. The survey data reflect this dynamic: 83 % of respondents trust family members, 49 % trust neighbours, and 31 % trust ‘‘experts. By contrast, trust in broader civic or professional associations is minimal, highlighting how strongly interpersonal trust remains anchored in small, familiar circles rather than in wider social or institutional networks. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025, p. 13)

In crisis scenarios, interpersonal reliance replaces institutional protection. 62 % would turn to family for help in the event of income loss, 53 % to friends, and 34 % to relatives abroad. Only 14 % would approach local government, and a mere 3 % would seek assistance from religious leaders. Notably, 32 % said they would turn to *loan sharks*, underlining the absence of social safety nets. This behavioral substitution - privacy over public solutions, illustrates how confidence is limited to tightly connected networks, which undermines collective efforts, limiting the creation of social capital for democratic engagement. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025, p. 14)

When posed hypothetical scenarios about job loss, problems with the law, or health emergencies, respondents consistently indicated that they would seek support from family or friends as opposed to public services or civil society organizations. Some respondents explicitly stated that they did not feel the state could or would assist them in times of distress.

Another notable trend that emerged in the interviews was a generational divide in attitudes toward neighbors (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). The older respondents (especially those over the age of 50) tended to stress the importance of neighborly connections, recalling a time when community was closer and social life was merely communal: neighbors existed not only as potential resource providers, but also as informal moral support.

In contrast, most younger respondents (under the age of 35) portrayed their relationships with their neighbors as typically nonexistent, minimal, or mostly transactional. Several described the neighbors as either strangers, or simply as potential sources of surveillance or gossip. This detachment is indicative of more significant transformations in urban life generally and in Tbilisi in particular, where rapid forms of

modernization, online connectivity, and mobility are tending to erode the fabric of communal life.

The geographical dimension of this pattern is striking. Urban respondents, particularly in Tbilisi, report weaker neighborly interaction than those in Batumi. In Tbilisi, modernization and digitalization have produced social atomization, while Batumi's smaller-scale economy sustains thicker interpersonal ties. Yet even in Batumi, only 45 % of residents describe their neighborhoods as "cohesive," and 39 % report experiencing political conflict locally. 58 % of Georgians agree that neighborhood conflicts "inherently promote violence," compared to 37 % who disagree. This perception of latent volatility reveals that, while interpersonal trust endures, it is laced with anxiety and conditionality. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025, p. 15)

This trend is more than a norm; it marks a broader shift away from seeking institutional solutions, but rather creates a feedback loop of institutional disengagement: as people lean on their immediate social network (family, close friends, or local community ties) for support, they unintentionally deepen their disengagement from public institutions. The less individuals rely on public institutions, the less responsive and visible those institutions become, which in turn further diminishes their perceived relevance and usefulness in everyday life.

From a governance perspective, this retreat into interpersonal dependency weakens participatory citizenship and democratic accountability. If trust only exists within family or community networks, it is more difficult to mobilize around collective interests, push for systemic change, or build the broader alliances and solidarities that a healthy democracy requires.

Importantly, this situation is also a manifestation of current political realities and recent authoritarian trends in Georgia, including elite polarization, media control, and the inability or unwillingness of government institutions to create inclusive, transparent, and responsive systems.

Generational, Socio-Economic, and Cultural Divides

Generational cleavages structure both trust and geopolitical imaginaries. Generational divides shape not only patterns of trust but also how people imagine Georgia's geopolitical future. Support for European integration is widespread, but it is far from uniform. Early findings from the fieldwork reveal a clear generational split in attitudes toward the EU, rooted in differing understandings of identity, opportunities for social mobility, and perceptions of what is politically or geopolitically realistic for Georgia.

Younger respondents (aged 18-29), particularly educated young people and students, exhibited unambiguous support toward the EU. Unlike older respondents, they viewed

Europe as more than a political alliance but rather a framework of value and opportunities, repeatedly referencing ideas of freedoms, individual rights, rule of law, academic mobility and economic wellbeing. For many young Georgians, the "European" identity is associated with modernity, openness, and hope. While 86 % of respondents acknowledge the EU's positive role in the economy and 81 % in democracy, only 36 % consider EU assistance strategically well-placed, and 45 % deem it misallocated. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025, p. 15)

Additionally, younger respondents expressed stronger trust in international organizations (including the EU), as well as critique the Georgian government for corruption, judicial mistakes, and media manipulation, pointing towards a generation that perceived domestic governance failures as a driving reason for adopting EU standards and values.

Conversely, respondents in the over 50 demographic were often doubtful about European integration. Some acknowledged that Europe had economic and symbolic value, while others viewed the EU as yet another elite-led enterprise that was disconnected from the challenges of day-to-day life for ordinary Georgians. Respondents in this age group often expressed concerns related to traditions and stability, and recalled historic ties with Russia, and worried about what Western ideals represented for Georgian cultural icons and standard Orthodox Christian life.

Importantly, these responses did not always indicate outright opposition to the EU, but rather a reluctant or conditional acceptance. Many of respondents in this group supported "cooperation with both East and West" in order to achieve a more neutral foreign policy direction and inherent doubts of arriving at a full geopolitical alignment with either bloc.

One particularly illustrative theme was the concern that EU-related reforms are thought to benefit 'others- namely NGOs, political elites, or urban youth, while overlooking the demands of the ordinary citizens. Perceptions of unequal distribution of EU benefits intensifies skepticism and delegitimizes public support for EU-related programs among even the most fundamentally supportive of the idea of European integration.

A third, smaller group, expressed a disinterest in the EU and in Russia. While their stance was less common, their attitudes are significant for what they reveal about growing disillusionment with all forms of external alignment. Responses in this group were critical of what they viewed as a "game of influence" between East and West, and called instead for a Georgian pathway based on reform rather than dependence on another country. This type of group was mostly found in middle-aged individuals that express a high degree of nationalism, distrust toward all political parties and viewed both the EU and Russia through a lens of geopolitical self-interest rather than normative

partnership. While relatively marginal in terms of numbers, this cohort may grow in influence as political fragmentation and elite disillusionment continue.

Socio-economic status also mediates trust. Those respondents with higher education and income levels had greater confidence in civil society groups and international (non-Georgian) civic engagement. In contrast, lower-income respondents tended to identify trust in religious and kinship groups. Geographic or linguistic identity reinforces and parallels the socio-economic divide: Geogrian-speaking urban areas demonstrate a higher level of self-identification with European Union democratic political identity, while minority regions often - specifically Armenian or Azeri-speaking populations neglect their relationship or engagement with decision making, or are apathetic toward national political engagement, citing language and lack of information barriers.

These findings emphasize the critical role of education, generational experience, and access to trustworthy information in determining geopolitical attitudes in Georgia. For younger, educated individuals, particularly those who reached adulthood during a more open media and academic landscape, the European Union is referenced as an exciting project of transformation linked to ‘opportunity’, ‘transparency’, or ‘justice’ values. For older people, especially those disengaged from transnational discourse, Europe tends to exist as an abstraction, something they admire, question, or romanticize rather than uncritically trust.

These divides have implications not only for public policy, but also for the design of democracy promotion strategies. EU efforts that focus exclusively on elite engagement or institutional reform risk alienating large segments of the population. Without efforts to broaden the base of understanding and inclusion, especially in lower-income, rural, and older communities, public support for integration may remain uneven and politically vulnerable.

