

**DEMOCRACY ON THE BRINK: GEORGIAN DREAM'S POLITICAL
ATTACK ON CIVIL SOCIETY**

By
Tata Varadashvili

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Supervisor: Professor Kirsten Roberts Lyer

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, Georgia has experienced an escalating deterioration of democratic principles across various sectors, marked by growing authoritarian tendencies of the ruling party, the Georgian Dream. This thesis analyzes the 2024 Transparency of Foreign Influence Law and its implications for Georgia's democratic future, focusing on Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). It argues that the legislation restricts the operational capacity of CSOs while also weakening the key principles of democratic governance. By adopting Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this thesis examines how political language and narratives, particularly those used by government officials following the law's adoption, have directly undermined and discredited CSOs. The methodology utilizes reports from international and national organizations, legislative texts, academic literature, and an interview with a Russian human rights defender. By focusing on political language, this thesis analyzes broader societal and political repercussions of the law concerning funding restrictions, state control over NGO activities, and stigmatization of civil society actors. The findings show that the Georgian government's framing of CSOs as foreign agents weakens domestic public participation and international democratic governance standards. Ultimately, the research concludes that the law functions as a tool for political centralization, indicating a shift away from democratic pluralism toward state-led authoritarianism.

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INTRODUCTION

Legal reforms and policies, once viewed as tools for democratic consolidation, are becoming increasingly reutilized as means for authoritarian consolidation. In recent years, democratic setbacks have taken subtle yet deeply destructive forms, often under the cloak of legal reforms aimed at protecting transparency, national security or even sovereignty (V-Dem Institute 2025). With the support of the legal system, the current ruling party in Georgia, Georgian Dream (GD), has proposed the “Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence”, a clear example of this broader trend. Enacted on August 1st, 2024, the draft law pressures civil society organizations and media outlets receiving more than 20% of their funding from abroad into registering as “agents of foreign influence” or simply, “foreign agents” (Fernandez-Powell 2024). While this language echoes neutral and may reflect standard administrative concerns, its political and social implications are far from benign and serve different purposes. This thesis analyzes how the proposed law constitutes a strategic effort by the Georgian Dream to limit the autonomy and rights of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), define and vilify opposing voices, and erode democratic norms, ultimately positioning Georgia closer to authoritarian governance models, such as Russia, rather than its professed European aspirations (Zurabashvili 2023,1-2).

This thesis assesses how the Law on Foreign Influence in Georgia fits into a wider framework of legislative reforms that can facilitate democratic backsliding. The scope of this research focuses on two key areas: first, it offers a legal analysis of the draft law itself, including the justifications from government officials and the legal and symbolic parallels with similar legislations in Russia. Second, it explores discursive strategies used to justify the law and discredit CSOs, focusing on the use of hostile and stigmatizing language by the GD officials. Through a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, this thesis dissects the narratives propagated by Georgian Dream and their impact on the legitimacy and functioning of civil

society actors. Particular attention is paid to a gradually shrinking space for CSO and increased stigmatization of NGOs, both of which affect Georgia's Democratization and Europeization processes.

Considering that there are similar laws and legal reforms present in multiple countries, including Russia, there is a growing body of literature on democratic erosion in Eastern Europe and Post-Soviet Space (Haider 2024). In Georgia's case, the literature, since the proposition and the adoption of this law, concentrates on falsified elections and physical violence during the protests. Since documenting the connection between language and power is complicated, the focus is shifted towards actions that are more easily monitored and more frequently observed internationally (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). This thesis aims to bridge that gap by situating Georgia's legislative developments within the broader context of authoritarian legalism and democratic decline.

From a CDA approach, this thesis castigates the proposed law as a mechanism for CSO repression and analyzes how its legal and symbolic nature impacts Georgia's democratic standing in a current political climate. As the country continues to navigate its path toward EU integration, how it treats its civil society, the key pillars for democracy, will serve as both an indicator of its democratic path and a determinant of its geopolitical trajectory.

METHODOLOGY

1. Key Definitions

For a proper analysis, it is important to suggest definitions of some terms within the research question that will be discussed frequently. In this study, democratic backsliding is defined as an incremental state-led eradication process of socio-political institutions that preserve the existing democracy, including, but not limited to, restrictions on freedom of expression, erosion of free and fair elections, etc(Wunsch and Blanchard 2023,279).

The following key term is the Civil Society Organizations, which is rather vague and can be up to interpretation. According to Pokleba, Civil society organizations are independent, non-governmental, and non-profit actors that expedite civic participation, promote government accountability and transparency, and serve as key pillars of democratic governance (Pokleba 2016,237). This research assumes that any legal or rhetorical framework that diminishes the legitimacy of CSOs poses a risk to democratic resilience (Pokleba 2016, 237-238). Lastly, the term 'contribute to,' as referred to in the research questions, implies the facilitation of backsliding, signifying that it is not the sole cause but rather a catalyst (“CONTRIBUTE | English Meaning - Cambridge Dictionary,” n.d.).

2. Research Approach

This thesis adopts a mixed research approach rooted in critical discourse analysis (CDA) to explore how Georgia’s *Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence* contributes to democratic backsliding by actively redefining civil society organizations (CSOs) as potential threats to

national sovereignty and “Georgianism”.² Rather than analyzing the law exclusively as a legislative tool, this thesis analyzes it as a discursive tool, which plays a crucial role in shaping public perception and validating raising authoritarian practices under the pretext of transparency, security, national interests, and sovereignty (Zurabashvili 2023).

CDA offers a beneficial framework when examining the connection between language and politics. Building on the work of scholars such as Korneli Kakachia, Shalva Dzebisashvili, and Teun van Dijk, along with reports from V-Dem and Freedom House, this method allows for a multi-layered analysis of how political actors use rhetoric, metaphors, and linguistic structures to construct ideological narratives.

In Georgia’s hybrid political regime, where democratic and authoritarian logics frequently converge, CDA enables a closer reading of how official, legal language facilitates the restriction of civic space without overtly, directly, and visibly violating democratic norms (Pokleba 2016, 236). This thesis has analyzed the law through technical context and symbolic, discursive weight. In this way, the adoption of this law is positioned as a defense mechanism against the CSOs, which are positioned as threats to national security and sovereignty.

3. Document Selection

To analyze the matter, the empirical material for this study consists of various forms of qualitative data. Firstly, this thesis explored the purposive sample documents mainly produced between 2023-2024. The primary sources include the original and amended versions of the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, as well as official commentary from parliamentary debates, committee meetings, and briefings. In addition to these texts, this thesis analyzes speeches, public statements, and interviews from Georgian Dream (GD) officials, particularly those in roles relevant to national security, foreign policy, and legislative affairs. This is

² Georgianism- ქართველობა, fight for preservation of Traditions, Language and Faith

important for showcasing the argument that the Georgian Dream (GD) has been consecutively making.

To complement these state-produced narratives, the study also analyzes responses from civil society actors and international organizations. These mainly include statements, press releases and written reports from NGOs, human rights bodies, and European Union institutions that either contest or contextualize the law. Furthermore, for more general clarification of the situations, I have looked at the V-DEM Data, Freedom House and Georgian Governance Index (GGI) 2024 report. The documents selected all contain language that directly or indirectly frame the law, justifies its need, or challenges its legitimacy. They were chosen based on their relevance to the research question, their accessibility, and their capacity to reveal discursive strategies used to portray CSOs in either supportive or delegitimizing terms. Since this research includes official GD documents, as well as Civil Society Responses, it offers a broad enough perspective for understanding the issue.

