



EU Democracy Support and Civil Society in Georgia

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Abstract

The paper critically examines the European Union's (EU) democracy support practices in Georgia, focusing on the role of civil society within the country's European integration process. Against the backdrop of pivotal turning points between 2022 and 2025—including the granting of EU candidate status, the government's authoritarian turn, and the eruption of mass youth-led protests, the analysis explores how EU engagement has both shaped and been challenged by Georgia's evolving political landscape. Drawing on the framework of social embeddedness, empowerment and accountability, the study assesses whether the EU's support for civil society has genuinely reinforced democratic values or instead reproduced top-down, technocratic governance models.

Findings indicate that EU support has disproportionately targeted established, donor-dependent civil society organisations (CSOs), often sidelining grassroots movements and failing to reflect local democratic knowledge. Institutions such as the Georgian National Platform, intended to institutionalise civic participation, have become elitist and in some cases complicit in legitimising government-led democratic backsliding. The EU's decision to grant candidate status despite Georgia's failure to meet most conditions revealed the erosion of conditionality as a key democracy promotion tool, emboldening authoritarian practices and weakening civil society's watchdog role.

By contrast, the nationwide protests of 2024–2025, driven largely by youth and independent activists, demonstrated the emergence of a new civic force outside traditional CSOs structures. These movements highlight both the shortcomings of EU strategies and the need for epistemic unlearning of entrenched donor-centric approaches. The paper concludes that meaningful EU support for democracy in Georgia requires shifting from technocratic partnerships with established NGOs toward engagement with dynamic, grassroots actors capable of sustaining democratic accountability and resilience.

Introduction

Over the past decade, Georgia – a candidate country for European Union's (EU) membership – has witnessed historic uprisings and widespread democratic protests. As these movements continue to unfold with uncertain outcomes, the EU's response to these critical moments becomes a subject of paramount importance.

In June 2022, while Ukraine and Moldova were granted EU candidate status, Georgia received only a European perspective accompanied by a list of 12 conditions. Brussels explained this decision by pointing out that, although Georgia performed comparably to Ukraine and Moldova in the technical implementation of the Association Agreement (AA) and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA), its democratic credentials and progress toward democratic transition lagged significantly. By autumn 2023, the European Commission reported that Georgia had fulfilled only three of the 12 conditions. Key areas such as deoligarchisation, depolarisation, judicial reform, and others – requiring substantial political will – remained largely unaddressed.

However, in December 2023, despite falling short of the EU's conditions for candidate status, Tbilisi was unexpectedly granted the designation. This decision bolstered the ruling Georgian Dream party while undermining efforts for meaningful democratic reform. Rather than spurring progress, the EU's failure to enforce conditionality effectively backfired. The Georgian government interpreted candidate status as validation of its approach, intensifying authoritarian measures. It reintroduced the

controversial 'foreign agents' law' (dubbed the 'Russian law') and proposed anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, drawing stark parallels with regressive policies seen in Russia.

These moves triggered mass protests across Georgia and drew widespread condemnation from the European Union, individual member states, and international human rights organisations. In response, Brussels began discussing the possibility of halting Georgia's EU integration process. Protests temporarily subsided in anticipation of the October 2024 parliamentary elections, as many hoped that a democratic change of government could address the country's political crisis. However, those hopes were dashed. The ruling party orchestrated massive electoral fraud and, soon after the elections, announced the suspension of Georgia's EU integration process. This move was unconstitutional, violating Article 78 of the Georgian Constitution, which mandates every government to uphold the country's Euro-Atlantic integration path.

The announcement sparked an unprecedented wave of nationwide protests, uniting generations and regions under a single demand: new parliamentary elections; the scale and intensity of these protests reflecting not only the profound discontent with the ruling party's actions against Georgia's path towards the EU but also the widespread desire for a return to democratic norms and constitutional governance.

Thus June 2022, December 2023, and October 2024 – along with the ongoing protests – mark pivotal turning points in Georgia's democratic transition as well as in the EU's approach to supporting democracy in the country also through engaging local civil society.

1 Analytical Framework and Research Questions

This paper examines the EU's behavioural practices in Georgia, specifically in the context of reinforcing civil society within its democracy support policy. To what extent are the EU's external actions imbued with democratic principles when supporting civil society in Georgia? Put differently, what role does democracy – understood as social embeddedness, social empowerment, and social accountability – play in shaping the EU's external engagement? How does the EU position civil society as a decisive actor in Georgia's political landscape? Have the historical turning points prompted Brussels to rethink its approach to democracy support? Has the EU adapted its behavioural practices when it comes to the support of the civil society in a way that reflects genuine learning and evolution? In other words, can the EU transform into a learning institution – one that not only reassesses its role in a rapidly changing global landscape but also becomes more accountable both internally and externally, particularly to the societies impacted by its policies? Furthermore, how can the EU acknowledge the need for – and actively pursue – the unlearning of entrenched approaches to democracy support through engagement of the civil society in Georgia?