Informational Trust and the Collapse of the Public Sphere

Perhaps even more alarming was the near-total collapse of trust in informational ecosystems, particularly mass media. While nearly all respondents indicated that they consumed news through television, online portals or social media, the vast majority expressed little trust in the accuracy, impartiality or motives behind what they consumed. Both pro-government and opposition affiliated media were seen merely as partisan "megaphones," both delegitimating each other and not providing a service to journalism. Social media platforms like Facebook and Youtube (while freely accessible and much utilized) were treated with similar caution - especially among older respondents - who expressed concern over being manipulated or surveilled. Although television remains the dominant medium, fewer than 20 % of respondents trust the leading channels (TV Pirveli 19 %, Formula TV 23 %, Rustavi 2 12 %, First Channel 14 %).

Social media platforms, particularly Facebook (23 % trusted) and Instagram (17 %), have become primary news sources, yet they amplify polarization and disinformation. (RE-ENGAGE Georgia Country Report, 2025, pp. 17–18)

This erosion of trust in information sources have immediate, and corrosive impacts on democratic literacy and civic engagement. Individuals, lacking credible, widely trusted sources of information, face the choice to simply disengage, or to engage with information that is disconnected, rumor-driven, or ideologically biased. This uncertainty feeds into political indifference, vulnerability to disinformation, and serves to carve cynicism into a primary political stance.

Civil Society, Religious Authority, and Competing Trust Networks

The data also reveal divergent trust patterns between formal civil society and informal community groups. Only a minority of respondents report strong trust in NGOs, yet 49 % identify NGOs as the primary actors in EU-funded "trust-building projects". This suggests that while NGOs are visible intermediaries, they are not necessarily perceived as legitimate community representatives. It is also important to note that the broader political context. At the time of the survey, the space for civil society in Georgia was already narrowing. A series of government-imposed laws and regulatory pressures had begun restricting the work of CSOs, which weakened their ability to operate independently and to serve as credible bridges between EU support and local communities. As a result, their visibility did not always translate into trust, and their shrinking autonomy further complicated their role as mediators in Georgia's democratic landscape. (RE-ENGAGE Georgia Country Report, 2025, pp. 20–22)

Religious leadership had a different experience, and certainly a more varied course of exposure. 42 % of citizens trust clergy, but qualitative interviews show that this confidence depends on personal relations rather than institutional reputation. Secular respondents and pro-EU activists frequently accuse the Georgian Orthodox Church of political complicity with ruling elites. Thus, religious authority offers *moral trust* that can either reinforce or undermine democratic cohesion depending on context. For regular churchgoers, or people who had clergy in their family, priests were seen as virtuous, trustworthy, and moral people. Unlike civil or political authority, trust came with relationships or spiritual authority as opposed to just the institution. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025, p. 13)

However, for many secular respondents and opposition aligned respondents, the Church as an institution was viewed as untrustworthy because of its supposed alignment with the Georgian state government. Several respondents voiced their frustration that often religious leaders declined to take moral stances against political corruption or injustices, and instead gave credence to the state's narratives or conservative interests. The

politicization of religious authority has contributed to a greater dissonance between private faith and trust in public ecclesiastical institutions.

Georgia's trust landscape reveals a deeply hybrid political order in which formal democratic institutions coexist with persistent informal networks and uneven patterns of social cohesion. The results of the data indicate a lack of trust in government institutions, greatly influenced by historical patterns of centralized power, clientelism, and the lack of substantial change in patronage practices. While there is considerable horizontal trust in Georgia, most of this trust is concentrated amongst family and friends rather than in broad civic or community structures capable of sustaining democratic accountability.

This combination produces a fragmented social fabric: citizens individuals turn to their networks for solutions and protection rather than to the institutions they perceive as either overly political or inadequately responsive. Additionally, the factors of generation, socio-economic status, geography, and language create even greater barriers between these different social groups; creating differing perceptions of democracy, government, and Europe's future role in Georgia. The trend for young and highly educated individuals is toward strong support for EU membership and acceptance of international norms, while older, economically disadvantaged communities tend to be influenced more by family and religious relationships, and thus apply more caution and conditionality in their evaluation of the EU. In tandem, the collapse of trust in the media and information environment is detrimental to the creation of a common public sphere that is vital to both democratic discourse and collective political Action.

Civil society organizations, despite being central intermediaries for EU assistance, struggle with declining legitimacy due to political pressures, shrinking civic space and start attacks by the Georgian government. Religious authorities, while highly trusted personally by some sectors, are also embedded within political and cultural contexts that limit their ability to offer neutral moral leadership. Together, these elements suggest that the need to build social trust needs to be understood not just as a result of political situations but also as a driver toward hybrid stabilisation of society.

With regard to democracy promotion, these findings indicate that there are clear possibilities for strategy development for democracy promoters. The practice of only focusing on institutional reform or elite-level conditionality will have very limited impacts on the social underpinnings of trust and social cohesion. To create a more democratic environment in Georgia, it is necessary to invest in repairing the vertical trust that exists between citizens and government through the processes of justice reform, increased transparency, and visible fairness, and to develop the horizontal trust that exists within the local civic communities by supporting community-based

dialogues, media literacy, and inclusive educational programs that address issues of generational, linguistic, and regional diversity.

Geopolitical Representations and Preferences

Georgia's geopolitical landscape cannot be understood without situating it within the broader architecture of hybridity. In hybrid regimes, external alignments are never merely foreign-policy preferences. They are extensions of domestic governance logics, trust deficits, and struggles over political meaning. The survey vignette instrument was designed precisely to capture this entanglement. By placing respondents in a stylised but plausible economic crisis scenario and asking them to evaluate support packages offered by the EU, Russia, China, and Turkey, we observe geopolitical imaginaries not as abstract attitudes but as practical expectations of who can deliver stability, prosperity, and democratic development under conditions of uncertainty. The patterns that emerge reflect how ordinary Georgians navigate a system marked by low institutional trust, fragmented information environments, and competing international narratives.

In Georgia's hybrid regime, patronage, state capture, and political polarisation shape daily life to an extent that exceeds formal constitutional design. These features structure not only domestic authority but also the imagined relationship between Georgia and its external partners. Citizens' geopolitical preferences are therefore best understood through two interconnected layers. Geopolitical representations capture how actors are perceived, narrated, and evaluated in the public imagination. Geopolitical imaginaries encompass the longer-term visions of what political and economic futures seem attainable or desirable.

These imaginaries are deeply social: economic, cultural, and social capital shape how individuals interpret the international environment. Education influences the credibility of liberal vs. autocratic narratives. Income insecurity conditions attachments to transactional or redistributive foreign actors. Social capital and access to alternative information channels affect the ability to distinguish between propaganda, political persuasion, and credible commitment.

Georgia's geopolitical representations thus emerge from a socially stratified public: highly educated younger groups who overwhelmingly view the EU as the horizon of modernity and rule of law; economically vulnerable respondents who may remain open to pragmatic engagement with Russia or Turkey; conservative or older groups more embedded in traditional media ecosystems where pro-government or pro-Russian narratives circulate more easily; and a fragmented urban middle class whose frustration with domestic governance does not diminish their aspiration for European integration.

The survey confirms this complexity. It is not simply that Georgians prefer the EU, although the preference is strong, but that external actors occupy different positions in the imaginary field: the EU is the political horizon, Russia the coercive or destabilising pole, China the technocratic economic actor, and Turkey the pragmatic regional partner. Following sections delve deeper into unpacking these geopolitical preferences.