This thesis also compares the narratives used by the government officials after the adoption of the law in Georgia and Russia. For the comparative study, it analyzed the laws itself, as well as research papers on the matter. Lastly, this thesis includes an interview with the Russian Human Rights defender, who preferred to remain anonymous.

4. Identifying Problematic Language

Problematic or ideologically charged language is identified through close reading of multiple materials. Specific attention is given to rhetorical strategies such as metaphor, repetition, and binary oppositions, for example, showcasing the contrast between “foreign” and “national,” “transparent” and “Opaque,” or “national and unpatriotic.” The analysis explores how these discursive tools invalidate civil society actors while enhancing the state's authority (Tolordava 2024,15). This process involves identifying emotionally loaded phrases, narratives of guised

hate speech, and framings that implicitly or explicitly link foreign influence with unpatriotic and against national security.

This thesis also pays special attention to the subtleties of language in Legal reforms that, in reality, conceal the damaging authoritarian political agenda. For example, calls for “transparency” and “accountability” may align with democratic norms on the surface yet function as a complete facade for state control (Krupskiy 2023). The analysis is, therefore, attentive not just to what is said but to how it is said and the political effects of its saying.

5. Analytical Framework

The analytical framework follows Teun A. Van Dijk ‘s CDA model (Dijk 2015). First, the texts and materials are chosen based on their language and implications. Second, discursive practice is considered by exploring how the texts are produced, circulated, and received, specifically within the framework of political speeches and civil society reactions. Finally, the broader socio-political context is incorporated to understand how these discourses indicate and replicate power dynamics within Georgia's current political standing, including its path toward the European Union.

This analytical framework approach allows for the analysis of theories regarding democratic backsliding and the CSO-State relationships in Georgia, as well as legitimization through discourse analysis.

6. Reliability and Limitations

All the sources and data used are publicly available and accessible. Legal texts and government speeches are drawn from the official web pages and the GD’s social media. Correspondingly, political statements are sourced from various verified media outlets, party press releases, and official government websites. Civil society responses are obtained directly from NGO

websites, international human rights organizations, various reputable online libraries, and online reports from numerous democracy and political institutes. The interview was conducted in English to preserve linguistic nuance and avoid misinterpretation. However, the corresponding wanted to stay anonymous for safety purposes.

Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that political discourse is fluid and context-country dependent, so certain meanings and discursive developments surrounding the law can be changed accordingly. Furthermore, the body of literature is interpretative and may be influenced by the researcher's positionality, e.g., their personal beliefs and views. These limitations are mitigated by triangulating sources and underpinning interpretations in contextual knowledge and established scholarly frameworks.

CONTEXT

Providing historical and political context is essential for a thorough analysis; however, this thesis will not delve into the full historical account. Instead, this chapter offers a concise yet comprehensive overview of the 12-year rule of the Georgian Dream (GD), highlighting the institutional and legislative developments that signaled early signs of democratic backsliding.

The party, officially Georgian Dream-Democratic Georgia (GD), was founded in 2012 by Oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, who acquired significant affluence in Russia during the 1990s. His wealth and a growing frustration toward the ruling United National Movement (UNM) party contributed to GD's electoral victory in October 2012 (Górecki 2024, 1). Although the party's agenda emphasized strong ties with the West, it opposed complete political alignment, maintaining a narrative of cooperation without subjugation (Górecki 2024, 2).

Despite the party's stance on complete westernization, GD's rule has been marked with politically successful and internationally recognized decisions, including strengthened EU cooperation, Visa-free entry into the Schengen area, and granting candidate status for the EU in 2023 (Górecki 2024, 3). However, despite all the successful stories, subtle authoritarian tendencies were evident. In 2014, GD initiated criminal proceedings against former President Mikheil Saakashvili, actions widely perceived by the opposition and West as politically motivated retaliation (Górecki 2024, 3). Furthermore, ahead of the 2016 elections, the Georgian government intensified its campaign against the United National Movement (UNM) by publicly airing footage of torture allegedly conducted under the previous administration, began tolerating attacks on opposition offices, and branded the UNM as a "criminal organization" (Górecki 2024, 3). Additionally, Tbilisi court froze the assets of the opposition-aligned Rustavi

2 TV, raising concerns over judicial politicization and media freedom. The attacks on the opposition were seen as the first step away from Democracy (Górecki 2024, 3).

According to the European Parliament's reports in 2022, which assessed the implementation of the EU-Georgia Association Agreement from 2020-2022, there was a clear regression in democratic reforms in Georgia, mainly stemming from attacks and arrests of opposition leaders, nevertheless, due to the overwhelming public support for the EU accession, Georgia was granted Candidate Status on December 14, 2023(Górecki 2024,5).

Although GD leaders celebrated the development and widely promoted it on social media, democratic concerns persisted, particularly regarding Georgia's neutrality towards the Ukraine-Russia war (Kakachia, Kakhishvili and Samkharadze 2024, 4). The impartiality towards Russia and critical language towards NATO and the EU shown by the GD officials, including the former Prime Minister, Irakli Garibashvili, had a symbolic meaning and demonstrated subtle yet growing affection towards Russia ("PM Garibashvili: 'If Ukraine Defeats Russia, What Does It Need NATO Membership For?'" 2023).

The ideological shifting from the West, culminating with the Foreign Agents law, accompanied by the "Global War Party" narrative, showed clear signs of democratic backsliding in the country (Kakachia , Kakhishvili and Samkharadze 2024, 4-5). The actions taken by the GD since the beginning of the war in Ukraine have shown multiple signs of Russian influence. Furthermore, the praise of the foreign agent's law by Russian officials indicates a growing Russian sympathy, which, according to scholars, equates to a rapid decline of democratic principles in Georgia ("Russian State Duma Chairman Praises Georgian Dream's Foreign Agents Bill" 2024).

The Georgian reality, which, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, was anticipated to have been democratic, revealed the nature of an extremely politicized organizational framework susceptible to more governmental reconfiguration across the entire bureaucratic scheme based on individualistic principles and loyalty (Dzebisashvili 2024, 190).

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Democratic Backsliding:

Democratic backsliding refers to the deliberate weakening of democratic institutions, norms, and practices by an increasingly dominant executive (Wunsch and Blanchard 2023, 278-280). It is not necessarily marked by rapid regime change but rather a subtle erosion of democratic principles and institutions (Bermeo 2016, 6).

Wunsch and Blanchard define a framework for analyzing democratic safeguards, categorizing them into vertical, diagonal, and horizontal dimensions (Wunsch and Blanchard 2023, 281). Vertical safeguards refer to the integrity and operation of electoral processes, including voter turnout and the formal functioning of elections. Diagonal safeguards focus on protecting and promoting fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of expression and association, in conjunction with maintaining a free and independent media. Horizontal safeguards, alternatively, refer to the institutional independence of key branches of government, notably the legislature and judiciary, ensuring their capacity to act without undue influence or interference (Wunsch and Blanchard 2023, 281-283). All these principles comprise a democratic state, and a process of democratic backsliding threatens such safeguards (Wunsch and Blanchard 2023, 295-296). Furthermore, as Marez. et al. note that the process of backsliding gradually starts with an active attack on Media freedom and CSOs and eventually extends to subversion of free and fair elections (Wunsch and Blanchard 2023, 281).