Social embeddedness refers to meaningful participation as a core element of democracy. EU external practices should therefore ensure inclusivity by engaging not only governmental actors and established civil society organisations but also a diverse array of affected communities. This was (and continues to be) particularly relevant in Georgia's EU integration process, including the implementation of the Association Agreement (AA), the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA), and the fulfilment of political conditions for obtaining a candidate status and advance in the accession negotiations. To what extent has the EU facilitated the

participation of a broad spectrum of civil society actors in these processes? (Achraimer and Pace, 2024).

Social empowerment underscores the idea that democracy is not simply imposed; it materialises through localised practices that reflect indigenous systems of democratic knowledge (Achraimer and Pace, 2024). This raises a crucial question: does the EU's democracy support framework incorporate local knowledge and perspectives, or does it predominantly export pre-defined models and norms? (Achraimer and Pace, 2024).

Social accountability ensures that those directly affected by policies play an integral role in their evaluation and assessment (Achraimer and Pace, 2024). According to Bovens, accountability entails providing mechanisms for feedback and ensuring that institutions remain open to policy revisions that better address the needs of local populations. In this context, does the EU offer local actors substantive avenues to influence and reshape its democracy support initiatives?

By critically engaging with these dimensions, this paper seeks to understand whether the EU's approach to civil society support in Georgia aligns with democratic principles or whether it merely replicates top-down governance models that does not strengthen local agency and participation. Ultimately, the findings will contribute to broader discussions on EU democracy promotion, institutional learning, and the evolving relationship between the EU and its partner countries.

To assess the extent of EU (un)learning in the realm of democracy support, this research focuses on historic turning points – defined as path-altering events or critical junctures that reshape the domestic political environment in Georgia. These events challenge existing power structures and governance models, triggering periods of reflection within the EU. During these phases, various actors within the EU reassess events, scrutinise their own approaches, and consider potential shifts in priorities. However, such reflection does not necessarily result in learning or behavioural change. Whether these moments lead to genuine transformation – ‘epiphanies’ in which the EU fundamentally rethinks its democracy support practices – is one of the core questions this paper seeks to answer.

2 EU Civil Society Support in Georgia: An Overview

In political science literature, civil society is conceptualised as a collective actor capable of entering the political arena and leveraging existing institutions to advance its agenda (Kakachia and Lebanidze, 2016). However, in the Georgian context, civil society organisations (CSOs) have struggled to exert consistent influence over political processes. Over the years, despite the prevalence of democratic discourse, the expected substantive engagement of CSOs in governance and policy-making remained limited as well as their capacity to effectively contribute to policy dialogue or influence state decision-making. Public trust in CSOs remains notably low, with widespread scepticism and political apathy contributing to a broader disengagement from civic life. Structurally, many Georgian CSOs continue to face persistent operational challenges. These include limited financial self-sufficiency, a weak culture of membership-based support, a lack of transparency, and minimal grassroots engagement.

A number of scholars have suggested that part of the responsibility lies with the international donor community, whose funding mechanisms – while critical – may inadvertently inhibit the long-term sustainability of civil society by fostering dependency and distorting organisational

priorities (Kakachia and Lebanidze, 2016). The reliance on external funding has had profound implications for the strategic orientation of Georgian CSOs. The necessity to conform to donor priorities often diverts organisations from their original missions and weakens their responsiveness to local needs. Furthermore, the broader political context exacerbates these difficulties: Georgia's highly polarised political environment has contributed to the politicisation of CSOs themselves, undermining their perceived neutrality and constraining their ability to operate as independent and credible policy actors (Kakachia and Lebanidze, 2016).