Vertical trust deficits and external anchoring

Vertical trust deficits do not merely coexist with external preferences, they actively structure them. As described earlier in the paper, virtually every measure of vertical trust in Georgian institutions is low. Only 18 percent say they trust the national government. Only 1 to 4 percent express high satisfaction with governmental performance across democracy, the economy, law and justice, healthcare, security, or infrastructure. The overwhelming majority rate performance as "not so satisfied" or "not at all satisfied." These deficits are not episodic or issue-specific: they reflect years of democratic backsliding, political polarisation, elite capture, and the chilling effect of the newly adopted foreign agents law, which many perceive as signalling a more assertive authoritarian turn. Low vertical trust pushes citizens toward external sources of authority and reassurance. The survey data display this logic clearly. When asked which actors matter for key sectors, an overwhelming majority identify the EU - *not domestic authorities* - as essential for Georgia's economy (86 %), and democracy (81 %). The reliance on informal networks for crisis coping (family 62 %, relatives abroad 34 %, friends 53 %) reinforces the idea that the state is not perceived as a credible protector, which increases the symbolic and practical value of external actors. (RE-ENGAGE Georgia Country Report, 2025, pp. 11–16)

This external anchoring is not evenly distributed. Younger, higher-educated, and urban respondents are particularly likely to view the EU as a framework for democratic and economic stability, while lower-income or older respondents display more ambivalence. Yet across all strata, the EU consistently outperforms any alternative geopolitical actor. Vertical trust deficits alone, however, cannot explain this pattern. It emerges through the interaction of distrust in domestic institutions, aspiration for a better governance model, and exposure to competing geopolitical narratives.

Media ecosystems, disinformation, and the fragmentation of geopolitical meaning. To understand Georgian citizens' geopolitical preferences, it is essential to examine the media environment through which these preferences are formed. The survey data make clear that geopolitical orientations do not emerge in a vacuum. They are shaped, *and often distorted*, by the information channels citizens rely on, the narratives available to them, and the credibility assigned to different media sources. In other words, media

consumption is one of the primary mechanisms through which geopolitical meaning is produced, filtered, and contested in Georgia.

Georgian media consumption reveals a highly fragmented information environment in which citizens rely primarily on domestic television and social media. Facebook is the dominant platform, used by 47 percent of respondents as a main source of news and trusted by 23 percent, while simultaneously serving as a major channel for disinformation and polarising content. Television channels such as TV Pirveli (22 %) and Formula (21 %) attract high viewership among urban, pro-Western audiences, while other outlets - Imedi (16 %), First Channel (15 %), or Maestro - have historically been associated with pro-government or more ambivalent messaging toward Russia. This segmentation generates parallel "credibility bubbles," each offering distinct interpretations of international political events and external actors.

Notably, international media outlets such as CNN and BBC remain almost entirely peripheral to how Georgians form geopolitical judgements. Only 4% of respondents report using CNN, and 6% use BBC in their daily information diets - figures that rise meaningfully only among the tiny subgroup of respondents with foreign citizenship (21%) or highly income (15%). Trust levels mirror this marginality: only 5 percent trust CNN and 8 percent trust BBC as reliable sources. Even in a crisis scenario, when audiences typically seek authoritative, external verification, only 3 percent say they would turn to CNN and 5 percent to BBC. Among younger respondents aged 18–29 reliance increases slightly (6 percent for CNN and 10 percent for BBC), yet these remain minority patterns.

This information structure matters profoundly for how geopolitical imaginaries are formed. With international outlets playing a marginal role, over 90 percent of Georgians receive their geopolitical narratives through domestic intermediaries and social-media networks rather than direct international reporting. Consequently, the EU, Russia, China, and Turkey circulate through competing domestic frames: oppositional, pro-government, nationalist, or populist, each constructing its own story about sovereignty, dependency, threat, stability, and legitimacy. Citizens therefore interpret external actors not as they present themselves internationally, but as they are refracted through Georgia's internal political divides.

This fractured information exposure has direct implications for the vignette results. Where citizens consume mixed or contradictory narratives, geopolitical preferences tend to become pragmatic and conflict-averse. Where exposure to democratic-promotion narratives is strong, alignment with the EU becomes both identity-driven and strategic. Conversely, where disinformation about Western interference or EU conditionality circulates, scepticism deepens regarding the EU's ability to deliver

tangible improvements. As a result, respondents interpret the vignette support packages not merely as technical economic offers, but as political visions embedded in broader narratives about Georgia's autonomy, vulnerability, and international orientation.

Geopolitical imaginaries of external actors

Against this backdrop, **the EU** stands out as the dominant external reference point. The perception that the EU is important for democracy (81 %), security (80 %), and rule of law (79 %) indicates that Europe is not simply a geopolitical partner, it is the imagined endpoint of Georgia's political trajectory. This aligns with two decades of societal support for European integration, extensive civil society engagement, and the country's formal aspirations toward EU membership. Yet within this strong symbolic alignment lies a frustration that is equally important for understanding hybridity. Only 36 percent believe EU support is strategically well placed in Georgia, while 45 percent think it is misallocated. Awareness of EU democracy-promotion projects is extremely low, with three quarters unable to name a single initiative. Although 64 percent say EU involvement supports democratic development, many do not clearly see how EU actions translate into domestic change. This gap between political horizon and perceived delivery is typical of hybrid contexts. It reflects the fact that the EU often channels its assistance through formal institutions or organised civil society: actors who may not command trust among ordinary citizens. It also reflects selective compliance and elite capture: EU-supported reforms may be implemented symbolically or partially, creating a perception that "the EU tries, but the system remains unchanged." As a result, the EU is both indispensable and imperfectly effective: an anchor whose gravitational pull is strong but whose concrete impact is not always visible.

A more detailed unpacking of these dynamics follows in the next section where we zoom in representations of the EU and it's democracy promotion strategies, but here, it suffices to note that the EU occupies a unique dual position: both the primary geopolitical horizon and a frustratingly imperfect agent of change.

Russia's geopolitical imaginary is overwhelmingly negative, but it is stratified in ways that reveal how different groups navigate vulnerability, information asymmetries, and historical memory. Across the full sample, only 3% of respondents judge Russian assistance as having a "very good impact," and 50% describe it as *detrimental*. Yet beneath this consensus of distrust lies a patterned variation. Younger respondents are the most hostile: among those aged 18–29, fully 63% describe Russian involvement as detrimental and only 1 percent see any positive effect. This aligns with their media consumption profile, which is dominated by oppositional channels (Formula, TV Pirveli) and social media ecosystems where narratives about Russian aggression are widespread. Among older respondents, however, negativity softens slightly. In the 60+

group, 33% still rate Russian support as "good" or "very good" (5%), and the share describing it as detrimental drops to 42%. These respondents rely disproportionately on pro-government television, 37% use Imedi daily and 28% First Channel, media environments that frame Russia in more ambivalent or pragmatic terms.