Furthermore, Nancy Bermeo identifies six mechanisms of democratic backsliding, most notably "executive aggrandizement" and "strategic harassment and manipulation" (Bermeo 2016, 10-13). These mechanisms refer to executives in power gradually weakening the opposing institutions, perfectly describing the current political climate in Georgia. These

mechanisms often operate legally through reforms or new laws that appear merely bureaucratic but are politically motivated, which is precisely concerning the Foreign Influence Law (Bermeo 2016, 10-13).

Building upon Bermeo's conceptualization, scholars such as Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), in the book "How Democracies Die: What History reveals about our future," analyze that modern autocrat hide in plain sight, deconstructing democracy slowly, often under the pretext of legal and bureaucratic reforms (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). The erosion of democracy is especially evident in hybrid regimes or electoral democracies, namely, Georgia, where democratic institutions exist but are prone to political manipulation (V-Dem Institute 2025). One more fact worth mentioning is the abuse of office, which results from monopolized state institutions and agencies that operate coordinately and give rise to reduced political participation and corruption (Dzebisashvili 2023,181).

Moreover, Waldner and Lust (2018) theorize backsliding as a process driven by organizational and agency-centered factors, encompassing weak rule of law, polarized societies, and leaders willing to trade democratic legitimacy for short-term political gains (Waldner and Lust 2018, 95, 96-97). In relation, Wunsch and Blanchard argue that democratic erosion often inordinately targets watchdog institutions, including the judiciary, free media, and CSOs (Wunsch and Blanchard 2023, 292).

Therefore, the Foreign Influence Law can be seen as a legal representation of executive "aggrandizement." By actively targeting CSOs under the pretext of transparency, the government interprets democratic participation and accountability as national threats, fulfilling the backsliding criteria not through coups or violence but through legality obscured in populist rhetoric (Bermeo 2016).

2. Civil Society Organizations

Civil societies are imperative constituents for properly functioning democratic governance. As Pokleba argues, social capital and transparent public participation are paramount for collective efficacy and fostering trust (Pokleba 2016,237). CSOs act as intermediaries between the state and the public, offering services, advocacy, mobilization, and rights protection, especially for marginalized communities (Diamond 1994, 5).

Larry Diamond (1994) identifies four key roles for CSOs in democratic states: constraining state power, fostering democratic values, boosting civic engagement, and endorsing social equity. These organizations provide a space for dissent, compromises, and alternative policy solutions (Diamond 1994,5-8) Consequently, debilitating them is tantamount to weakening democratic resilience and democracy itself.

In the process of autocratization, CSOs are usually actively demonized and scapegoated in the public eye due to their active criticism of the government (Weller 2024, 11). Since they are the main opposing power fighting for democracy and holding moral and social legitimacy, CSOs are targeted actively, and the incidents of large-scale intimidation towards individual members also increase significantly (Georgian Institute of Politics 2024).

In Georgia, CSOs have played an important role in election monitoring, legal aid, minority rights advocacy, and anti-corruption (Georgian Institute of Politics 2024). Their foreign funding has been essential due to the scarcity of domestic resources (Haider 2024, 6). The Foreign Influence Law, by requiring them to register as “organizations carrying the interests of a foreign power,” delegitimizes their work and rhetorically aligns them with foreign interference (Kakachia, Kakhishvili, and Samkharadze 2024, 3).

3. Foreign Agents Laws and Legal Repressions: From Russia to Georgia

Since the 2000s, several countries have proposed specific laws to elevate state controls over governmental or non-governmental institutions, especially those receiving funding and participating in international advocacy networks (Haider 2024, 2). Most notable was the “foreign agents’ law,” introduced in Russia in 2012 and has served as a prototype ever since. The Law actively limits NGOs' capacities, which receive more than 20% of their funding from abroad, to operate properly and fulfill their mission, mainly in advocacy and human rights (Green 2024). The term carries a connotation of espionage and betrayal, effectively branding civil society as suspicious (Tolordava 2024, 14).

Stuvøy (2020) explores the legalistic turn in autocratization, showing how governments increasingly use administrative and legal measures to repress opposition. These laws can be impactful: they decrease foreign funding, discourage public participation, and increase general and self-censorship among activists (Stuvøy 2020, 1104). Even if not strictly imposed, such laws significantly impact the operating environment for CSOs, particularly regarding funding (Haider 2024, 4).

In a regional comparative study, Rutzen (2015) discusses that the narrative framing of CSOs as “foreign agents” is part of a broader governmental strategy to reclaim sovereignty and limit liberal-democratic values framed as Western ideas (Rutzen 2015, 29). This corresponds closely with the Georgian government's plan, which argues that CSOs are ambassadors of the West, trying to influence domestic politics and governmental strategies (Gozalishvili et al., 2024, 36).

The legislation does not prohibit foreign funding but bureaucratizes it, making the opposition time-consuming and expensive (Krupskiy 2023). Georgia is a clear example of such a strategy:

by establishing a registry, imposing theoretical sanctions, and enabling surveillance, the government can censor and scrutinize actively.

4. International Norms and Norm Erosion

Georgia, long considered a success story of post-Soviet democratization, is now in a gradual autocratization process (V-Dem Institute 2025). By adopting undesired legal reforms and policies, the Georgian government has been openly castigated by the EU and the USA (Fernandez-Powell 2024). However, in line with Kelley and Simmons' (2015) work on norm diffusion, Georgia's shift illustrates how states can selectively borrow from international repertoires, adopting a form of legality while undermining its spirit (Kelley and Simmons 2015, 56-57, 68).

5. Framing, Populism, and the Enemy Within

A useful theoretical lens here is the populist logic of antagonism, articulated by scholars like Busby, Gubler and Hawkins (Busby, Gubler, and Hawkins 2019). Populist leaders often construct political identity through showing the discrepancy between the “corrupt elite” versus “the people” (Dzebisashvili 2023, 179) In hybrid regimes, this narrative is extended to NGOs and CSOs, who are framed as elites in disguise, domestically unaccountable, externally funded and against national interests (Tolordava 2024, 17).

The Foreign Influence Law hence becomes a populist instrument: by targeting CSOs, the government appears to protect national sovereignty and moral identity, even as it clearly poses a threat to democracy in Georgia (Kakachia, Kakhishvili, and Samkharadze 2024, 7).

In conjunction with this antagonizing strategy, Kriesi and Pappas (2015) analyze how populist parties often adopt anti-democratic policies and portray them as reflections of the will of the people (Pappas and Kriesi 2015, 318, 324-325). The guised “democratization” process towards

transparency, which is in reality a clear autocratic step in Georgia and is guised as a step towards sovereignty, ends up shrinking civic space (Georgian Institute of Politics 2024).