The European Union has long supported Georgian civil society, recognising its role as both a pressure group and a driver of change. The EU's assistance has been particularly relevant in promoting democratic governance, strengthening human rights and encouraging sustainable local development. This support is channelled through two principal instruments: the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and the Civil Society Organisations and Local Authorities Instrument (CSO/LA) (Emerson and Kovziridze, 2021). Between 2019 and 2024, Georgian CSOs received approximately €46.1 million in EU funding, supporting 47 projects implemented by more than 170 civil society actors across a wide range of sectors. This funding was directed toward enhancing human rights protection, democratic participation, rural development, and legal alignment with EU norms ("[EU Delegation to Georgia](#)"). Additionally, in February 2025, the EU launched the "Act for Georgia" initiative, a two-year programme with a total budget of €1.57 million. The initiative aims to strengthen local CSOs, boost civic engagement, and promote democratic governance ("[EU launches 'Act for Georgia'](#)"). In light of recent democratic backsliding and political polarisation, the EU has proposed redirecting over €100 million in aid from the Georgian government to civil society organisations. This reflects a strategic shift toward empowering non-state actors and supporting democratic values in response to emerging governance challenges ("[EU's Borrell Proposes Redirecting €100M Aid](#)").

Despite the EU's longstanding support, its funding mechanisms have often overlooked grassroots movements, politically influential actors, and community-based civil society initiatives. This has limited the inclusiveness and representativeness of civic engagement in Georgia. The EU's broader integration strategy in the country has predominantly followed a top-down model, in which civil society is expected to play a technocratic role – delivering services and supporting democratic and market-oriented reforms – without challenging the stability of the state (Axyonova and Bossuyt, 2016). Although the EU's discourse emphasises the political importance of civil society, its assistance programmes tend to treat CSOs as apolitical actors, primarily responsible for providing socio-economic services or technical expertise, particularly in aligning domestic legislation with EU standards as observed in Tunisia (as observed by Boiten, 2015; Buzogány, 2018).

In the Georgian context, this dynamic has increasingly pressured CSOs to collaborate with the government in meeting the EU's 12 conditions for candidate status. One of these conditions explicitly called for 'ensuring the involvement of civil society in decision-making processes at all levels' ([European External Action Service, 2022](#)). However, rather than empowering independent civic engagement, this provision has often been instrumentalised to legitimise government-driven processes. As will be examined in the following sections, this alignment has come at a significant cost to the fundamental role of civil society: holding power to account. Instead of functioning as autonomous watchdogs, certain organisations have become complicit in

supporting the government's superficial EU integration narrative – even when this has required turning a blind eye to democratic regression.

This technocratic framing has also exacerbated internal tensions. Civil society actors working in similar thematic areas often diverge sharply in their political approaches or strategic priorities. Such tensions have surfaced within the Georgian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF), where several prominent human rights organisations have withdrawn in protest – citing irreconcilable differences with both the government and the platform's internal dynamics (Georgian CSO representative, personal interview 1, February 2025).

Against this backdrop, this paper examines the case of the Georgian National Platform and the nature of the EU's engagement with it. The central question is whether this engagement has meaningfully advanced democratic development and strengthened the broader civil society sector in Georgia.

3 EaP Civil Society Forum: A Case of the Georgian National Platform

The formal frameworks of cooperation between civil society in Georgia and the European Union consist mainly of three initiatives that should work in parallel: the multilateral Civil Society Forum, the bilateral Civil Society Platform and the Domestic Advisory Group on sustainable development issues. The multilateral [Civil Society Forum of the European Eastern Partnership \(EaP\)](#), which was established in 2009, prior to the signature of the Association Agreement, brings together members of civil society from all six countries included in the EaP, each with their individual country platform (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum). The Georgian National Platform (GNP) of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) comprises approximately 185 member organisations. These members are organised into four working groups aligned with the thematic platforms of the Eastern Partnership, with the flexibility to establish subgroups as needed ([Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, 2014](#)).

The Georgian National Platform (GNP), backed by EU funding and occupying a prestigious position within the civil society landscape, has served as the primary institutional mechanism for facilitating dialogue between Georgian civil society and the European Union. It has been assigned by a central role not only in the implementation of the Association Agreement (AA) and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) (Emerson and Kovziridze, 2021), but also in coordinating civil society's involvement in meeting the EU's conditions for granting Georgia candidate country status. This role is explicitly outlined in the "EU-Georgia Country Roadmap for Engagement with Civil Society" ([European External Action Service, 2023](#)), which designates the GNP as a key interlocutor in the broader process of European integration.

However, while the GNP serves as a significant platform for civil society engagement in Georgia, some civil society organisations (CSOs) have raised concerns regarding its composition and effectiveness. Critiques have been directed at the inclusion of numerous organisations perceived as inactive or ineffective, which some argue dilutes the platform's overall impact. Additionally, the process for admitting new members has been a point of contention, with calls for greater transparency and inclusivity (Georgian CSO representative, personal interview 2, February 2025).

The historical turning points in Georgia introduced above and surrounding the issue of EU candidate status has sparked intense debate within Georgia, spanning both government and civil society circles.