Economic precarity produces similar patterns. Respondents who identify as poor exhibit the highest share of positive assessments (7 % very good, 36 % good) and a notably lower share of "detrimental" evaluations (31%). This does not indicate genuine affinity but reflects narratives portraying Russia as a necessary market, employer, or source of remittances. In contrast, financially secure groups are far more polarized. Among those who are "above average" assessments of Russian assistance as "detrimental" rise sharply, to 52%, while positive evaluations remain minimal (4%). Education follows the same gradient. Those with primary or no education show 31 percent positive or somewhat positive assessments, compared to 21 percent among respondents with higher education, where 53 percent view Russia as detrimental. Political identity amplifies these divides. Liberal respondents overwhelmingly reject Russia: 80% describe its measures as detrimental, and only 8% assign any positive value. Conservatives and moderates are more mixed: conservatives show 33 percent positive or somewhat positive assessments and 35 percent detrimental, whereas moderates lean heavily negative (54 percent detrimental). Socialist/Communist identifiers constitute the only group where a majority (64 percent) evaluate Russia's support positively, a pattern consistent with their media choices and ideological priors.

Taken together, the data reveal that Russia is imagined not as a viable partner but as a coercive and destabilising actor. Yet for older, poorer, less-educated, and conservative respondents, this negative imaginary is tempered by pockets of reluctant pragmatism shaped by economic dependence, limited media pluralism, and historical familiarity. Among younger, urban, educated, and liberal strata, by contrast, Russia is rejected almost uniformly. This stratification underscores that Georgia's geopolitical landscape is not simply pro-Western versus pro-Russian. It is a field structured by vulnerability and information asymmetry, where rejection of Russia is broadly shared but unevenly articulated across social groups.

China occupies an ambivalent and relatively underdeveloped position in Georgia's geopolitical imaginary. Unlike the EU, which serves as a normative horizon, or Russia, which evokes a largely uniform sense of threat, China is imagined primarily through an economic and technocratic lens. This is reflected in the vignette data, where assessments cluster around the middle of the scale. Across the full sample, 35 percent of respondents view Chinese assistance as positive (5 percent very good, 30 percent good), while 26 percent describe it as bad and 20 percent as detrimental. The largest single

group—58 percent—thus falls into categories of modest approval or uncertainty, indicating neither strong attraction nor deep resistance.

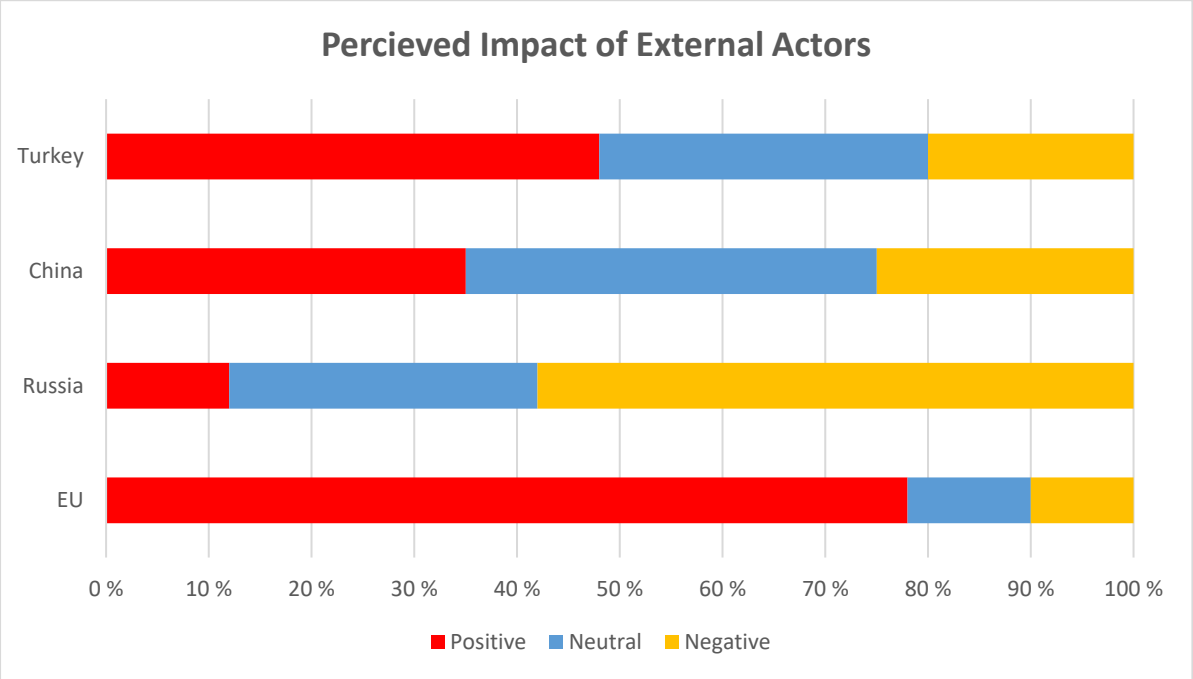
This pattern is remarkably stable across geography and gender. However, variations emerge more clearly across age groups. Younger Georgians aged 18–29 are more sceptical, with 30 percent describing China's assistance as bad and 19 percent as detrimental. Their cautious stance reflects higher exposure to global debates about China, greater alignment with EU-oriented narratives, and lower reliance on state-affiliated media. By contrast, older respondents, especially those over 60, show a more even distribution of opinions, with 26 percent positive assessments and a relatively moderate 23 percent detrimental evaluations. Their views reflect a combination of economic pragmatism and limited familiarity with China's political system. Socioeconomic status also shapes imaginaries of China. Among the poor or financially insecure, negative evaluations reach 50 %, reflecting vulnerability and scepticism toward external actors more broadly. Meanwhile, the "above average" and "well-off" groups show the highest levels of approval (48–49 %) and the lowest levels of negativity (6% and 15 %, respectively). This suggests that China's developmental image resonates more strongly with economically secure strata who may view Chinese investment or infrastructure support as beneficial.

China's imaginary in Georgia is therefore characterised by low normative resonance but considerable pragmatic openness. It is neither embraced nor rejected; instead, it is evaluated as a functional economic actor whose relevance depends less on identity and values than on material expectations. This ambivalence reflects the broader logic of Georgian hybridity, where citizens, amid deep distrust in domestic institutions, remain open to selective external benefits without granting China the political or symbolic significance attributed to the EU.

Turkey occupies a pragmatic, middle-ground position in Georgia's geopolitical imaginary. It is neither a normative horizon like the EU nor a coercive threat like Russia, but rather a functional regional partner shaped by proximity, trade, and cross-border mobility. This is reflected in the vignette results: 47 percent of respondents evaluate Turkish assistance positively (4 percent "very good," 43 percent "good"), while 21 percent view it as bad and 11 percent as detrimental. Compared with Russia and China, Turkey generates the lowest levels of strong negativity, reinforcing its image as a useful but non-transformational actor.