CHAPTER ONE: CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS AND THE STATE

CSOs and non-state actors play a crucial role in preserving democracy and warning the international community to Georgia's backsliding process (Georgian Institute of Politics 2024). As they are seen as the biggest threats to far-right governments like the GD, the ruling party has attacked them by adopting the law on transparency that requires enhanced bureaucratic cooperation and can be heavily fined for non-compliance (Georgian Institute of Politics 2024).

1. Foreign Influence Law: Provisions and Implications

Under the current law on Foreign Transparency, media and NGOs that receive more than 20% of their funding from abroad must register as organizations acting in the interest of a foreign power (Green 2024). This is determined by whether they received funds either directly or indirectly from a foreign power, from another organization that was funded by a foreign power, or if the source of the income is unknown (Parliament of Georgia 2024).

The Georgian Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence includes articles legally limiting the working possibilities for CSOs. The law also includes vague language that can be interpreted according to the government's needs, leaving room for damaging and restricting speculations for CSOs (Krupskiy 2023).

This section will explore how specific law provisions function politically and discursively to restrict civil societies.

1.1 Article 4 – Registration Requirements & Stigmatization

Article 4 mandates that CSOs that receive over 20% of their funding from abroad must register with the Ministry of Justice (Parliament of Georgia 2024, art. 4). The article does not directly

use degrading language toward CSOs; however, when referring to them as “organizations carrying out the interests of a foreign power”, it automatically and symbolically aligns civil society with espionage and foreign manipulation (Krupskiy 2023).

The registration procedure signals to the public that foreign-supported NGOs are inherently suspect. While the officially declared intent of the law is transparency, the political messaging, especially from GD officials, positions transparency to protect national sovereignty from Western propaganda. Consequently, if CSOs are being funded from the West, they are associated with the propagators (Tolordava 2024,14). The stigmatization is a deliberate step from the government aimed at restricting the abilities of CSOs (Tolordava 2024,14). If, as claimed by the government, the main aim of the law was transparency, it could have been achieved without deliberately attacking CSOs and their social status. The Australian law of foreign influence (FIRSA) is a clear example of such practice. Since the label “foreign” hinders foreign funding and is stigmatizing, CSOs in Australia are exempt from the label of foreign agent or influence and are under the protection of Charitable Organizations Act (Zurabashvili 2023,6).

1.2 Article 8 – Monitoring, Oversight and Selective Enforcement

To identify organizations pursuing the interests of a foreign power, or to check compliance with any of the requirements of the law, article 8 allows authorized individuals from the Ministry of Justice to control CSOs, review documentation, and request financial data (Parliament of Georgia 2024, art.8). This article lacks any requirement for prior judicial approval or objective criteria for provoking such investigations. While technically permissible under Georgian law, this absence creates potential for selective enforcement and discrimination towards CSOs who oppose the legislation and the government (Phirtskhalashvili 2024).

According to the Georgian Institute of Politics (2024), the control of finances from abroad, erosion of civil rights, and institutional credibility are already deterring new initiatives, funding opportunities, and partnerships due to reputational concerns. Since Georgian CSOs rely heavily on funding from abroad, the restrictions with the funding and CSOs reluctance to register as foreign, poses a risk to their existence and could possibly result in their full liquidation (Haider 2024, 5). The scarcity of such organizations will threaten democratic standing of Georgia even more.

1.3 Article 9 – Sanctions and Penalties

According to Article 9, failure to comply with the law results in fines ranging from GEL 5,000 to GEL 25,000 (Parliament of Georgia 2024, art.9). While administrative penalties are not unusual, their frequency, scope, and possible escalation create a climate of fear and uncertainty (Phirtskhalashvili 2024).

Although the Georgian government insists that these measures are about enforcing transparency, international observers, including the Venice Commission and OSCE/ODIHR, have expressed concern over their potential to undermine CSO rights and, hence, democratic standards (Kamilsoy et al. 2024, 2). Accordingly, these financial sanctions can be burdensome for CSOs that solely depend on Western funding and might result in the full or partial liquidation of the organization (Interview with the Human Rights Defender).

2. The Ambiguous Language Within the Law

Language as a powerful discursive tool can become the objective registry of vast accumulations of meaning and experience, which can then be preserved in time and can be harmful to certain entities, in this case, CSOs (Tolordava 2024, 15).

The term foreign power is defined in the law; however, none of the 10 articles attempt to clarify the term transparency.

When it comes to defining the term foreign influence, Article 3—foreign power—gives a rather substantial definition: "Foreign power under the law refers to any foreign government body, non-Georgian individual, organization, or company not established under Georgian law, or any type of group (like foundations, associations, or unions) created under foreign or international law(parliament of Georgia 2024, art.3)Even though the law provides some definitions, their ambiguous nature leaves much room for speculation. The intended space for “interpretation,” though it appears non problematic, allows for more restrictions and limitations from the Government (Krupskiy 2023). According to linguist Marina Beridze, the language used in the law purposefully appears neutral and non-problematic (Tolordava 2024, 16). However, it carries harmful connotations that actively vilify the targeted groups, e.g., investors and CSOs (Tolordava 2024, 16). For example, in Article 2, subsection 1, the law subtly designated CSOs as “an organization pursuing interests of the foreign power”. CSOs can be viewed as organizations that deliberately act in service of another country, threatening national sovereignty (Parliament of Georgia 2024, art.2).

The main function of this law is not only to regulate NGOs in a technical sense but also to actively stigmatize them as foreign, unpatriotic, and dangerous. The result is a narrowing of civic space, not only through direct legal reforms but also through the social and political narratives that the law enables (Kamilsoy and Tolordava 2024, 5, 17).

This reframing and focus on discourse align with the broader argument of this thesis: that language, symbolism, and strategic ambiguity can be as detrimental as legal enforcement when it comes to democratic backsliding (Krupskiy 2023). Georgia’s law on foreign influence should

thus be understood not solely through the lens of legality but through its discursive and political effects on democratic governance.

3. Comparing Foreign Agents Laws: Russia, Georgia and CSOs

Many CSO members in Georgia have argued that the Georgian version of the foreign agent's law is similar to the Russian version (Interview with Human Rights Defender). This chapter aims to discuss recurring patterns between Russian and Georgian versions of the foreign agent's law, its implications for CSOs, and how they have adapted to modifying legislation.

3.1 Foreign Agents Law in Russia

Foreign agents' law in Russia was introduced in 2012, stipulating that if NGOs receive funding from abroad and are politically engaged in Russian politics, they must register as foreign agents (Stuvøy 2020, 1103). This step aimed to create a contextual bridge between legitimate and illegitimate organizations. This step allowed the government to prioritize organizations that were actively pro-government and did not directly oppose the automatization process that had been taking place in Russia (Stuvøy 2020, 1104-1105). The first version of the law was already very restrictive. Nevertheless, a more radical version was implemented in 2014, which legally permitted the government to register CSOs as foreign agents without their consent. The non-compliance resulted in significant fines and potential criminal charges (Stuvøy 2020, 1109). As of 2020, the law also targets individuals and informal organizations (Haider 2024, 4)

3.2 Implications for Civil Society Organizations

Due to the influence of the Soviet past and institutional and bureaucratic norms, the Russian pathway to democratization has become a role model of failed democracy for Georgia, which,

due to its political and economic fluidity, is prone to be influenced easily (Dzebisashvili 2023, 179). The following chapter discusses the law's impact on CSOs in Russia.