Notably, certain civil society organisations (CSOs) have struggled to maintain objectivity when assessing the country's democratic development and the legitimacy of its bid for candidate status. Rather than offering a critical and balanced evaluation, some CSOs have promoted the slogan: 'Candidate status at any cost' – even if it means overlooking democratic backsliding.

Rather than fulfilling their role as watchdogs, some CSOs have become complicit in constructing a façade of compliance with the EU's 12 conditions for candidate status. A telling example is the appointment of Levan Ioseliani as Ombudsman in March 2023 – an event publicly framed as progress toward fulfilling one of the EU conditions by members of the Georgian Civil Society Platform during their presentation in Brussels on 17 November 2023 ([European Economic and Social Committee, Joint Declaration 12th EU-Georgia CSP, 2023](#)). However, Ioseliani's close alignment with the ruling authorities and his unwillingness to advocate robustly for vulnerable groups -particularly the LGBTQ+ community – reflects the deeper costs of this co-optation. His appointment underscores how the appearance of democratic progress can be used to mask substantive regression, with civil society actors, wittingly or not, lending legitimacy to this process.

Civil society organisations for GNP have also taken part in the selection of key public officials, including the Chair of the Central Election Commission, through formal nomination procedures established by the government. However, in practice, these processes have frequently been dominated by the ruling party. While some CSOs have engaged in these procedures under the premise of promoting transparency and inclusiveness, their participation has, at times, inadvertently lent legitimacy to outcomes that were effectively predetermined. Instead of acting as meaningful checks on political power, such mechanisms often serve to create the illusion of democratic engagement – particularly when the appointment of candidates aligned with the ruling party is virtually guaranteed from the outset.

In a similar vein, the Georgian National Platform signed a Memorandum of Cooperation with the government in October 2023, ostensibly to strengthen collaboration between state institutions and civil society. Yet this initiative has appeared more as an effort to simulate the fulfilment of EU conditions than a substantive move toward genuine democratic reform.

In line with the narrative of securing candidate status 'at any cost', the EU-Georgia Civil Society Platform issued a [Joint Statement](#) on 6 November 2023, falsely asserting that 'Georgia's visible progress in addressing EU fundamentals and in advancing reforms in the crucial areas of rule of law, human rights, strong institutions and democratic development [had] to be recognised'. The Platform went on to recommend that the European Council grant Georgia EU candidate status, fully aware that, at the time, only three out of the twelve conditions set by the EU had been meaningfully fulfilled. Worryingly, some members of the Platform began to suppress dissenting voices within the civil society sector. Those who sought to engage the public with intellectually honest assessments – arguing that candidate status must be based on genuine democratic progress – found themselves marginalised. In certain circles, the debate shifted from a matter of principle to a litmus test of loyalty: questioning unconditional support for candidate status risked being branded as unpatriotic. These dynamics have fuelled internal tensions within the Georgian National Platform, ultimately prompting the withdrawal of several prominent CSOs who no longer viewed the structure as a credible or independent actor in the democratic process (Georgian CSO representative, personal interview 3, February 2025).

The above-mentioned statement by the Platform not only distorted the reality of Georgia’s reform efforts but also undermined the civil society sector’s credibility as an independent watchdog. This trend reflects a troubling shift within parts of Georgia’s civil society, where collaboration with the government has gradually displaced independent oversight. In prioritising access and influence over accountability, a significant portion of the sector has compromised its core watchdog function and weakened its ability to shape public discourse or hold authorities to account. The foundational role of civil society—to offer citizens transparent, principled, and honest guidance—has, in many cases, been subordinated to political convenience and short-term strategic gains.

The consequences have since become clear. Granting EU candidate status to Georgia in December 2023 has backfired. Since then Georgia has been experiencing a deepening of democratic backsliding and the consolidation of authoritarian practices. The government has increasingly relied on repressive tactics, including the detention of peaceful protesters and the enactment of restrictive laws targeting civic activism. These developments have seriously jeopardised the operational space – and in some cases, the very survival – of civil society organisations in Georgia.

Last but not least, the youth-led protests that erupted in Georgia in 2024 – and continue to this day – have laid bare the shortcomings of the EU’s civil society engagement strategy. Not only has the EU miscalculated in its methods of supporting democratic development, but it has also backed the ‘wrong’ actors within civil society. The nationwide mobilisations have revealed that the driving force behind civic resistance lies not with the established leadership of the Georgian National Platform, but with a new generation of activists. On the streets of Tbilisi, a different civil society has emerged – led by the so-called Zoomers or Gen Z – who operate outside traditional CSO structures. Their self-organisation, creative energy, and independence have redefined civic engagement, breaking away from the stagnant models of post-Soviet NGOs.

Conclusions

This report set out to critically examine the European Union’s democracy support in Georgia, focusing in particular on its engagement with civil society. Against the backdrop of major political turning points between 2022 and 2025 – including the controversial granting of EU candidate status and the eruption of youth-led mass protests – this analysis has exposed the limits of EU behavioural practices in promoting democratic values and empowering civil society actors on the ground. The findings suggest that the EU’s approach, while rhetorically aligned with democratic ideals, remains largely technocratic, hierarchical, and insufficiently adaptive to local political realities and grassroots dynamics.

In terms of social embeddedness, the EU’s engagement with Georgian civil society has lacked genuine inclusivity. Although Brussels has supported a significant number of CSO initiatives – particularly through instruments like EIDHR and the CSO/LA – the focus has remained on established, professionalised CSOs that are often disconnected from the broader public. Civil society has been treated primarily as a functional extension of policy implementation, rather than as an arena for bottom-up democratic contestation and societal participation. Mechanisms such as the Georgian National Platform (GNP) were intended to institutionalise civic dialogue, yet they have become increasingly elitist, exclusionary, and co-opted by state-aligned interests. The EU’s failure to reach beyond these traditional structures has led to a form of ‘performative inclusion’, where participation is formalised but lacks substantive democratic engagement.

Regarding social empowerment, the EU has largely exported a pre-defined model of civil society engagement based on liberal, depoliticised, and post-Soviet NGO archetypes. This approach has failed to recognise the evolving nature of civic activism in Georgia, particularly the rise of decentralised, youth-led movements that are organically embedded in society and driven by democratic urgency rather than donor compliance. The EU's support has not sufficiently fostered local ownership or engaged with indigenous democratic knowledge. Instead, it has often prioritised technical alignment with EU norms at the expense of supporting authentic, community-based democratic empowerment. This dynamic has weakened the third sector's strategic autonomy and may have contributed to the co-optation of certain civil society actors into government-led processes, especially around key milestones such as the pursuit of EU candidate status. In the meantime, the youth-led protests of 2024–2025 have revealed a powerful civic capacity that operates entirely outside the conventional donor-funded CSO sphere, calling into question the very assumptions underpinning EU democracy support.

On the dimension of social accountability, the EU's democracy promotion strategies in Georgia have lacked meaningful mechanisms for policy feedback and self-correction. Even in moments of political crisis, Brussels has shown reluctance to reassess its support frameworks or engage critically with the consequences of its partnerships. The EU's mechanisms for consultation and feedback with local actors have remained largely procedural, while the ability of some local organisations to influence or reshape EU democracy support strategies has remained limited. The co-optation of certain CSOs into government-led processes, including in the flawed implementation of EU conditionality, underscores the dangers of an unaccountable civil society policy. The EU's continued reliance on organisations that offered uncritical endorsement of 'candidate status at any cost' – despite evident democratic backsliding – has not only compromised the watchdog function of civil society, but also damaged public trust in civic actors. By contrast, grassroots mobilisations have demonstrated far greater responsiveness to public sentiment and a more credible claim to represent democratic accountability.

Crucially, the historic turning points in Georgia did not serve as catalysts for meaningful EU learning. The granting of candidate status in December 2023 – despite Georgia's non-compliance with most of the EU's own conditions – revealed a breakdown of conditionality as a core principle of democracy support. Rather than reassessing its tools and partners, the EU doubled down on engagement with traditional civil society actors, some of whom became complicit in legitimising the government's façade of reform. While the EU has since attempted to reallocate aid from the government to civil society, this shift remains insufficient unless it is accompanied by a fundamental overhaul of how civil society is defined, selected, and empowered.

The challenge for the EU moving forward is not merely one of recalibration, but of epistemic and institutional unlearning. It must abandon rigid, donor-centric models and recognise that democratisation in Georgia is now being driven from below – by youth, activists, and communities operating without formal recognition or international funding. The protests of 2024–2025 mark a decisive moment in this transformation, offering a clear signal that civil society is no longer synonymous with post-Soviet NGOs, but is instead a living, dynamic force rooted in generational change and grassroots legitimacy.

Ultimately, the question is not only whether the EU can learn from its experiences in Georgia, but whether it is willing to unlearn some of the entrenched practices that have limited the effectiveness of its democracy support. This would require a shift from viewing civil society primarily as an instrument of policy implementation to recognising it as a dynamic and autonomous actor in the

democratic process. Doing so could help the EU build more resilient and responsive partnership with the third sector, both in Georgia and in other contexts where democracy remains contested and in transition.

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