Demographic patterns further illustrate this pragmatic orientation. Younger respondents (18–29) are the most positive, with 52 percent favourable evaluations and only 5 percent detrimental assessments—a likely reflection of tourism, labour mobility, and cultural openness. Middle-aged respondents remain similarly supportive, while

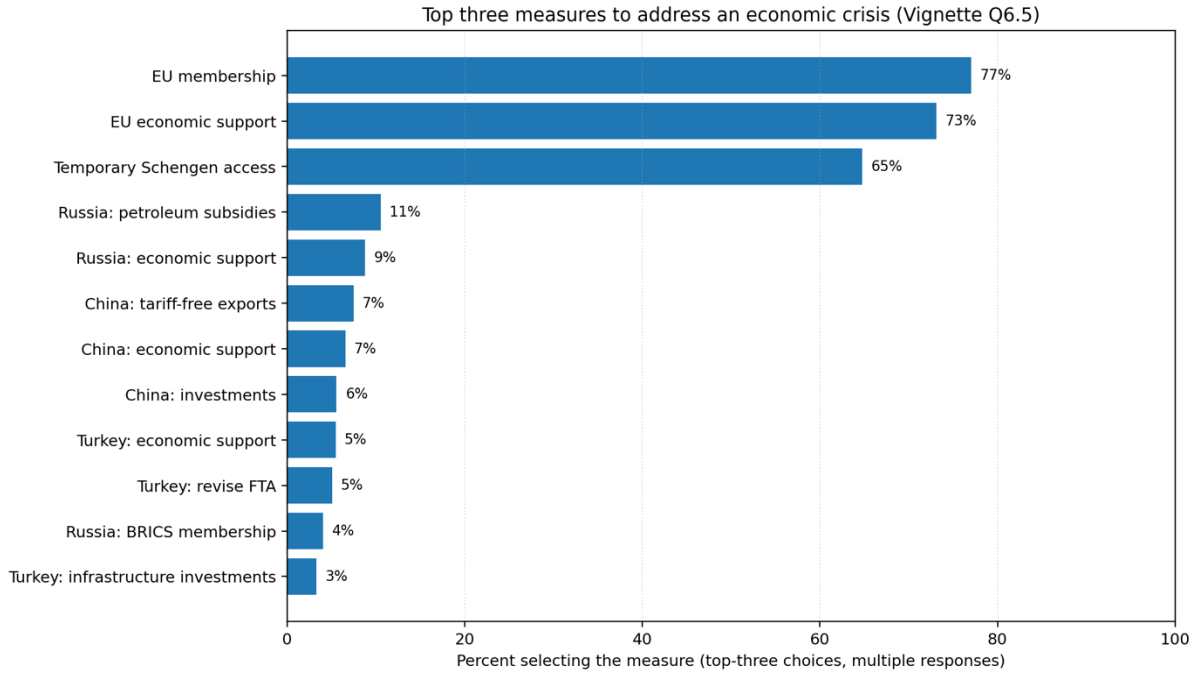
older Georgians (60+) display greater ambivalence, with positivity falling to 32 percent and detrimental evaluations rising to 22 percent. Socioeconomic status also plays a role: negative assessments reach 44 percent among poorer households, whereas the financially secure show the strongest approval, up to 85 percent among the "well-off." This suggests that Turkey's developmental and commercial relevance resonates most strongly with groups already connected to regional economic networks. Across ideological divides, Turkey remains a comparatively low-polarisation actor. Liberals, moderates, and conservatives all cluster around similar levels of moderate approval (39–45 percent), indicating that Turkey is not viewed as a normative challenger to Georgia's democratic aspirations, nor as a competing governance model. Instead, it occupies a stable intermediate role: as a regional problem-solver whose value is rooted in practicality rather than political identity. Turkey's geopolitical imaginary is anchored in everyday pragmatism. It is a consistent regional presence but not a political destination, reinforcing its position as a supplementary partner within Georgia's broader hierarchy of multi-alignment.



Graph 3: Perceived Impact of External Actors

Multi-alignment: structure, hierarchy, and hybridity: The vignette's second stage, which asked respondents to rank the top three external measures they believed would help Georgia navigate an economic crisis, provides a clear window into the hierarchy of geopolitical preferences across social groups. EU-aligned measures dominate decisively: 77 percent of respondents place full EU membership among their top three choices, 73 percent select EU economic support, and 65 percent prioritise temporary Schengen access (Graph 4). These preferences are strongest among younger, better-

educated, and urban Georgians among 18–29-year-olds, support for EU membership rises to 88 percent and EU economic aid to 89 percent. Yet even among older cohorts and financially insecure respondents, EU options consistently remain the top choices. At the same time, the data show that alternative offers are not dismissed outright. A non-trivial minority select Russian petroleum subsidies (11 percent), Russian economic aid (9 percent), or Chinese economic support (7 percent). Turkish measures attract similar niche but stable interest: 5 percent choose the Turkey economic support package and another 5 percent favour revision of the Free Trade Agreement. These minority preferences reflect instrumental, crisis-driven calculations rather than geopolitical alignment.



Graph 4: Top three measures to address an economic crisis (Vignette Q6.5)

Seen together, these patterns illustrate the core logic of Georgian multi-alignment. The EU anchors the normative and strategic horizon, but external expectations diversify when filtered through economic insecurity, uneven media narratives, and the chronic weakness of domestic institutions. Russia's offers attract limited pragmatism among older, poorer, or conservative respondents; China's appeal remains technocratic and concentrated among higher-income groups; and Turkey occupies a functional regional tier with modest but steady support. This layered structure reflects hybridity in practice. Citizens compensate for institutional distrust by looking outward, but they do so hierarchically: granting the EU symbolic primacy while remaining selectively open to material benefits from alternative actors. The result is a geopolitical imaginary that is neither binary nor unstable, but a calibrated balancing act shaped by vulnerability, identity, and competing narratives. It is within this landscape that EU democracy

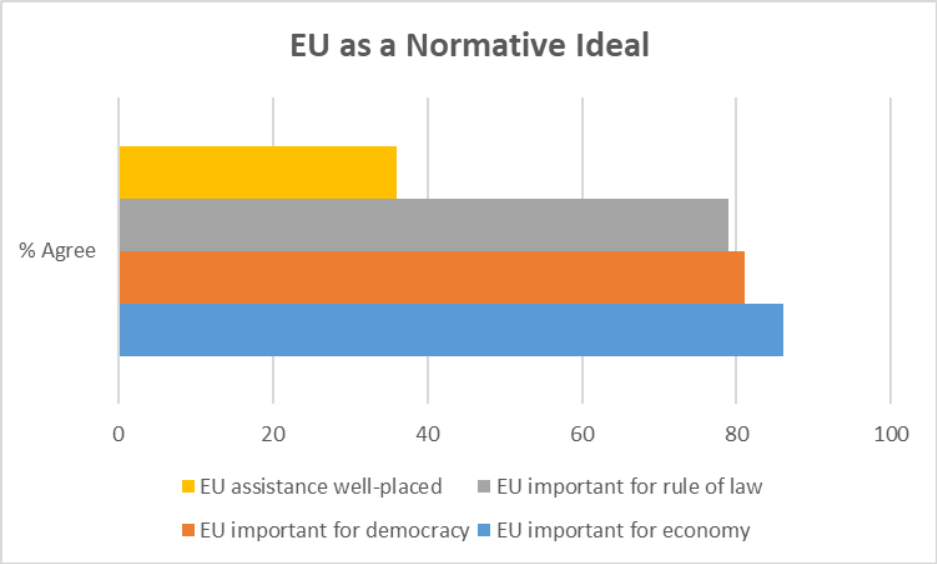
promotion must operate, not as a monopolistic force but as the central node in a crowded field of pragmatic external expectations.