3.2.1 Legal and Institutional Challenges

Many CSOs, particularly those focused on human rights and advocacy, have voluntarily foregone foreign funding to avoid the stigmatizing label, which would impair international funding opportunities (Haider 2024, 10). This decision, however, has often led to firing staff, program cuts, or even complete liquidation, as seen with the Moscow Helsinki Group (Haider 2024, 6). Some NGOs have fought back through legal challenges, and while court victories can result in exemption from the foreign agent registry, litigation demands significant time, resources, and money (Haider 2024, 7). Some NGOs had to restructure entirely, shifting to for-profit models or adopting informal organizational forms to escape severe legal constraints (Haider 2024, 12-13). This shift has coincided with the rise of grassroots, citizen-led initiatives focused on local, everyday issues (Haider 2024, 9). Furthermore, registered foreign agents are subject to significant bureaucratic requirements that deplete much time and resources that could otherwise have been directed at the organization's core issues and project implementation (Haider 2024, 6).

3.2.2 Funding Diversification

As government grants are highly competitive and often include state-led sanctions, many NGOs have turned to alternative funding opportunities, which rely primarily on crowdfunding, income generation, and member donations, with various forms of innovative financing emerging in recent years (Haider 2024, 11). However, due to the stigmatization, CSOs lost many partners, including those from organizations affiliated with government agencies, since the status of “foreign agent” was toxic from the very beginning, and state-affiliated actors were

afraid to interact with “foreign agents” (Interview with the Russian human Rights Defender by tata Varadashvili 2025).

3.2.3 Compliance

Adaptation and compliance may differ based on the resources of individual NGOs. In some cases, NGOs have shifted from advocacy to service delivery, aiming to appear less politically threatening. Weaker organizations dissolved to avoid penalties, only to reconstitute under new identities later (Haider 2024, 2, 13). Meanwhile, other NGOs have decided to comply and closely cooperate with the state, raising concerns about the future role of CSOs. The close connection with the government risks turning independent civic actors into tools of authoritarian government (Haider 2024, 14-15).

4. Framing Politics: Georgia and Russia

Since adopting the foreign agent’s law, Georgian government officials have actively targeted the West and criticized ambassadors for various reasons (Gozalishvili et al., n.d,28). For example, Chairman of the Parliament, Shalva Papuashvili, during the briefing on February 10th, urged the West and ambassadors to talk about the changing world, where foreign funding and donors must be transparent and public for the interests of the Georgian people and openly discuss how the money was used to destabilize Georgia (Papuashvili 2024,2:40-3:00). GD officials also repeatedly emphasized the threat posed by the so-called “global war party,” which they claim the West is trying to drag Georgia into (Kakachia, Kakhishvili, and Samkharadze 2024,2, 4-5). On the official Facebook page, Shalva Papuashvili shared a photo statement on April 30th, highlighting the importance of peace while subtly attacking the West for allegedly interfering with it (Papuashvili 2025). The tactic of vilifying the West is actively used in Russia as well (Krupskiy 2023). Russian President Putin, on the first anniversary of the start of the

war in Ukraine, officially labeled the West as “scums and traitors, trying to poison the fatherland” (Reuters 2022).

The Georgian Far-Right party has actively demonstrated the logic of Russian anti-western discourse, which mainly serves the Russian strategic interests. The GD has been undermining constitutionally based pro-western aspirations by castigating the West, disparaging liberal and Western values, and attempting to convince Georgians that Europe is futile (Gozalishvili et al., n.d, 29.). Government officials have been mimicking the language of Russian officials, actively equating Europe to losing traditional identity and values and promoting LGBTQIA+ propaganda (Tolordava 2024, 1, 17). The similarities between Russia and Georgia, as well as the “borrowed” narrative is a result of the fact that new democracies, like Georgia often experience common pathologies that are inherited from the former colonial occupiers (Dzebisashvili 2023, 183). Certainly, the instrumentalization of identity related topics to vilify civil society echoes Soviet-era practices (Tolordava 2024, 17).

5. Legal Vagueness in Foreign Agent Laws

The Foreign Agents Law shows alarming similarities between the tactics and language practiced by the GD and Russian “duma,” as well as Russia’s influence on legal documents.

The most considerable similarity between the two existing legislation is the vague language. Both laws have confusing and ambiguous definitions for “political activity” and “foreign funding/financing” (Interview with the Human Rights defender). The active use of the word foreign, especially in this context, could be interpreted as “spy” or “traitor,” especially when endorsed by Government representatives (Krupskiy 2023). The legislation includes an unclear and overbroad definition of political activities, allowing for arbitrary and selective use of the law. It does not distinguish between advocacy and partisan political activity (Krupskiy 2023).

Furthermore, vague language makes it challenging to formulate a position on the side of the defense. As a result, the fate of the person accused of being a foreign agent depends only on the biased, corrupt judicial body whose work is designed to legitimize the position of executive authorities and government (Krupskiy 2023).

5.1 Shaping civil Society Through Funding

As discussed above, one of the consequences of such a law in Russia for CSOs was the forced close cooperation with the government. A similar scenario is taking place in Georgia. According to Georgia Today, The GD has planned to establish a special fund for governmental grants, which will be distributed among the NGOs that comply with the governmental interests and are loyal while taking all the measures to silence critical voices (Today 2025). This step, as seen in the Russian case, is a direct attack on the objectivity of NGOs and the purpose they are supposed to serve advocate for the rule of law and transparency and challenge the government.

6. Assessing Georgia's Democratic Decline

Although there are some key legal differences, there are similarities between the law itself and how and in what way the government endorses it to attack the CSOs directly. The comparison is important to draw patterns between Russia, an already autocratic state, and Georgia, where democratic backsliding could potentially lead to authoritarianism. According to V-Dem Democracy Report 2025, Georgia is in an active process of autocratization (V-Dem Institute 2025). Its democratic governance score has also decreased significantly from 41.65 to 32.65/100 (Georgian Governance Index Report 2024). The deterioration process can be seen because of Russian Influence and interference: politically, physically, or economically (V-Dem Institute 2025).

6.1 Closing NGOs and Repressions

According to the Russian news agency TASS, between 2020 and 2023, the Russian Ministry of Justice reported an almost 50% decrease in NGOs funded from abroad. The constant bureaucratic struggles, legal pressure, and stricter regulations for funding impacted the general situation of CSOs. It all started in 2012 with the law's introduction of foreign agents (“Number of Branches of Foreign NPOs in Russia Has Halved since 2020, 2024). It should be emphasized that no NGOs were liquidated or shut down in the Georgian case, but this was solely because of international criticism, internal protests, and opposition. Furthermore, an active tactic also being used in Russia is physical violence towards CSO representatives (Human Rights Watch 2024). According to the Georgian Governance Index (GGI), in 2024, there was a magnified number of assault cases of large-scale intimidation and physical violence targeting opposition politicians and civil rights activists (Georgian Institute of Politics 2024). Such treatment of opposition and CSO members goes against democratic principles and is a direct attack on freedom of expression and media, as well as serious human rights violation (Georgian Institute of Politics 2024).