Zoom in representations and perceptions of the EU and democracy promotion assistance

In contrast to domestic institutions, which suffer from chronic distrust, the European Union stands out as one of the few actors that enjoys high levels of public confidence in Georgia. This trust is especially pronounced among younger, educated, urban, politically neutral respondents, who claim the EU represents what they do not perceive at home: transparency, fairness, professionalism, and meritocratic governance. For many, the EU acts as less of a geopolitical external actor and more of a normative touchstone and a reference point for what public institutions would look like in an ideal democracy. As one student put it, *"When I see an EU flag on a project, at least I know there is some fairness involved." (Interview with anonymous respondent)*

The survey data reinforce this symbolic role - 86% of respondents consider the EU essential for Georgia's economy, 81% see it as vital for democracy, and 79% credit it with strengthening the rule of law. These figures reveal a profound alignment between Georgian citizens' aspirations and the EU's normative identity. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025, p.15)

Yet this trust is not unconditional. When citizens evaluate not the idea of the EU but the practical outcomes of its assistance, perceptions become more ambivalent. Only 36% of respondents believe that EU democracy-promotion resources are "strategically well-placed," whereas 45% view them as misallocated, suggesting a growing gap between the EU as an ideal and the EU as an implementer. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025, p.15) Several interviewees expressed frustration that while the EU brings clear values and expectations, its assistance tends to circulate within a very narrow local ecosystem, a closed circle of urban NGOs, English-speaking professionals, and political actors who already share the EU's normative frameworks. For many, EU-funded initiatives appear symbolically visible yet materially distant. As a mid-career professionals noted, *"All this EU money is going to the same five organizations. It never reaches the general population".* (Interview with anonymous respondent)



Graph 5: EU as a Normative Ideal.

This perception of exclusivity has also been reflected in survey data showing that only 15% of respondents could name a single EU-funded democracy initiative, while 75% reported having no direct awareness of projects supported by the EU delegation or its partners. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025, p.15)

Focus group discussions echoed these patterns. The sessions have pointed out that trust has not vanished but has been transferred to a certain extent to the civil society and, to the EU institutions. The civil society organizations have been portrayed as credible intermediaries, providing legal support, information, and a sense of solidarity under conditions of repression. Yet, it should be noted that the mentioned trust is highly volatile and contingent upon several factors. Specifically, it was noticed that a lack of responsiveness, formalism, and political caution by the EU could weaken its credibility as a democratic cornerstone and a potential source of support during a democratic emergency. The mentioned form of trust is, therefore, very dependent upon the potential responsiveness of the trusted actor during a democratic emergency rather than during a longer-term period. *(Focus Group with representatives of different sectors)*

This dynamic creates what can be described as a paradox of trust. The EU is respected as a normative ideal, fair, impartial, democratic, yet its local implementation mechanisms are frequently viewed with skepticism. Citizens distinguish sharply between the EU as an institution, perceived as principled and trustworthy, and the EU as a local actor, seen as entangled in elite networks and unable to distribute opportunities equally. This gap between symbolic legitimacy and lived experience widens feelings of exclusion among rural, lower-income, and minority-language communities, reinforcing the impression that Europeanisation remains a project accessible primarily to already-privileged groups.

Social Demographics of Perception: Convergences and Cleavages

The survey data reveal that attitudes toward the European Union in Georgia are not uniform but rather shaped by age, class, education, gender, geography, linguistic identity, and socio-economic status. These differences help explain why the EU appears as a promising future to some groups, while others see it as a project driven mainly by political and urban elites. These divergences are not random, they map onto deeper structural inequalities and historically rooted cleavages that shape how people interpret political authority and the promises of Europeanisation.

Younger respondents (18–29) exhibit the strongest identification with the EU. An overwhelming 96% associate the EU with opportunity, rights, and mobility, while 93% view it as essential for stability, transparency, and fair governance. For this generation, Europe is not only a political direction but also a cultural and moral horizon. Their identity formation has taken place during years of partial openness, Erasmus exchanges, visa-free travel, English-language education, and digital connectivity, experiences that integrate them into transnational cultural spaces. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025, p.15)

In contrast, older respondents (50+) perceive the EU with a greater degree of ambivalence; around 25% describe themselves as skeptical or opposed to EU integration. About a quarter describe themselves as either sceptical or even anti-EU integration narrative. Their opinions are shaped by different memories of historical events including: The Fall of the Soviet Union, The Economic Crisis of the 90's and Experiences of Civil War. For older generations, the thought of rapidly becoming members of Western organisations raises issues of: the potential loss of sovereignty, cultural dilution, and the geopolitical aspect of European integration. Therefore, Europe is not dismissed outright, but it is approached with significant caution.

Educational background sharply increases these generational divides. Respondents with higher education are 2.5 times more likely to describe the EU as a "source of democratic inspiration" compared with those with vocational or primary education. Higher-income and middle-class respondents tend to associate EU integration with professionalization, rule of law, and economic modernization.

In contrast, respondents with lower incomes view the EU though a more transactional and practical lens - whether it generates jobs, lowers prices or brings direct localized development. In economically marginalized communities, disappointment with the lack of visible EU funded reforms often yields skepticism. These differing perceptions of the EU and its role in the democratization process further reinforce the differences in ownership between groups based on their socioeconomic status.

Although gender differences are less pronounced than generational or class cleavages, they offer important nuance. Women (56% of sample) are more likely than men (44%) to view EU as associated with protections of rights, social justice and rule of law. This is consistent with the global patterns that women tend to place more value on institutional fairness, legal protections and stability.

Geography deepens these social divides. For urban respondents, especially in Tbilisi, the EU is a visible actor. EU flags are seen on infrastructure projects, university partnerships, judicial reform initiatives, human rights campaigns, and civil society programs. In rural areas, however, the EU is largely symbolic and distant. Only 15% of rural respondents reported awareness of any EU-funded democracy initiative. Rural participants often described Europeanisation as an elite-driven discourse, "something for Tbilisi people", detached from the economic struggles and informational environments of rural life. Limited access to high-speed internet, fewer opportunities for mobility, and linguistic barriers (particularly in Armenian- and Azeri-speaking communities) reinforce this sense of exclusion. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025, p.12-13)

EU Democracy Promotion

The analysis of European Union assistance in Georgia for the past years reveals a persistent structural pattern: democracy promotion has been conceived and implemented primarily through a top-down, institution-centred model, with few mechanisms that enable meaningful citizen participation or local ownership. Most EU-supported reforms, judicial, electoral, anti-corruption, or public administration have produced visible formal improvements, they have not consistently translated into public trust, social resonance, or inclusive engagement.

Across interviews with civil society actors, local activists, and project beneficiaries, a recurring theme emerged: EU-supported reform processes tend to focus on technical compliance and formal technical alignment rather than community participation. As one of the civil society leaders stated; *"the reforms come from above and through documents and procedures and therefore people do not feel as if they are a part of the reforms. They are simply informed"* (Interview with anonymous respondent). This is an important distinction: informing is not ownership and, aligning with the procedure does not mean legitimacy in the eyes of citizens.

The disconnect was more pronounced in the context of the vignette experiments that were undertaken within the RE-ENGAGE study. When respondents were asked to evaluate hypothetical EU interventions during an economic crisis, 60% supported macro-financial assistance, a measure perceived as tangible and broadly beneficial. In contrast, 17% of respondents expressed support for the governance interventions as many of these respondents viewed these interventions as too "abstract", too "intrusive"

or simply "captured by the elite" stakeholder groups. Overall these findings highlight a disparity in the perceived trust/capability of the EU's normative values against its governance tools by citizens. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025, p.12)

In the past EU has focused on working predominantly with institutionalised NGOs, think tanks, and metropolitan policy experts. Meanwhile, informal civic groups, rural communities, youth collectives, or minority-language networks were marginalised from the democracy-promotion ecosystem, further contributing to the growing perception that Europeanisation is an elite domain rather than a societal project.