6.2 Georgia’s International Standing Post-Legislation

Due to the reintroduction of the foreign influence law, Georgia’s international standing and reputation have been negatively influenced. The Open Government Partnership (OGP) ceased Georgia’s membership because of legislative actions aimed at sabotaging civil liberties and fundamental rights (Georgia Institute of Politics 2024). The suspension was a serious regression for Georgia’s transparent and democratically governed future. Furthermore, the EU has stopped Georgia's integration process until the democratic rights of CSO are reconsidered by the GD (Georgian Institute of Politics 2024).

These political steps from international partners clearly signal a failure to meet international expectations and emphasize the scarcity of democratic practices in the current Georgian climate. Georgia's political, economic, and social isolation from its European partners can be seen as a result of active Russian interference in Georgian politics (Kakabadze and Kakachia 2025, 14). As the Georgian government's relations with the West become more deleterious, Moscow has signaled its intent to normalize relations with Tbilisi by actively commenting on multiple political events acclaiming GD (Kakabadze and Kakachia 2025, 14)

CHAPTER TWO: DELEGITIMIZATION THROUGH POLITICAL LANGUAGE

In political systems where forms of repression can generate international and domestic backlash, the use of language and discourse become primary instruments of power and public manipulation, both from governmental and non-governmental sectors (Tolordava 2024, 15). In Georgia, the discourse surrounding the Law on Transparency of Foreign influence reveals how rhetorical and language strategies are employed to construct civil society as a threat.

This chapter analyzes how the language used by GD officials, and press releases to frame CSOs as unpatriotic, foreign-aligned, and disruptive to national unity.

1. Nationalism and Sovereignty

The main government rhetorical tactic is using nationalism and sovereignty as the cores of the Georgian state. Officials frequently invoke the language of “foreign intervention”, “Global war party” to undermine CSOs, especially those working in human rights and minority advocacy (Kakachia, Kakhishvili, and Samkharadze 2024, 2-4). For instance, PM Irakli Kobakhidze’s speech in April 2024, which was shared on the official Facebook page as well, emphasized the need to protect the national sovereignty and interests of Georgian people (Kobakhidze 2024). His exact quote was:” Georgian traditions, faith and national identity had to be saved from ideological infiltration disguised as civil society”(Kobakhidze 2024). The deliberate use of such strong, and key words recasted and framed CSOs and the main investors in their work: the west as enemies of the state (Kakachia, Kakhishvili, and Samkharadze 2024, 3). Furthermore, during his visit at Conservative Political action Conference (CPAC), he encouraged government leaders to protect centuries old traditions from the dangerous liberal identity, mainly implying CSOs (Tolordava 2024, 17). On April 3rd, Kakha Kaladze, Mayor

of Tbilisi, during an interview that was later shared as a photo on Georgian Dream's official Facebook page, proudly claimed, "For the Georgian Dream party, what mattered most was the Georgian people and the country, not the West or the United States" (Kaladze 2025).

The nationalism argument was also used in August 2024, when an official GD page published a statement in which the 2024 parliamentary election was described as a referendum where the Georgian people must finally decide whether they choose war or peace, moral degradation or traditional values, Georgia's subjugation to external powers or an independent sovereign state (Tolordava 2024, 15).

These rhetorical framings can be seen as a result of Georgia's historically rooted vulnerability to external domination and as the idea of external influence is disliked by the majority of the population, it is used to present CSOs as contemporary instruments for such interference (Jorjoliani and Chivadze 2025).

2. The 'Enemy Within' Narrative

The Georgian Dream has actively been using rather common populist rhetoric tactics, namely creation of binary opposition: common people versus the corrupt elite, or in this case, external threat. In Georgia this narrative is fueled by depicting CSOs as elitist, foreign funded and disconnected from reality (Dzebisashvili 2023, 179). On February 6th, the official GD Facebook page shared a picture, depicting the current PM, Irakli Kobakhidze, who says: "No one can raise a hand against the Georgian state, more than four hundred people who are trying to create some problems for four million people. Therefore, the state will protect its positions and interests as a matter of principle" (Kobakhidze 2025). This clearly illustrates how GD officials are trying to create a diversion between CSOs and the remaining population. This sort of binary positioning augments the chances of public dissatisfaction towards the CSOs and weakens their credibility. Furthermore, it also pressures civilians to choose between national

loyalty and civil participation (Tolordava 2024, 15). The tactic was and is still being used in Russia, where civil society actors are portrayed as puppets of western interest and a threat to national, Russian sovereignty (Interview with the Human Rights defender).

3. Media and Repetition

State-affiliated Media in Georgia played a significant role in upholding the same narrative as the GD. Government funded News Channel, TV Imedi, on its official Facebook page or in live actively associated CSOs with controversial topics, such as LGBTQIA+ rights, liberalism or anti-government protests (Kakachia, Kakhishvili, and Samkharadze 2024, 8). Moreover, they accused multiple western leaders, such as the ambassador of Germany, of plotting against the government with the opposition (TV IMEDI 2025). The active framing of CSOs and in this case, the west, the government tended to create a moral panic and influence the people (Kamilsoy et al. 2024).

The choice of words, such as “radical”, “propaganda” reflects on a deliberate strategy of the government making it socially complicated to support CSOs (Barzegar, Powers and El Karhil 2016, 14-15). Citizens may begin to view NGOs not as facilitators of democracy, but as instigators of unrest.

The power and the detriment of the Georgian foreign influence law lies not only in its bureaucratic procedures, but also in its symbolic resonance. Through language, the law creates moral and political narratives in which CSOs are not the upholders of democracy, rather they are the enemies posing a threat to Georgian national sovereignty (Georgian Institute of Politics 2024). Language and framing, when used consecutively and consistently, are useful tools for democratic erosion.

4. Georgian Dream on CSO Restrictions

Though international pressure from the West has been substantial, the GD has still refused to take the issue of CSOs seriously, while simultaneously justifying the law itself. In November 2024, the current GD prime-minister Irakli Kobakhidze declared an official suspension of the EU integration process until 2028, thus the next parliamentary elections (“Georgia: Freedom in the World 2025 Country Report,” n.d.). The suspension process was blamed on the EU and, according to prime minister Kobakhidze, “their politically bureaucratic nature towards Georgia” (Kobakhidze 2025). The key question is: how did government officials justify this clearly restrictive law, and in the process, strain relations with the West even further? The argument that was actively used by the government spokespeople, was always related to the importance of transparency and the roots of the funding received (Zurabashvili 2023, 1, 9-10). According to the GD officials, the funding for CSO members must be transparent, since it can potentially impact the sovereignty of the country and directly attack Georgia's national interests. Pursuant to the press release by the GD on April 22nd, 2024, GD officials subtly disparaged political opposition and CSO members, as well as the funding from abroad, with the following epithets: “intervention under the guise of religion, LGBT propaganda, drug propaganda, the discrediting of state institutions, radicalism, and so-called polarization” (Georgian Dream 2024).

The argument about transparency is closely tied to the upholding of traditional values, such as language and faith (Tolordava 2024, 14-15). And as a significant number of CSOs represent and protect the rights of queer people, Women and other marginalized groups, they do not necessarily fit into the category of governmentally desired or non-critical groups.

The criticism of the law by the opposition, civil society organizations, and international partners was framed as interference in Georgia’s national identity and sovereignty, often

accompanied by the rhetorical question: “What do they have to hide” (Kucera 2024). In the press release on 22n of April, Georgian Dream used the following quote: “Let us say no to black money together, and say yes to transparency, the true European path, and an independent and sovereign Georgia!”(Georgian dream 2024).

One more tactic and argument that the GD was actively using was the comparison between the already existing transparency laws, such as Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) and drawing parallels to portray the adoption of the law as aligning with the ‘real European’ model of democracy (Zurabashvili 2023). However, due to international pressure, instead of the foreign influence law, in 2025 they adopted a “copy-pasted” version of the above-mentioned legislation. However, the analysis of the Georgian version of FARA goes beyond the scope of this thesis.

The selective legislation, which clearly targets only political opponents and CSO representatives, combined with the harsh, blaming language directed at them, further exacerbates the decline of democratic standards in Georgia (Interview with the Human Rights Defender).

CONCLUSION

The study aimed to analyze the influence of the law on transparency of foreign influence on civil society organizations and its broader implications for democratic standing of Georgia. Through a critical discourse analysis of the law's provisions and political context, the findings demonstrate that the legislation serves not merely as a tool for transparency, but as a mechanism for controlling CSOs (Stuvøy 2020, 1104). The strategic use of terms such as foreign, agent and influence, all of which carry negative connotations, allows for politically motivated interpretations that frame foreign funded CSOs as threats to national sovereignty (Krupskiy 2023). This narrative delegitimizes these institutions, fosters public suspicion and social division, hinders international support and significantly undermines civil society.

This study finds that the law's language is rhetorically and politically harmful, posing a serious threat to the effective functioning of CSOs (Tolordava 2024, 16). Furthermore, it is evident that GD's legislative strategy appears to target the last institutional mechanism capable of monitoring and challenging the democratic erosion of Georgia (Zurabashvili 2023, 10). The broader goal of GD goal is to create a guaranteed, non-competitive political environment, one that eliminates internal pressure from below, silences opposition, and only experiences limited external accountability (Zurabashvili 2023, 10).

The analysis of press releases, public speeches and interviews revealed that following the adoption of the legislation, GD officials have employed politically charged and damaging rhetoric. This language is aimed at weakening the operational capacity of CSOs while also eroding their credibility and reputation in the public eye (Interview with the Human Rights defender).

The findings also suggested that although CSOs have voiced strong opposition to the legislation, the general situation of civil society in Georgia can be considered weak and

fragmented internally. Ideological and personal divisions continue to hinder the formation of unified coalitions based on common values and formal rules (Pogleba 2016, 246). As a result, CSOs struggle to fully represent a cohesive social force capable of mobilizing meaningful institutional change to comprehend the repercussions of foreign agents' law, and its role in democratic backsliding (Pogleba 2016, 246). It is essential to recognize the scope of such legislation extends targeting only CSOs. It signifies a broader political shift aimed at silencing and neutralizing critical voices (Weller 2024, 11).

By highlighting the tactical use of language in Politics by GD to undermine CSOs, this study underscores the role political discourse plays in shaping and justifying authoritarian tendencies. Legislative action, when paired with hostile rhetoric, contribute significantly to the erosion of democratic principles.

This thesis calls for further research with the intersection of political language and democratic backsliding. As shown in the Georgian case, language is an instrument of power, and is a powerful tool used to discredit democracy's most critical actors: Civil society organizations.

APPENDIX A: TRANSLATED INTERVIEW QUOTES

Quote 1:

Translation (English)

For the Georgian Dream party, what mattered most was the Georgian people and the country, not the West or the United States

Original (Georgian)

ყოველთვის ვიმოქმედებთ ისე, როგორც სჭირდება ჩვენს სამშობლოს და არა ისე, და არა ისე როგორც სხვა რომელიმე ქვეყნის ინტერესებს

Quote 2:

Translation (English)

Intervention under the guise of religion, LGBT propaganda, drug propaganda, the discrediting of state institutions, radicalism, and so-called polarization

Original (Georgian)

რელიგიური სარჩულით პოლიტიკური ინტერვენციის, ლგბტ-პროპაგანდის, ნარკოტიკების პროპაგანდის, სახელმწიფო ინსტიტუტების დისკრედიტაციის, რადიკალიზმისა და ე.წ. პოლარიზაციის დაფინანსებას

Quote 3:

Translation (English)

Let us say no to black money together, and say yes to transparency, the true European path,
and an independent and sovereign Georgia

Original (Georgian)

ერთად ვუთხრათ არა - შავ ფულს და ერთად ვუთხრათ კი - გამჭვირვალობას,
ქემმარიტ ევროპულ გზას, დამოუკიდებელ და სუვერენულ საქართველოს

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

1. How would you describe the core legal differences between the Russian “foreign agents” law and the proposed one in Georgia?

If we talk about the Georgian law of 2024 in comparison with the current Russian law adopted in 2022, they have quite a lot of formal-legal differences. I will name only those that are, in my opinion, the main ones. However, it is important to realize that they have one major key similarity - both laws contradict the rule of law and are not democratic in their content and consequences (I will write more about this in my answer to your second question).

First, the Russian law uses the term “foreign agent”, while the Georgian law of 2024 contains the term “an organization carrying out the interests of a foreign power”. Despite the semantic identity of both concepts, the term “foreign agent” is still more stigmatizing, especially in the context of those societies that have a historical experience of pathological suspicion of everything ‘foreign’ and where the term “agent” is synonymous with traitor or spy.

Secondly, the grounds for inclusion of certain persons in the register of “foreign agents” in the Russian and Georgian legislation differ significantly. In Russia it is possible to become a foreign agent if a person receives support and (or) is under foreign influence in other forms and carries out activities, the types of which are established in the law. At the same time, foreign influence means provision of support and (or) influence on a person by a foreign source, including through coercion, persuasion and (or) other means. Support means provision of monetary funds and (or) other property to a person by a foreign source, as well as provision of organizational and methodological, scientific and technical assistance to a person by a foreign source, assistance in other forms. The list of activities that may lead to recognition as a “foreign agent” includes, inter alia, (A) political activities, understood extremely broadly and without

any clear criteria in the text of the law, (B) posting any information on the Internet for a wide range of users, (C) financing of the above activities, and others. In fact, the register of “foreign agents” includes individuals who have in one way or another demonstrated their disloyalty to the Kremlin or have been suspected of such disloyalty. This follows from the official reasons for including persons in the relevant register, which the Russian Ministry of Justice posts on its website (anti-war statements, criticism of the decisions of the Russian authorities, etc.).

The Georgian law of 2024 provided as a basis for inclusion in the register “receipt of more than 20% of an organization's income in the form of money and other property from a ‘foreign power’ during the year”. Thus, the list of grounds for inclusion in the register in this case was significantly narrower than in the Russian law.

Third, the Russian and Georgian laws differ in the range of persons. The Russian law applies to organizations (commercial and non-commercial, Russian and foreign), public associations (without forming a legal entity), and individuals (regardless of citizenship or citizenship status). The Georgian law of 2024 only applies to NPOs and media organizations.