At the political level, the conducted fieldwork points to another significant outcome: selective compliance. Over the years, Georgian political elites have strategically performed alignment with EU standards by producing reform strategies, adopting legal texts, or launching institutional programs, while quietly manipulating implementation to preserve political control. This pattern reflects the dynamics of stabilitocracy, where governments maintain the appearance of reform for international audiences while entrenching informal power structures at home.

In this context, the EU's democracy promotion may bolster rather than challenge hybrid authority. The elite monopoly over Europeanisation limits societal ownership and diminishes the EU's credibility as a democratisation agent. Unless democracy assistance becomes more participatory, context-sensitive, and socially embedded, it will continue to strengthen the very intermediaries and power networks that limit Georgia's democratic transformation. In the case of the ruling Georgian Dream party, this façade has largely collapsed. The government has openly abandoned previous commitments to cooperation with the European Union, signaling a decisive step away from the EU partnership and exposing the limits of its earlier performative Europeanisation.

Managing Expectations: Between Rhetoric and media Experience

Expectations toward the European Union in Georgia are shaped by four principal domains - democratization, rule of law, economic development, and security, forming the backbone of what citizens believe Europeanisation should deliver. Yet, as the fieldwork shows, Georgians assess EU impact not through official documents or institutional indicators but through their personal experience - whether reforms impact their daily lives, whether the justice system appears fair and impartial, whether they have more opportunities available, and whether their lived sense of security has improved.

A closer look at each domain reveals the depth of this expectation–experience gap:

Democracy: An overwhelming 81% of respondents named the EU as a crucial promoter of democratic governance in Georgia, but this broad normative support is hindered by 64% of citizens disagreeing with how democratic reforms are implemented domestically. Citizens report election processes, anti-corruption bodies, and other institutions being formally restructured, yet they perceive little substantive change in political accountability or fairness. Democracy is thus seen as an EU promise that the ruling party has failed to deliver. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025, p.15)

Rule of Law: Citizens of Georgia generally believe that the EU has positively impacted justice-sector reforms, 79% credit the EU with advancing justice-sector reforms. Yet, qualitative interviews suggest a different picture: legal reform process is perceived as slow, and inconsistent. Multiple respondents cited cases of a selective justice and ruling motivated by political interest, stating that "reforms backed by the EU exist on paper, but not in practice." Many believe that due to political influence and corruption and close alignment with the ruling party, the possibility of real change continues to diminish. In this context, citizens increasingly question whether even sustained EU engagement can overcome the structural barriers that undermine the rule of law. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025, p.15)

Economy: Economically, the EU continues to offer symbolic and material capital appeal. 86% of respondents consider EU trade arrangements, development assistance, and economic relations essential for Georgia's growth. However, 48% of respondents believe that the Georgian government has poorly coordinated EU funded economic projects. Citizens often see EU-backed work turn into projects that don't improve local employment, social protection, or regional economies. Overall EU is trusted as economic partners, and would admit that on the whole, the EU is not negative for the economy, but the EU remains abstract that does not translate to tangible economic empowerment for many households beyond urban Georgia. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025, p.15)

Security: In the domain of security, trust in the EU is moderate (58%), but consistently overshadowed by NATO, which Georgians overwhelmingly view as the real guarantor of sovereignty, especially under the pressure of Russian occupation. Respondents frequently reported that the EU was perceived as "supportive but ineffective" in military or territorial context. This framing limits the EU's authority in which citizens feel most vulnerability.

All four spheres reveal a similar pattern of symbolic expectations outpacing practical experiences. While the EU is imagined as a transformative actor, the concrete benefits of Europeanisation feel unequal, concentrated among elites or seemingly too distant to ordinary citizens. Yet the biggest challenge is a clear disconnect between the EU's

ambitious rhetoric of systemic change and the gradual, sector-specific adjustments that people encounter in their daily lives.

Increasing divides lead to increased disillusionment and political apathy. Citizens see a growing distinction between the "EU as an ideal," and the "EU as experienced," a distinction that populist actors have exploited to suggest that Europeanisation is serving only to benefit the elites, and not the broader society. Thus, in this context, managing expectations should not only be considered a political challenge, but also a democratic one. The long-term strength of pro-EU sentiment will depend on ensuring that the EU's symbolic appeal is matched by concrete, inclusive results that people can feel in their everyday lives.

Fear, Silence of Political Expression

One of the most revealing and troubling findings from the field interviews was the presence of fear - a quiet, but prevalent, anxiety felt in how people spoke, what they articulated, and if they talked about anything possibly political. Georgia is a pluralist democracy, and has formal protections for freedom of expression in its constitution, however the enduring psychological legacies of the recent repressions and the perceived chances of political retaliation cloud the political life of the country.

Respondents often became stiff or stalled when asked about their position towards government performance, political parties, or police. Even though the context of the interviews were anonymous and happened in an informal context, just articulating the political view seemed to activate their behaviors to self-monitor their comments, voice lowering, looking over their shoulders, or deflections like "I don't follow politics," or "I'd rather not say."

Importantly, this self-censorship was not the same across the board. It showed some age and gender variation. Older respondents, especially those who were 45 and older, were the most hesitant, maintaining a learned practice of silence. Conversely, younger respondents often exhibited more vocal and astute confidence when articulating their political viewpoints. They reported frustration with the status quo, a willingness to move toward deeper integrations with the EU, and exhibited a degree of scepticism toward established authorities and those engaged in the party-political system. But, even these respondents showed some hesitance, especially in so far as naming any particular parties, in terms of membership, and/or critiquing well-known politicians.

One of the most telling dynamics was that contradictory responses appeared within the same interview. For example, a participant might first argue they supported the government at the same time in one-on-one informal or sometimes off-the-record context argue that they had to be tempered or risk the operator's vengeance. There was

a young woman from the highland region of Adjara who initially answered all of the questions that were pro-government until she finally, being afraid of losing her social benefits, said her concerns were based on whether her responses might be interpreted as disloyalty.

These contradictions demonstrate that formal guarantees of freedom, whether to speak, assemble, or vote, do not necessarily indicate psychological freedom. When fear is present, even in democratic arrangements, public opinion data can be rendered useless; discussion becomes impossible; and the deliberative processes for democratic legitimacy become undermined.

This issue is systemic and, therefore, not simply individual. People who may have personally been terminated, harassed, and blacklisted for political speech (or know of others who have) condition themselves into reconciling or normalizing the risks associated with false consciousness. Over time, this process then becomes a silent but habitual acceptance of silence where voicing opposition can be interpreted not only as a danger, but a social stigma. One middle aged respondent said it clearly: *"Why risk it? Nothing changes anyway." (Interview with anonymous respondent)*

This case shows the disconnect between legal institutional design and lived democratic experiences. The presence of free elections, independent media, or opposition parties creates no open public sphere if someone is internally silenced by their fear of repercussions. This gap presents one of the most difficult challenges to domestic reformers and external democracy promoters like the EU: how to create an environment in which people feel safe not only to vote, but to also speak in disagreement and imagine alternatives.