Fourth, the Russian law provides for a large list of prohibitions and restrictions on the activities of “foreign agents”, including the prohibition to produce any information for minors, to engage in any educational and enlightening activities, to place advertisements on their information platforms, to organize and finance the organization of public events, and much more. The Georgian law of 2024 did not have such prohibitions.

Fifth, Russian law provides for criminal liability for non-compliance by “foreign agents” up to 5 years imprisonment. The Georgian law did not provide for criminal liability for violation of this legislation.

One can cite other differences between these laws, but in my opinion, the above are the main ones. For a more complete picture I provide here a link to the Venice Commission's opinion on the Georgian law of 2024 and I highly recommend to read it:[https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-PI\(2024\)013-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-PI(2024)013-e).

As for the new law, which was adopted in Georgia in 2025 and is, as far as I can find from open sources, a textual copy of the American FARA, in my opinion, it makes no sense to compare it in terms of its content with the Russian law, and here is why. The text of the FARA law is much more democratic in its content than the text of the Russian law, and if the new Georgian law is an accurate translation of FARA, it may seem that it is also better than the Russian law. However, a mere translation of the text of a U.S. law drafted and operating in the American legal reality (where case law is in force and the significant interpretative powers of courts enable them to create law) does not automatically result in the same text of the law operating similarly in Georgia in a continental law system, with the inherent enforcement traditions of the Georgian legal reality. Moreover, the political context of the drafting and adoption of the law in Georgia also indicates that this law is likely to be applied primarily against NPOs and independent media, and will be more repressive in nature.

2. Do you see the Georgian draft law as directly modeled after the Russian version, or are there key distinctions?

The Georgian law of 2024 was rather borrowed from Hungary in terms of its text, namely, it repeated the Hungarian law of 2017 in many respects. This does not mean that this makes the Georgian law better, because the Hungarian law in 2020 was recognized as violating human rights and freedoms in accordance with the decision of the European Court of Justice. I will

provide a link to this decision below. As I mentioned in my answer to the first question, the Georgian law differs significantly from the Russian law in terms of text, however, they are very similar in essence, and both violate the rule of law. Neither the Georgian law nor the Russian law contains the key features of “agency activity”, namely, they do not require proof that the agent acts in the interests of the principal (a foreign person), that such activity is the result of mutual consent of the agent and the principal for the agent to act in the interests of the principal, and neither of these laws requires proof that the agent acts under the control and direction of the principal. In other words, under both the Russian and Georgian laws of 2024, a person who does not carry out any “agency” activity, i.e. does not represent the interests of the principal, can be recognized as a “foreign agent”. This is where the similarity of the Georgian and Russian law is manifested, and this is where their autocratic nature is manifested. Let me remind you that both laws were recognized by international experts (Venice Commission), and the Russian law was also recognized by the ECHR as legislative acts that contradict the fundamental principles of international law and violate human rights. To summarize, it can be noted that in terms of the letter of the law, the Georgian law differs from the Russian law, however, in its spirit and autocratic essence they are similar.

3. Do you view laws like this as part of a broader authoritarian legalism strategy?

How do they typically evolve over time, and do you think it contributes to democratic backsliding?

I am convinced that the “foreign agents” laws, designed along the lines of the Russian law, i.e. lacking clear criteria for agency activities, containing a large number of vague concepts and thus giving excessively broad powers to executive authorities, are part of a general trend of autocratic legalism. The proliferation of these initiatives in jurisdictions such as Russia,

Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Hungary, Slovakia, Bulgaria, the Republic of Srpska, etc. normalizes the use of foreign influence transparency laws as a tool to combat political and civil opposition, and even more broadly against any disloyal actors, be they civil activists, NGOs or independent media. All these initiatives appear under the pretext of ensuring transparency of foreign influence, fighting corruption and protecting national interests. However, in fact, being “fake laws on foreign agents”, these regulations are used to create unbearable working and living conditions for those who are included in the register of “foreign agents” on arbitrary grounds. Over time, these laws are being amended with new amendments, which are nibbling away more and more rights and freedoms from those included in the register. The Russian law in this sense is the most striking example - in 2012, when the law was first introduced, it did not provide for the kind of prohibitions that exist now and did not apply to individuals and media. Today “foreign agents” in Russia, as I have already mentioned, cannot teach and educate, organize public events, place advertisements, freely receive income from creative activity and engage in many other activities. Russian deputies are constantly coming up with more and more initiatives to tighten the laws, including tougher liability for their violation. An important feature of the development of these laws is the hate speech used by the authorities against “foreign agents”, which is aimed at dehumanizing and stigmatizing them. In the conditions of creating a negative public background around “agents”, it is not difficult to toughen the legislation. In general, it can be said that such a scheme can be effectively applied in any jurisdiction where such autocratic legislation exists. Given this, I am convinced that the development and proliferation of such laws leads to democratic backsliding and autocratization.

4. In your experience, what have been the most damaging legal consequences of the Russian law on civil society organizations (CSOs)?

In my opinion, the most painful consequences of the application of the law on “foreign agents” for Russian NGOs were the following. Firstly, additional financial costs of preparing reports for the Ministry of Justice of Russia, including expenses for auditors' services, as well as time costs. This was compounded by the need to divert part of the NCO's staff to physically prepare the reports, which resulted in the NCO's core activities (project implementation) being hampered. Second, NPOs were stigmatized - they lost many partners, including those from organizations affiliated with government agencies, since the status of “foreign agent” was toxic from the very beginning and state-affiliated actors were afraid to interact with “foreign agents”. Third, the risks of administrative liability, including liquidation risks due to the slightest violations of the requirements of the law on “foreign agents”, have significantly increased for NCOs included in the register. Fourth, all of the above made it impossible to continue receiving foreign funding without hindrance, so many NCOs decided to refuse it, but even this did not save many NCOs from being included in the register. Thus, the law created a toxic environment around foreign funding and put many NCOs in the position of having to choose between continuing their work, receiving foreign grants and facing significant risks of inclusion in the register of “foreign agents”, or refusing foreign funding and facing financial difficulties, curtailing some of their projects and laying off staff. Some NCOs have even decided to liquidate themselves, unwilling to work under such conditions. You can look for academic articles on this subject (consequences for NCOs) - they are available in online libraries if you have access.

5. What legal or civic strategies have proven effective in resisting the Russian Law, and could they be applied in Georgia?

I am afraid that the Russian law was originally formulated in such a way as to deprive civil society of effective protection from its action. Any law filled with a large number of vague concepts gives virtually unlimited discretion to the executive branch. In the case of Russia, this is the Ministry of Justice, which decides solely on the basis of its discretion on who to include and who not to include in the register of “foreign agents”. In this situation, judicial protection becomes a sham, as lawyers and “foreign agents” themselves have nothing to rely on in their defense - the criteria in the law are vague, and therefore you cannot refer to them for your defense. In other words, the criteria are formulated in such a way that the word (interpretation of this or that term) of the Ministry of Justice will be stronger than the word of the defense. So, I can't say that Russia had any effective defense strategies that could be applied in Georgia. Even three-won cases in the ECHR did not lead to any positive changes.

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Generative AI was used to correct grammar and syntax errors.