In light of these findings, the challenges facing EU democracy promotion in Georgia become both clearer and more urgent. The generational divides, distrust in domestic institutions, shrinking civic space, and fear of political expression all paint similar pictures of a fragile democratic environment in which formal reforms cannot be expected to be enough alone. The EU remains viewed as a normative idea, but the disconnect between the EU's rhetoric and citizens' realities undermine its credibility and eventually its sustainability. The conclusion below indicates some of the implications of these dynamics and recommends how the EU should adapt its programming in order to take these realities into consideration.

The most immediate and practical insight relates to public ignorance about EU-funded democracy initiatives. Although Brussels, Strasbourg and the EU delegations point out their support for civil society development, judicial reform, anti-corruption or election monitoring efforts, this support is not often seen or felt among the public. In the fieldwork, very few respondents - especially those not connected to elites or urban NGO

level - could name any concrete projects or actors connected to the EU democracy support. Even well-known organizations actively engaged in election monitoring, legal representation, or civic education, were virtually invisible to the average citizen. Those citizens who had heard of these organizations often confused their missions with partisan motivations or thought of them as detached from the local context.

A second implication relates to the elite-based form of EU democracy promotion in Georgia Although there are numerous examples of initiatives that show signs of success, most notably in legal reform, electoral integrity, and modernizing key state institutions, the benefits are perceived by many respondents to be restricted to a small group of well-connected NGOs, policy experts, and urban elites. This perception reinforces skepticism about international aid, advances political populism, and isolates economically vulnerable or politically disengaged communities.

To counter this, democracy promotion must move away from an elite partner model toward direct civic empowerment, by investing in civil society actors, delivering grassroots civic education and empowering citizens to become more active citizens on national and local levels.

Although it is important to note that Georgia today stands at a critical juncture. Democratic aspirations are increasingly overshadowed by authoritarian entrenchment, legislative assaults on civic space, political control, fear, and public disillusionment. For years, democracy promotion was seen as a shared endeavor between reform-minded institutions and an engaged public. Today, the picture is more sobering: civil society is not just underfunded or overlooked, it is in some cases being legislated out of existence.

In this environment, the EU can no longer count solely on soft tools of persuasion, institutional benchmarking, and elite consultations. Democracy promotion should become a proactive defense of the civic space and targeted protection for democracy actors under risk. The task of upholding democratic values in Georgia takes more than simple rhetorical solidarity; it will take visible, bold, and context-sensitive action from international partners.

As formal institutions weaken and civic space shrinks in Georgia, the path forward requires cultivating micro-resilience: small yet meaningful acts of solidarity, dissent, and ethical citizenship that sustain democratic culture. The EU should rethink its relationship and focus on informal, community-based democratic practices - especially with rural communities, youth, and marginalized individuals. This includes funding alternative media, expanding civic education, providing digital security training, and supporting localized governance initiatives. While these may not appear to maintain institutional impact like reform, they may be more permanent in regenerating healing

social trust and cohesion needed for a future democratic transition, particularly in light of increasing authoritarian trends toward the majority of the country's population.

Conclusion: Implications for EU Democracy Promotion

Georgia today stands at the intersection of several key mutually reinforcing forces: deep trust asymmetries, an increasingly aggressive geopolitical rivalry, and a consolidated hybrid (now increasingly authoritarian-leaning) regime. Together, these dynamics shape how citizens interpret democratic processes, evaluate international actors, and imagine the country's political future. Drawing on the survey data, vignette experiments, and qualitative insights, this conclusion reflects on how these factors sustain or challenge democratization, and what they imply for the European Union's capacity to act in Georgia's rapidly deteriorating political environment.

As shown in the analysis, vertical trust in state institutions has collapsed to historic lows, while horizontal trust remains strong but inward-looking, anchored in kinship networks, neighborhood ties, or personalized relations, with comparatively weak civic organizations or public institutions. In this configuration, distrust does not provoke mobilisation; it produces withdrawal. Citizens retreat from formal politics into private coping mechanisms, enabling elites to govern with minimal accountability.

Geopolitical rivalry overlays this fragile trust environment. Although most Georgians normatively identify with the EU, these preferences are segmented across age, education, income, and region, producing divergent "geopolitical imaginaries." For some, the EU represents a civilizational future; for others, a transactional partner; and for nationalist segments, an intrusive Western influence. Political elites strategically weaponized these imaginaries, either framing Europeanisation as a threat or using it as a bargaining tool, further polarizing the political environment.

The survey–vignette data point to a clear contradiction. Symbolic trust in the EU remains exceptionally high, yet this symbolic trust does not translate into perceived effectiveness. Most Georgians regard EU assistance as misallocated, inaccessible, or captured by a narrow set of urban NGOs and policy elites. These perceptions have strategic implications. Citizens differentiate sharply between the EU as an ideal and the EU as an implementer.

Although, it should be noted, that the trajectory of EU democracy promotion in Georgia can no longer be understood as a story of gradual alignment, incremental reform, or a predictable pathway toward integration. Over the past decade, and especially since 2023, Georgia has undergone a profound authoritarian turn that has reshaped the very conditions under which external assistance operates. Rather than existing in a hybrid

equilibrium where democratic and authoritarian elements coexist uneasily, Georgia has moved decisively toward systemic de-democratization, shrinking civic space, weaponizing state institutions, and actively dismantling the foundations of Europeanisation.

In this political context, the EU's traditional democracy-promotion model, already limited by elite capture, selective compliance, and technocratic overreach, has become not only ineffective but, in some respects, structurally impossible. Within this altered political landscape, traditional EU strategies, premised on conditionality, institutional templates, and elite cooperation, risk unintentionally stabilizing rather than transforming hybridity and increasingly authoritarian structure.

The case of Georgia exemplifies the challenge of limited support of a technocratic democracy in a strongly polarized and securitized political context in which citizens are increasingly exposed to governance by fear, violence, and social control. In this scenario, trust cannot be sustained by institutional proximity or procedural engagement alone. Further reliance on cautious, technocratic, and procedurally limited instruments may offer some guarantee of continued access and avert further escalation, but it also risks eroding the EU's credibility among pro-democratic constituencies facing political closure and repression. On the other hand, a marked political stance may sharpen the normative credibility of the EU, potentially entailing the danger of a negative reaction in further limiting civil freedoms. The challenge, therefore, is no longer how to support reforms, but how to do so in a well-rebalanced engagement and political positioning manner that will remain credible in the fast-consolidating authoritarian environments without losing remaining leverage or accelerating societal disengagement. How the EU navigates this dilemma will shape not only its role in Georgia, but also its broader standing as a democratic anchor across contested neighbourhoods.

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ABOUT RE-ENGAGE

Russia's war against Ukraine has radically altered European security. Confronted by the direst security crisis in decades, EU policymakers are forced to fundamentally rethink their security policies. Europe has demonstrated unexpected unity and resolve, adopting a series of sanctions against Russia, increasing national defence spending, but also by deciding on a historic revival of the EU enlargement process.

Still, there is an urgent need to make sure that this process contributes to democratic, well-functioning and stable neighbourhood states, capable of countering external threats, particularly those posed by hybrid warfare. A thorough investigation is required to determine how this can be achieved without compromising the EU's values and security in the current context.

RE-ENGAGE's overarching ambition is to assist the EU in refining its foreign policy toolbox, including its enlargement and neighbourhood policies. This will enhance the Union's geopolitical leverage and provide better tools for democracy promotion in its neighbourhood. To achieve this goal, RE-ENGAGE will conduct in-depth studies in six candidate countries – three in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Serbia) and three in the Eastern Neighbourhood (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine).