

PALACKÝ UNIVERSITY OLOMOUC

Faculty of Science

Department of Development and Environmental Studies

Zuzana FIŠEROVÁ

LGBTIQ Activism in Georgia

Master's Thesis

Supervisor: Mgr. Simona ŠAFAŘÍKOVÁ, Ph.D.

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Abstrakt

Tato práce zkoumá postavení místních nevládních organizací, které se zaměřují na ochranu práv LGBTIQ osob v Gruzii. Cílem výzkumu je prostřednictvím kombinace kvalitativního výzkumu a deskriptivní analýzy sekundárních dat zmapovat, jak místní nevládní organizace přistupují k problémům týkajícím se LGBTIQ komunity. Výzkum identifikuje silné stránky i problémy, s nimiž se tyto organizace setkávají. Práce dále rozebírá snahy o spolupráci mezi nevládními organizacemi zaměřenými na LGBTIQ a rozličnými zúčastněnými aktéry. Kapitoly v této práci se odvíjejí následovně: kontextualizace práv LGBTIQ v postsovětském prostoru, historický vývoj LGBTIQ práv v Gruzii, současné problémy komunity a nastínění aktérů, kteří negativně ovlivňují práci nevládních organizací, jako je vláda, média, krajně pravicové skupiny a gruzínská pravoslavná církev. Stěžejní kapitoly poskytují poznatky získané z rozhovorů, doplněné diskusí zasazenou do náležitého teoretického rámce. Práce dále předkládá soubor doporučení vycházejících přímo z poznatků výzkumu, která jsou přizpůsobena jak místním organizacím, tak jejich dárcům.

Klíčová slova: LGBTIQ práva, Gruzie, nevládní organizace, vláda, gruzínská pravoslavná církev, média, krajní pravice, dárci

Abstract

This thesis examines the landscape of local non-governmental organizations that focus on safeguarding LGBTIQ rights in Georgia. By a combination of qualitative research and descriptive analysis of secondary data, the research aims to analyze how local NGOs in Georgia approach and address challenges concerning the LGBTIQ community. It seeks to identify both the strengths and challenges encountered by these organizations. Furthermore, the study examines the dialogues and collaborative endeavors between LGBTIQ-focused NGOs and various stakeholders. Chapters in this thesis unfold progressively: contextualizing LGBTIQ rights within the Post-Soviet framework, delving into Georgia's historical progression, scrutinizing current challenges, and outlining the actors negatively impacting NGO work, including the government, media, far-right groups, and the Georgian Orthodox Church. The core chapters present findings derived from interviews and analyses, complemented by discussions framed within appropriate theoretical frameworks. The thesis offers a set of recommendations drawn directly from research insights, tailored for both local organizations and their donors. These recommendations aim to enhance the efficacy and impact of their endeavors in advancing LGBTIQ rights in Georgia.

Keywords: LGBTIQ rights, Georgia, NGOs, Government, Georgian Orthodox Church, media, far-right, donors

I declare in lieu of an oath that I wrote this thesis myself. All information derived from the work of others has been acknowledged in the text and a list of references is given.

Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto práci jsem vypracovala samostatně pod vedením Mgr. Simony Šafaříkové, Ph.D. Veškeré použité informace získané z práce jiných osob jsou uvedeny v seznamu použité literatury.

Olomouc, 2023

Signature

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Mgr. Simona ŠAFAŘÍKOVÁ, Ph. D, for her dedicated guidance throughout the writing process.

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Mé srdečné poděkování dále patří mé rodině a přátelům, zejména mé mamince, jejíž bezpodmínečná opora mi byla stálým zdrojem motivace po celou dobu mé, ne vždy hladké, cesty studiem.

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Studijní program: N0588A330002 Mezinárodní rozvojová a environmentální studia
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Zásady pro vypracování

Despite significant increases in tolerance for the LGBTIQ minority in Georgia, the situation is far from ideal (CRRC, 2022). In 2021, Georgia experienced violent riots, causing several injuries and even a death. Protests were held against the March for Dignity in support of LGBTIQ rights. A year later, candidate status for Georgia in the European Union was not granted. Georgia received a letter with a number of recommendations that need to be improved in order to further discuss the candidate status. The protection of the LGBTIQ community was included (European Commission, 2022). The following protest of 60,000 Georgians waving EU flags in front of the European Parliament shows that Georgian society wishes to join the EU in the future (Liboreiro, 2022). The objective will, however, remain a long way off without stronger and more effective protection for the LGBTIQ minority. Therefore, this study aims to give voice to the local NGO sector as an important stakeholder in LGBTIQ rights protection. The combination of qualitative research and descriptive analysis of secondary data is chosen in order to analyze the strengths, weaknesses, risks, and opportunities of LGBTIQ activism in Georgia.

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Katedra rozvojových a environmentálních studií

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L.S.

doc. RNDr. Martin Kubala, Ph.D.
děkan

doc. RNDr. Pavel Nováček, CSc.
vedoucí katedry

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List of Abbreviations

APG	Alliance of Patriots of Georgia
CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
EU	European Union
GOC	Georgian Orthodox Church
IDAHOT	International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender
LGBTIQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Queer
LGBTIQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Queer and other genders and sexual orientations
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
TV	Television
UNM	United National Movement
USA	United States of America
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WISG	Women's Initiatives Supporting Group

Introduction

After dedicating two months to volunteering in Rustavi during 2017 and another month in the Marneuli region in 2019, I took the opportunity to spend a semester in Tbilisi for an Erasmus exchange in 2021. However, during a period of post-exam relaxation, an unfortunate incident occurred. The planned March for Dignity, advocating for LGBTIQ rights, encountered vehement opposition from far-right groups and the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC). This clash not only led to the cancellation of the event but also resulted in injuries to numerous journalists and a tragic loss of life (RFERL, 2021).

These events got a lot of attention from abroad. The government was heavily chastised for failing to take adequate measures to protect public safety, freedom of speech and free media. The European Union (EU) Embassies, together with the EU delegation, even wrote a letter to the minister, Vakhtang Gomelauri, where they stated that *“recent events have cast a shadow over EU-Georgia relations and Georgia’s image as a country upholding basic human rights”* (EEAS, 2021).

Witnessing the clash, I naturally found it distressing, but I was also worrying about the future ties between Georgia and Europe. In 2022, Georgia did not receive a status of a candidate country from the European Commission. Instead, they received a letter detailing specific recommendations for improvement, including the protection of the LGBTIQ community (European Commission, 2022), as the incident described above was not an isolated event in Georgia; instead the community faces violence and discrimination on regular basis (Public defender, 2021).

While an extensive research has probed into understanding the perception of homophobia in Georgia (Aghdgomelashvili et al., 2022; Aghdgomelashvili, Mchedlishvili & Laperadze, 2022; CRRC & Council of Europe, 2022; Pew Research Center, 2017; Sichinava, Saldaze & The Caucasus Datablog, 2021; World Value Survey, 2014) and has addressed the challenges encountered by the LGBTIQ community (Aghdgomelashvili et al., 2022; Aghdgomelashvili & Natsvlishvili, 2014; CRRC & Council of Europe, 2022; Gvianishvili, 2020; UN, 2019; Public defender, 2021), there has been notably limited research capturing the perception on the experiences and struggles of the representative of LGBTIQ focused Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs).

Hence, this thesis aims to provide a deeper understanding of the nuances of their work and the challenges they face, and offer valuable insights into the dynamics of these NGOs and their interactions within broader societal contexts (detailed in Chapter 1). To accomplish this, a combination of qualitative research and descriptive analysis of secondary data formed the methodological approach (outlined in Chapter 2).

The thesis also offers the contextualization of LGBTIQ rights within the broader framework of Post-Soviet countries and then focuses specifically on the context within Georgia (Chapter 3). That includes an exploration of the historical progression of LGBTIQ rights protection and a close examination of the current state of LGBTIQ rights in Georgia alongside the challenges faced by the community.

Subsequently, the thesis delves into a chapter dedicated to detailing the various actors (Government, GOC, Far-right groups, and Media) that negatively influence the work of NGOs, as identified from the literature (Chapter 4).

Further, the thesis presents the results of the interviews and conducts an in-depth analysis (Chapter 5), and offers a discussion segment (Chapter 5) that complements the results with an appropriate theoretical framework.

It is important to note, that in this study, the acronym LGBTIQ, standing for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex, Queer (LGBTIQ) is consistently utilized. Nevertheless, when directly citing respondents or literature, the document/interview's specific acronym is employed. The acronyms employed are as follows: "LGBT" for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT), and "LGBTIQ+" for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex, Queer and all the other gender and sexual orientations (LGBTIQ+). These acronyms are used interchangeably throughout the study and should be perceived as such rather than distinct and separate entities.

1. Aims and Objectives

The existing literature concerning LGBTIQ protection in Georgia predominantly emphasizes the perception of homophobia and the challenges faced by the community, while significantly overlooking those who are actively engaged in safeguarding their rights, more specifically, *local* NGOs.

Therefore, this research aims to understand comprehensively how local NGOs in Georgia approach and address challenges concerning the LGBTIQ community. It seeks to identify both the strengths and challenges encountered by these organizations. Furthermore, the study aims to examine the dialogues and collaborative endeavors between LGBTIQ-focused NGOs and various stakeholders in Georgia. Ultimately, the research aims to generate recommendations and strategies for empowering the LGBTIQ community in Georgia, derived from research outcomes and insights.

In essence, this thesis encompasses a comprehensive exploration of internal NGO dynamics, external interactions, and a future-oriented approach to fostering empowerment by answering the following research questions.

1. How do local NGOs approach the problematic LGBTIQ community in Georgia?
 - 1.1. What are the strengths of the NGO sector focusing on protecting LGBTIQ rights in Georgia?
 - 1.2. What are the challenges of the NGO sector focusing on protecting LGBTIQ rights in Georgia?
2. What does the dialogue of NGOs with other stakeholders look like?
 - 2.1. How do these NGOs collaborate?
 - 2.2. How do NGOs establish collaborative relationships with various stakeholders, including the government, media, far-right groups, and the church?
3. How should be the LGBTIQ community empowered in the future?

2. Research Methodology

This chapter outlines the research methodology, including the research type, the selected research sample, the process of data collection and data analysis, and ethical considerations. Besides, the chapter offers a critical reflection on the quality of the research and its limitations.

2.1 Type of Research

To answer the research questions, a combination of qualitative research and descriptive analysis of secondary data was used. By integrating qualitative research with the analysis of secondary data, this research design allows to triangulate findings and enhance the credibility and reliability of study's outcomes.

Qualitative research was chosen as the primary method due to its capacity for in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives, experiences, and opinions related to the research topic (Golafshani, 2003). This depth of understanding is crucial as the research aims to uncover context-specific insights held by local Georgian NGOs regarding LGBTIQ protection and direct focus on participants' experiences.

Furthermore, qualitative research provides flexibility and adaptability (Creswell, 2009), making it possible to adjust the research to the dynamic character of political processes in Georgia during the research period. This flexibility was especially useful in obtaining real-time findings since the political atmosphere for local NGOs changed dramatically due to attempts to introduce so-called Foreign Agent Law during the research.

Due to personal and time constraints of the author, the research was conducted online. While one could argue that online research is not the best communication tool for every study, due to its several limitations as described in Chapter 3.6. The utilization of online qualitative research has experienced a recent growth due to the necessity imposed by the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), compelling researchers to modify their methodologies for remote data collection (Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021; Keen et al., 2022). It provides a range of tools, including live chat sessions, video-based focus groups and interviews, discussion forums, bulletin boards, mobile ethnography or diary platforms, and more (Lobe et al., 2020). The qualitative research proved to be practical in overcoming the challenges that hampered onsite interviews such as time, money, geographic dispersion, and physical mobility barriers (Carter, 2011). Besides, as Are (2019) claims, online interviewing provides flexibility to accommodate everyone's busy schedules, which in turn substantially reduces the time burden for participants. This was found highly practical and suitable for the chosen research sample (elaborated in Chapter 2.2).

2.2 Research Sample

The research employed non-probability sampling, beginning with criterion sampling and followed by incorporating the snowball method.

Criterion sampling is based on the logic of reviewing and studying only individuals who fulfil a certain criterion determined by their role in the implementation process or who have specific experience (Palinkas et al., 2015). The criterion of this research sample was the following – the chosen research participants had to work for *local* NGOs with the primary focus on addressing issues within the LGBTIQ community. Given the limited number of such local NGOs, no additional criteria were considered.

The first step was using email addresses that were retrieved from the organizations' official websites to get in touch with possible interviewees. In the cases where there was no response through email, alternative communication channels such as Facebook and Instagram were utilized to reach out to the organizations. Additionally, WhatsApp was employed for establishing contact if contact details were not readily available on their websites.

The snowball method was incorporated into the research design at a later stage as the direct contact yielded only a few responses. This method was selected as it is recommended when facing challenges in accessing individuals with the desired target characteristics (Naderifar et al., 2017). The snowball method works as follows, the researcher starts with a few initial contacts, who meet the research criteria and invites them to participate. These participants, in turn, recommend others who fit the criteria, and the cycle continues (Parker et al., 2019).

While this approach proved valuable in expanding the pool of interviewees, it was not always successful. Besides, the snowball method is regarded as having inherent risks that challenge sample diversity (Kirchherr & Charles, 2018). This concern was confirmed as respondents frequently introduced the researcher to NGOs with similar orientations. Both of these limitations are closely addressed in Chapter 3.6.

In the end, the research sample comprised ten representatives from eight different organizations and initiatives. To ensure the safety of respondents, names of organizations and individuals are not disclosed (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Research sample

Respondent	Organization	Date of the interview
Respondent 1	Organization S	27.02.2023
Respondent 2	Organization T	18.05.2023
Respondent 3	Organization U	01.06.2023
Respondent 4		
Respondent 5	Organization V	06.06.2023
Respondent 6	Organization W	20.07.2023
Respondent 7	Organization X	03.08.2023
Respondent 8		
Respondent 9	Organization Y	29.08.2023
Respondent 10	Organization Z	30.08.2023

Source: Author

2.3 Data Gathering

To gather primary data, semi-structured interviews were used as they have a clear structure while still allowing for flexibility during the interview. As a result, they offer a flexible framework for understanding the problem (Hendl, 2008). Furthermore, aspects that are considered crucial by the interviewee can be followed up better than in the case of entirely planned interviews. This allows the interviewer to focus on areas relevant to the research study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The interview guideline of this research (Annex 1.) took advantage of qualitative research and was changed throughout the study, for example, the interview question *“Can you elaborate on the role of donors in shaping the direction of your organization's activities?”* was added to the guidelines when the researcher understood that this was an important issue for the respondents.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted online in two formats: one-on-one interviews (done in six instances) and one-on-two interviews (done in two instances). The decision to include group interviews emerged organically during the study process, as participants themselves suggested this format. Group interviews were understood as a chance to gain more detailed insights into their work and perspectives.

The choice of the interview platform was Google Meet, which the researcher considered the most secure and user-friendly video conferencing platform (further details provided in Chapter 2.5.). The interviews lasted approximately 60-90 minutes.

The data were gathered within six months (February to August 2023). The process ended when the saturation of data was reached. The extended duration of data collection is attributed to the challenges encountered in reaching potential respondents. The factors contributing to the challenge of reaching potential respondents were identified as follows:

- As both Carter et al. (2021) and Orgad (2005) warn, due to the nature of online research, it is challenging to establish trust and build connections with respondents as the researcher cannot simply meet them in person, either in their offices or in a public place.
- Moreover, the sensitive nature of the research issue may cause some people to be wary of speaking with an unknown researcher (Mohajan, 2018).
- It is possible that the emails ended up in responders' spam folders or appeared as spam to them as also marked by Nayak & Narayan (2019).
- Besides, the participants' hard workload was noticeable and as Kristensen & Ravn (2015) highlighted, people are unlikely to participate if they assume they are too busy. Participants frequently postponed the planned interview appointments or accidentally forgot to react to emails. That was further exacerbated by the increased workload brought on by political developments like the anti-LGBTIQ bill and demonstrations against the Foreign Agent Law. Additionally, having more than one job was a prevalent trait of the respondents. Given the busy schedule, lack of personal contact with the researcher, and knowing that the research is only done to produce a master's thesis, it is assumed that the interview was not given priority.
- Similar to the observations made by Gregory (2018), another noteworthy aspect observed during the data collection phase was the occurrence of “ghosting”, the sudden stop of email communication by certain potential participants, as well as neglecting scheduled conversations without any notice and explanation.

2.4 Data Analysis

A thematic analysis of the collected data was conducted both during and after the data collection process. The recorded interviews were transcribed, anonymized and coded in Nvivo software.

Firstly, the data were coded and subsequently clustered into categories. As the analysis progressed, new codes and categories naturally emerged or on the other hand got merged. These categories and codes served as the foundation for the organization of the subchapters and sections in Chapter 6, where the subchapters correspond to the categories and the sections correspond to the codes.

This method of organization of data made it easier to explore the key challenges, constraints, common themes, disagreements and perspectives of different stakeholders among the respondents. These findings were then used to respond to the research question, presented in Chapter 1.

Furthermore, it is important to note that Chapter 6 includes direct citations from interviews. While most of these citations are presented with grammatical mistakes to maintain authenticity, a few were slightly reformulated to enhance readability and comprehension for the reader.

2.5 Research Ethics

To maintain the research ethics, a series of measures was taken. Before each interview, participants received an email clarifying the goals of the study and how participants' privacy, anonymity, and data confidentiality would be upheld. Besides, each participant was required to complete an informed consent form (Annex 2.) to formally acknowledge their willingness to participate in the research, accessible via Survey Monkey.

Besides, it was emphasized to participants that they have the absolute right to withdraw from the research at any point without explanation.

To adhere to the “do not harm” principle¹ and emphasize the safety and well-being of the participants, the research avoided using any personal information of individuals or names of organizations engaged. This approach is especially important given the nature of the responders' profession, which frequently exposes them to different threats, including the possibility of a physical attack. Some of the participants also had not “come out” to their close relatives yet. Given this situation, it is essential to preserve their privacy so that they are protected from any potential harm or unexpected consequences of the research.

Unfortunately, as Are (2019) mentions, it needs to be noted that the researcher has no control over the location from which participants conduct interviews or how internet platforms retain information. Therefore, researchers using online interviews can no longer fully guarantee the confidentiality of information shared and the privacy of conversations. However, the researcher made an effort to reduce the risk to participants' anonymity, confidentiality, and privacy in all phases of the study process by following the principles in Figure 2. For that reason, Google Meet was selected as the platform for conducting interviews. Google Meet offers services described in Figure X and provides end-to-end encryption, which “*doesn't allow Google to view, hear, or save the audio and video from your call*” (Google, 2023).

¹ The “do not harm” principle refers to a process when a researcher recognizes the potential negative effects of interventions and avoids exposing participants to additional risks through action (Charantle & Lucchi, 2018).

In addition, it is important to note that all participants willingly participated in the research, willingly contributed to the research, dedicated their time and shared their knowledge and valuable experiences. To underscore the researcher's commitment to transparency and reciprocity within the study, it has been mutually agreed with all participants during the informed consent process that the research findings will be shared with them following the thesis defense.

Figure 2: Precautions taken to lower the risk of participants' anonymity, confidentiality, and privacy

Interview	Storage	Publishing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private link with a password • Waiting room feature to prevent uninvited persons from joining • Virtual background if wished • Instruction about the environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data kept on a dedicated laptop under pseudonyms (not stored online) • Recording the audio alone • Anonymization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anonymization

Source: Are (2019), Carter et al. (2021), James and Busher (2016) adjusted by the author

3.6 Research Limits

Certainly, online interviews are not the best communication tool for every study. To ensure a quality interview, respondents must have access to a high-speed Internet connection, be familiar with online communication, and understand the fundamentals of digital literacy (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014). These obstacles were, however, not predicted or experienced in this study as the research sample were young professionals who work daily on computers in their offices. Still, as Carter et al. (2021) suggest, the researcher needs to ensure that prospective participants have (1) access to the necessary hardware (e.g., phone, tablet or computer, (2) a reliable internet connection and (3) familiarity with the chosen platform. As expected, all of the participants had access to the necessary hardware and used either computers or smartphones to conduct the interviews. The internet connection got lost occasionally but thankfully, never to the point that a polite request to repeat their answer would not resolve the issue. Before the interviews, all respondents were informed about the use of the Google Meet platform, and the researcher inquired if this platform was suitable for them. None of the respondents disagreed with its use.

However, the use of online semi-structured interviewing has been criticized as it cannot achieve the highly interactive communication that can be achieved face-to-face (Carter et al., 2021). As Orgad (2005) mentions: *“When face-to-face contact is absent, researchers cannot ignore the*

potential obstacles that anonymity and disembodiment pose in attempting to arrive at a relationship of trust with other people online" (p. 55). To overcome this issue, the researchers should share personal information about themselves as Kivits (2005) suggested and should be also replying to the participant's messages quickly to show their commitment to the study (Orgad, 2005).

The researcher took the initiative to solve these problems. The researcher included details about the research in the email inviting participants to the research interview, but also additionally provided details about their professional background, and personal experiences with the country. This approach proved to be effective as it created a common starting point in the interviews, making the atmosphere more relaxed and fostering a sense of mutual understanding. Furthermore, it appeared to enhance the credibility of the researcher. Given the researcher's professional background in the field of human rights and support for civil society organizations (CSOs) and academic grounding in the International Development studies, some participants seemed to perceive a sense of shared commitment as some of them expressed statements like *"You work in this field, so you know..."* or showing interest in the researcher's work by asking for more details.

In many instances, prompt replies were also found to be beneficial since they sped up the scheduling procedure. Some potential interviewees spent a lot of time looking for suitable interview times, then sudden messages like *"Do you have time now?"* were sent to the researcher, resulting in the interview being done in the next few minutes.

However, it is worth noting that there was one unfortunate incident where the researcher was unable to respond promptly due to a health condition, resulting in a missed interview. Despite issuing an apology, contact was not reestablished with that particular participant. This particular incident underlined how crucial it is to keep participants informed in a timely manner to preserve their interest in and commitment to the study.

Another obstacle mentioned by Carter et al. (2021) is that the researcher lacks control over the setting; thus, the interview may be interrupted several times. The advantage of conducting interviews online, on the other hand, is that one may do it in an environment that is neutral and private (such as at home). Additionally, the authors highlight the importance of considering a third party's presence during the interpretation of data to prevent incorrect interpretations of visual signals and/or self-censored replies brought on by an unwanted guest who is not captured on camera.

To minimize these challenges, the respondents were instructed to conduct the interview alone, in a quiet environment and with headphones on. They were also instructed to check their internet connection, camera, and microphone to ensure the quality of the recording and eliminate the possibility of third parties influencing the respondents' responses. The ability to modify the background was also reminded to preserve the privacy of the researcher and interviewee (Carter et al., 2021; James and Busher, 2016).

However, it should be noted that not all respondents followed this recommendation as asked. Many conducted the interviews in various environments, such as cafe, their offices with other colleagues sitting in the room, or even at home with other activities happening around them, including cooking. In one particular case, the researcher had to request a change of environment as the respondent took a walk on a busy street with cars passing by.

During the interviews, the presence of third parties was indeed identified. However, their impact on the obtained data was considered to be minor or insignificant, given that the study participants regularly showed openness, self-reflection, and a critical attitude in their replies.

Conducting interviews online also posed the challenge of missing out on the opportunity for direct observation of the respondents' work and surroundings. Nevertheless, it is believed that the researcher's previous visits to Georgia, active monitoring of the news and social media activity related to the organizations involved, and ongoing engagement with the local context helped mitigate this limitation.

Furthermore, in addition to the challenges posed by online research, it is essential to acknowledge other limitations that were considered:

(I) Language barrier – The interviews took place in English, a language that neither the researcher nor the respondents spoke as their mother tongue. Despite the high proficiency in English displayed by all participants, the potential for data misinterpretation remains due to language differences, as raised by van Nes et al. (2010).

(II) Reliance on individual reflections – Participants may have a tendency to present their organization's work in a favorable light and potentially leading to the so-called social desirability bias as described by Bergen (2019). To address this bias, steps were taken to ensure the anonymity of responses and provide information about the study's goals and objectives.

(III) Poor trust of participants in the researcher – Some participants might have had reservations due to the researcher's status as a young “outsider” discussing sensitive content (Breen, 2007). To

establish and maintain trust, the researcher explained the aims and objectives of the research, assured the maintenance of confidentiality of provided information and shared personal information. While these efforts were successful in some cases, it is believed that in-person interactions could have elicited even more detailed information (Keen et al.,2022).

(IV) Limited sample variation – The snowball technique proved useful, but respondents tended to connect the researcher with similarly feminist-oriented NGOs. Therefore, maintaining the criterion sampling was crucial. However, the research could benefit from a more diverse sample, including voices from different regions, as all respondents were centered in Tbilisi. Additionally, including respondents with varying perspectives mainly on visibility politics could provide a broader spectrum of insights.

3. The LGBTIQ Rights in Post-Soviet Countries

To fully understand the current situation in Georgia regarding LGBTIQ rights, it is essential to consider the historical context of the Soviet times. This context is crucial for recognizing the unique challenges and complicated factors that have shaped the perception of the queer community in the society, influenced the evolution of LGBTIQ rights over time, the current status of these rights, and how authoritarian regimes have exploited the topic for their use.

3.1. The Perception of LGBTIQ in Soviet Society

The perception of LGBTIQ individuals in the context of Soviet society stands as a testament to the deeply ingrained attitudes and policies of the era. Homosexuality, during the Soviet regime, was systematically reimagined as unnatural, deviant, decadent, and destructive to the general welfare in Soviet culture, where all individuals were expected to value the community over individual desires (Attwood, 1996). Furthermore, homosexual relationships between males were illegal throughout all time of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), while lesbianism was classified as a mental disease (Essig, 1999). Unsurprisingly, the lack of public exposure to homosexuality and the state's persecution of gay relationships influenced the public's negative attitudes throughout the Soviet era and afterward (Mole, 2018).

Contrary to sexuality, "transsexualism" has been regarded as a medical condition in the Post-Soviet zone. Since the early years of the communist system, Soviet medicine has been aware of people who change their gender and sex. Doctors, psychiatrists, and sexologists who advocated on behalf of their patients were the first to engage in "activism". They made an effort to persuade authorities and the general public that transsexualism was a real disorder. They argued for the legal recognition of transsexuals' gender and for transsexuals to be treated with kindness rather than contempt (Kirey-Sitnikova & Kirey, 2019).

3.2. The LGBTIQ Rights in Post-Soviet Countries

It is important to recognize that even after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Post-Soviet countries share significant commonalities. They maintain political, economic, and cultural interconnections, primarily through shared energy infrastructure and a united economic sphere. Furthermore, the dominance of the Russian language, Russian media, and sizable ethnic Russian diasporas in most of these nations contribute to their cultural cohesion (Kolsto, 2018).

However, the Post-Soviet landscape was also marked by challenging economic transitions. Many countries faced rapid economic declines, exacerbated by a shift to market-oriented systems, often

characterized by a corrupt privatization process. These circumstances led to considerable income disparities, prompting several nations to embrace Western values in exchange for economic and political opportunities. For instance, during the 1990s, most countries, excluding Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, decriminalized same-sex conduct between men (Kirey-Sitnikova & Kirey, 2019). For details, see Figure 3.

Figure 3: Summary of LGBTIQ rights in Post-Soviet countries

Country	Homosexuality	Gay Marriage	Censorship	Changing Gender	Discrimination
Armenia	Legal	Foreign same-sex marriages are recognized only	None	Ambiguous	No protection
Azerbaijan	Legal	Unrecognized	None	Illegal	No protection
Georgia	Legal	Not legal	None	Legal, but requires surgery	Illegal
Belarus	Legal	Not legal	None	Legal, but requires surgery	No protection
Moldova	Legal	Not legal	None	Legal, but requires surgery	Illegal in some contexts
Ukraine	Legal	Ambiguous	None	Legal, surgery is not required	Illegal in some contexts
Estonia	Legal	Civil Union	None	Legal, but requires surgery	Illegal
Latvia	Legal	Civil Union	None	Legal, but requires surgery	Illegal in some contexts
Lithuania	Legal	Foreign same-sex marriages recognized	State-enforced	Ambiguous	Illegal
Kazakhstan	Legal	Unrecognized	None	Legal, but requires surgery	No protection
Kyrgyzstan	Legal	Not legal	None	Legal, but requires surgery	No protection
Tajikistan	Legal	Unrecognized	None	Legal, but requires surgery	No protection
Turkmenistan	Male illegal, female legal	Not legal	None	Ambiguous	No protection
Uzbekistan	Male illegal, female legal	Not legal	None	Ambiguous	No protection
Russia	Legal	Not legal	Fine as punishment	Legal, surgery is not required	No protection

Source: (Equaldex, 2023)

The 1990s brought a wave of new freedoms and Western funding, fostering the emergence of numerous organizations, including those advocating for LGBTIQ rights (Feyh, 2015). According to

the Asian Development Bank (2011), CSOs in Georgia began to flourish in 1994, when international foundations established branches in Georgia, providing financial and technical support.

Nevertheless, as Rivkin-Fish & Hartblay (2014) stated, these newfound liberties also paved the way for the rise of conservative forces, who coalesced around the notions of national identity, cultural traditions, and traditional gender roles. Concurrently, religious institutions, notably the Orthodox Church, previously suppressed during the Soviet era, regained prominence. The early 2000s witnessed a significant expansion of the Russian Orthodox Church's power and influence in the region (Potts, 2016). In Georgia, despite official claims of secularism, the church was granted special status in 2002 through a constitutional agreement (Chitanava & Gvartadze, 2020).

The turn of the new millennium marked a pivotal moment in the Post-Soviet space. The election of Vladimir Putin as Russia's president triggered a consequential shift towards authoritarian and traditionalist policies that resonated across the region (Rivkin-Fish & Hartblay, 2014). Heightened economic prosperity, in contrast to the hardships of the 1990s, bolstered governments and their leaders, enabling substantial investments in law enforcement and pro-government propaganda. This period also witnessed diverse national trajectories, with some nations drawing closer to Russia, such as Belarus or Armenia, while others sought closer alignment with the Western world and the European Union (Moldova, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia) often accompanied by legislative changes. In the case of Georgia, an anti-discrimination law on sexual orientation was passed as an amendment to the Labor Code and a comprehensive law banning discrimination based on sexual orientation took effect in May 2014 (Kirey-Sitnikova & Kirey, 2019).

While this may seem optimistic for the LGBTIQ community, it is important to note that, as highlighted by Aghdgomelashvili & Natsvlshvili (2014) and Shevtsova (2022), these legal changes in the region were often driven by geopolitical motivations rather than internal political processes. This has created a complex landscape for the community and LGBTIQ activists, which is far from ideal, as detailed in the following chapter.

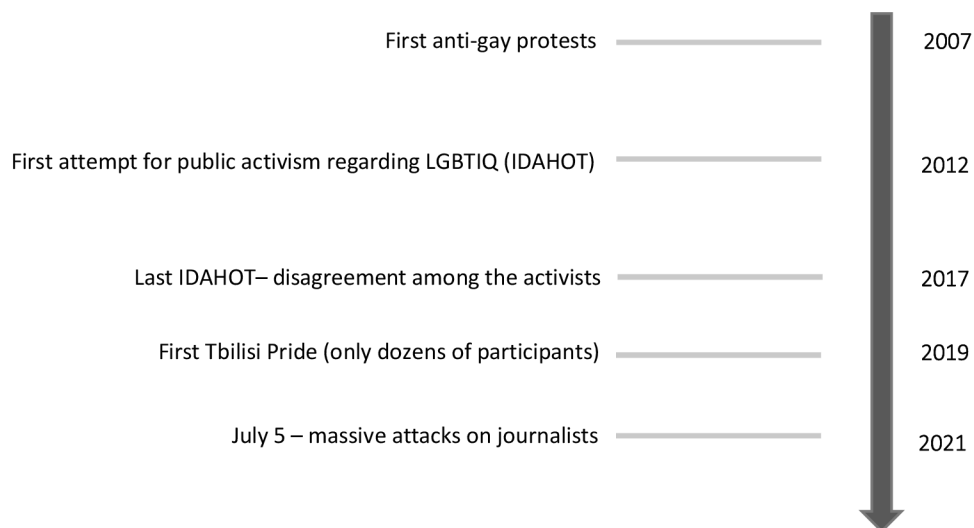
4. The LGBTIQ Rights in Georgia

Despite the legal advancements in LGBTIQ rights the lived reality for the community in Georgia paints a far less optimistic picture. For instance, despite the anti-discrimination laws in place, LGBTIQ individuals and their advocates continue to face widespread discrimination and violence in various aspects of their lives. This section therefore aims to provide an overview of historical struggles of LGBTIQ activists and examines the state of homophobia and the contemporary challenges faced by the queer community, which are prominently highlighted in the existing literature.

4.1 History of LGBTIQ Promotion in Georgia

This chapter aims to chronologically describe the history of LGBTIQ rights promotion in Georgia and reveals the struggles of the activists and community over time. The spotlight is given to events visualized in Figure 4. The chapter discloses the history of complex interactions between the LGBTIQ community, organizations promoting their rights, the GOC, far-right groups, and the government.

Figure 4: Key milestones in LGBTIQ rights advocacy in Georgia



Source: Author

First anti-gay protests

Interestingly, as Aghdgomelashvili (2016) stated, *organized anti-gay rallies have a longer history than LGBTIQ activists and their supporters' attempts to hold peaceful marches* (p. 184). In 2007, the Georgian newspaper Alia published an article announcing preparations for a gay parade in Tbilisi. Following that, upon the publication of another article accusing the government of supporting the march, a wave of homophobic hysteria began in Georgia. Opposition politicians accused the

government of trying to debauch and degenerate the Georgian people, and the Orthodox Church of Georgia released a special statement in which emphasized that engaging in deviant sexual relations is a serious sin that requires a confession (Aghdgomelashvili, 2015).

The published articles, however, were misleading; no gay march was planned. Only the Council of Europe organized an event called “All Different, All Equal²”, in which LGBTIQ people were to take part. Despite the efforts of the organizers and officials of the Council of Europe to explain the objective of the scheduled gathering, the event was canceled as organizers were concerned about the safety of the participants (IGLHRC, 2007).

It should be highlighted that the campaign was not only misunderstood in Georgia. In Serbia, several campaigners got badly injured after being beaten by a few attackers who mistook the diversity march for a gay parade, in Poland the name of the campaign was changed to avoid association with the ‘Equality Marches’ organized by the Polish gay community (UNITED, 2007).

Similarly in 2010, a large group of people carrying crosses and being led by a priest spent the entire day combing the streets of Batumi for the participants of another fictitious parade, to rid the city of “sinners”. The source of the rumor has not been identified (Aghdgomelashvili, 2015).

The first attempt for public LGBTIQ rights promotion - International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia

The first effort of LGBTIQ public activism in Georgia was made in 2012. On May 17, the annual International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHOT) was to be recognized. IDAHOT rally’s participants, however, were only able to complete a part of the planned route before being faced by opposing protestors. The rest of the march was canceled although police was able to break up the confrontation (Aghdgomelashvili, 2015).

The following year (2013), the celebrations were disrupted again. Against around a hundred participants of IDAHOT, around 30, 000 counterdemonstrators³ were mobilized by the GOC (Aghdgomelashvili, 2015). This time, the police did not manage to separate demonstrators and counterdemonstrators, and the event ended up with 28 injured people⁴ (Antidze & Dobkina, 2013).

² The campaign “All Different, All Equal” was a continuation of the Council of Europe's 1995 Campaign against racism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and intolerance. However, the campaign widened the scope of dimensions and moved from racism, antisemitism, xenophobia, and intolerance to Romaphobia, Islamophobia, homophobia, and disablism (Ramberg, 2006).

³ 20, 000 according to Roth & Vartanyan (2013).

⁴ 17 according to Amnesty International (2013).

GOC evaluated the counterdemonstration as a success and proclaimed May 17 as a *traditional family day* to counteract the Day Against Homophobia (Aghdgomelashvili, 2015).

In 2014 instead of celebrating IDAHOT, a large-scale march to protest against gay- marriage, anti-discrimination law and homosexual propaganda was organized. LGBTIQ organizations rejected the idea of organizing the IDAHOT in order to not put any live at danger (Aghdgomelashvili & Natsvlishvili, 2014).

As Donald and Speck (2020) summarized, in the following years (2015, 2017) the IDAHOT celebrations were held under restrictive conditions which arguably fell short of the requirements of Article 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights, Rights, protecting freedom of assembly and association or canceled for a fear of violence (2014, 2016, 2018 and 2019).

The last IDAHOT organized in coordinated matter and the first Tbilisi Pride

According to an interview conducted by Luciani (2021) in 2017, the IDAHOT was organized for the last time in a coordinated manner, as several activists started to doubt the effectiveness of the celebrations. One of the interviewees described IDAHOT followingly:

“The overwhelming amount of resources (...) directed at the event, the negative/victimizing publicity surrounding it (as hate crimes tend to increase in correspondence with public demonstrations), and the ever-present threat of violence caused burnout and distress among activists while leading to very limited outcomes” (p. 6).

Some activists raised concerns about IDAHOT being hijacked not only by GOC but also by the government and some of the community allies for their benefit (Ptskialadze, 2019). While some members of the movement were beginning to question the mainstream approach to exposure, others were taking a different path through mainstreaming the LGBTIQ community and decided to hold the first Tbilisi Pride even though the government refused to provide security forces to protect the march (Bachhi, 2019).

Not only traditional actors like the government, the church, or far-right organizations opposed the pride. The community criticized the event as well. For example, in a formal statement, the Women's Initiatives Supporting Group (WISG) expressed their disapproval as they believe that the event is politically counterproductive (WISG, 2019).

Contrary to the mixed perception of the march within the Georgian community, the Tbilisi Pride received strong support from the international community. Even though only 40 participants joined, the event gained high visibility (Kuenning, 2019). As one of the organizers in the interview

explained, a strategy to hold the government accountable included pursuing international visibility and having several international activists in Tbilisi (Luciani, 2021).

According to Luciani (2021), the event was also highly geopoliticised. The organizers connected the event with a geopolitical situation in the region. Giorgi Tabagari (2019), a key organizer, conveyed to Open Caucasus Media that politicians face a crucial decision: whether to align with Russia, where queer rights hold no significance, or to forge ahead towards establishing a genuine Western democracy that safeguards the rights of all citizens and ensures equal opportunities for everyone.

The geopolitical nature of Pride, Luciani (2021) shows on the attendance of co-founders of Pride in protests known as Gavrilov's Night⁵. According to the author, it *"exemplifies activists' localizing strategies to gain broader backing for the LGBTIQ+ cause"* (p. 204). However, it needs to be noticed that such a connection can be counterproductive. As DRFlab (2019) analyzed, the tie demonstration to LGBTIQ activist groups can damage the protest's legitimacy due to social unacceptance.

In 2020, the Tbilisi Pride was postponed due to the country's epidemiological situation since the government forbade (among other limitations) to conduct any public festivities. As stated by the Public defender of Georgia (2021) the threats and aggressive behavior towards LGBTIQ persons (and others who support them) were present. For example, several protests were conducted in front of the Tbilisi Pride organizers' office building to have the LGBTIQ community flag taken down.

The violent attacks on July 5, 2021

The scenario was similar in 2021, the comments against the march started weeks before the Pride was planned to take place. On July 5, 2021, the same day that the march was scheduled, the opposing demonstrators organized and announced the protests. Over fifty journalists suffered bodily injuries, and one of them passed away (RFERL, 2021). The event was called off, but still, the polarization of society reached its peak, as Schiffers (2021) argues, *the country has never seen such an escalation of hatred aimed at democratic civil society*. According to Geguchadze & Urushadze (2022), *the capital divided between "conservatives" and "liberals" went far beyond the LGBTIQ issue* (p. 86.), and the LGBTIQ issue become an implementation tool for propagandistic attacks targeting Western values as predicted by the WISG statement in 2019.

⁵ Protests erupted after Sergei Gavrilov attended the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy, sat in the chair reserved by protocol for the Head of Parliament, and made a speech in Russian language glorifying Georgian-Russian Orthodoxy. The Georgian population perceived Gavrilov's activities as undermining Georgian sovereignty. Protests became violent as rioters clashed with police. Several protesters were hurt and detained. Protests persisted in the days that followed, calling for the resignation of government leaders accountable for the police conduct (BBC, 2019).

The EU Embassies, alongside the EU delegation, composed a letter to Minister Vakhtang Gomelauri following violent assaults. They expressed that these incidents had a detrimental impact on EU-Georgia relations. Additionally, they highlighted the destruction of the European Union flag as assaults directly targeting Georgia's democratic values and its aspirations towards a pro-European stance (EEAS, 2021).

In 2022, no march was planned. Instead, several activities such as a conference, festival, or screening of the movie were prepared (Tbilisi Pride, 2022). Not surprisingly, the events did not avoid threats. The extremists right-far group Alt Info threatened to interrupt the planned program (Kincha, 2022). However, this year the police was able to arrest 26 participants at a right-wing rally against the ongoing Tbilisi Pride Week (Agenda.ge, 2022) which was appreciated by the United Nations Development Programme, the Delegation of the European Union, and several embassies working in Georgia who mark the event as:

“Potential stepping-stone for enhancing LGBTIQ+ rights protection in Georgia” but remained the need “to properly follow up on the events of 5 July 2021, including the full investigation and prosecution of the instigators and organizers of violence” (EEAS, 2022).

Nevertheless, the year 2023 did not brought for the organizers the desired peace and recovery and the festival had to be canceled due to safety risks for participants after the far-right protesters again stormed the site of the event (Civil.ge, 2023a).

4.2 The Current State of Homophobia in Georgia

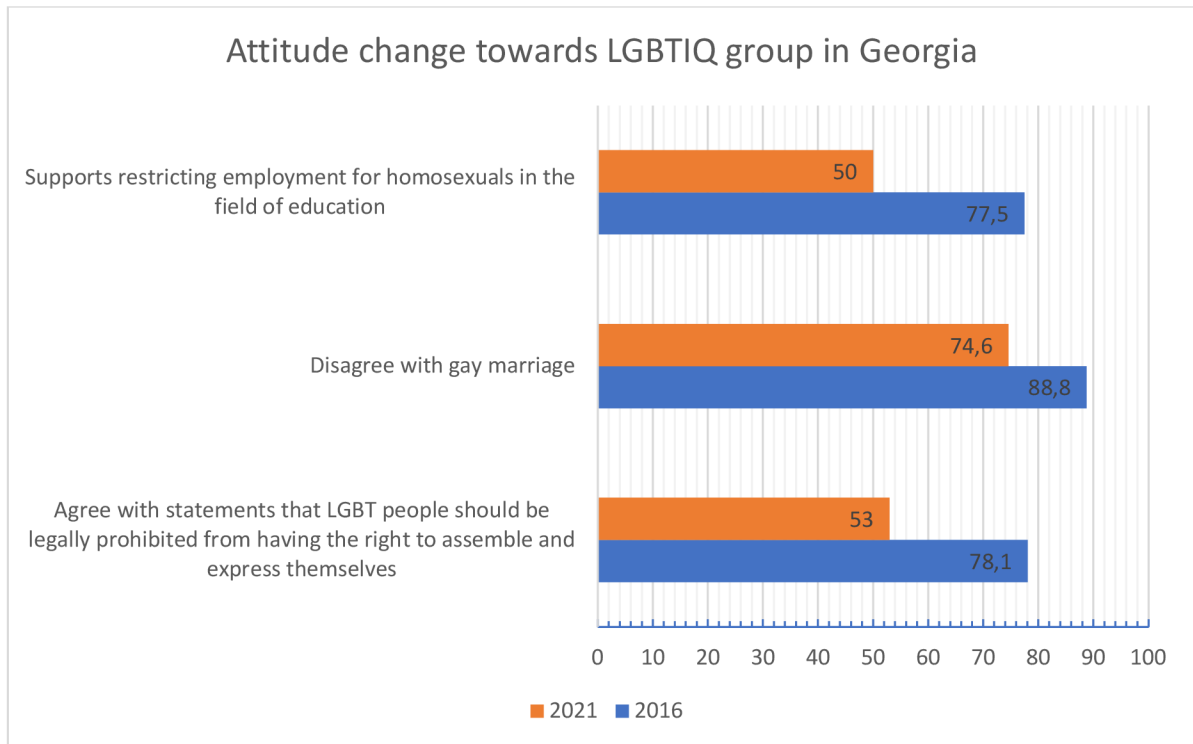
The current state of LGBTIQ rights is far from perfect, and Georgian culture may be seen as being rather homophobic (Aghdgomelashvili et al., 2022). Homophobia in Georgia remains relatively high, despite improvements over time, according to several surveys on the subject (Aghdgomelashvili, Mchedlishvili & Laperadze, 2022; CRRC & Council of Europe, 2022; Pew Research Center, 2017; Sichinava, Saldaze & The Caucasus Datablog, 2021; World Value Survey, 2014).

Figure 5 depicts an illustration of the progression. In 2021, 50% of respondents supported the limitation of gays in the sphere of education (compared to 77.5% in 2016), 74.6% opposed gay marriage (compared to 88.8% in 2016), and 53% believed that LGBTIQ individuals should be denied the freedom to assemble and express themselves (25,1 percentage points decline compare to 2016).

Moreover, according to a different study conducted by CRRC & Council of Europe (2022), Georgians over the years increasingly believe that the protection of the LGBTIQ rights or different minority

groups is crucial for the country’s development. While only 33% of citizens in 2018 considered the protection of LGBTIQ rights to be important, that number increased to 47% by 2021. Besides, according to research reflecting the event of July 5, 2021, made by Sichinava, Saldaze & The Caucasus Datablog (2021), 91% of respondents agreed that physical violence is unacceptable in any circumstance.

Figure 5: Public attitude towards the LGBTIQ group in Georgia in the years 2016 and 2021



Source: Aghdgomelashvili, Mchedlishvili & Laperadze, 2022

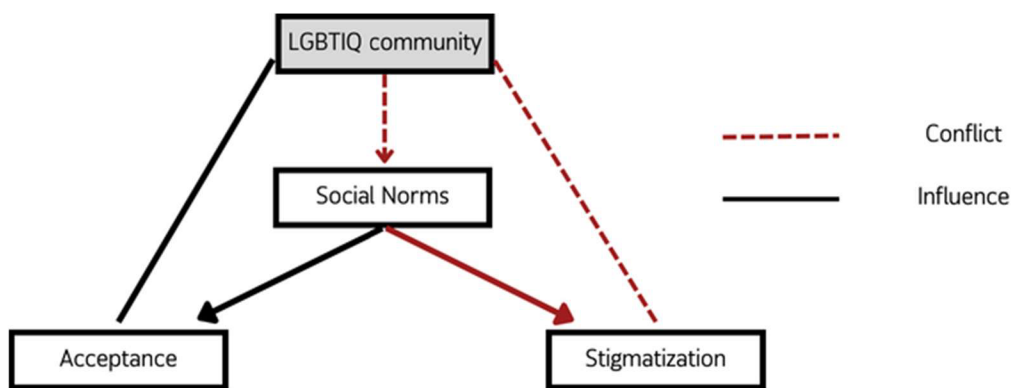
Yet, Aghdgomelashvili et al. (2022) warn that in studies, the proportion of respondents who are indifferent or refuse to respond to the issue has been increasing over time. Therefore, it may be argued that openly opposing LGBTIQ is regarded as less acceptable, and thus the improvement may be slightly lower than the figure indicates. According to the authors, the shift in attitudes toward the LGBTIQ group is asymmetric. As stated by Aghdgomelashvili et al. (2022) most of the surveys, consider the LGBTIQ group as a homogenous group, which does not allow a deep conclusion. According to their research results, lesbians are more accepted than gays, and acceptance of gender non-conforming men has increased, more than gender non-conforming women. As well as, transphobia is decreasing more sharply than homophobia or biphobia.

The predictors of homophobia

Homophobia refers to a fear, hatred, or prejudice against LGBTIQ individuals. Such attitude is often rooted in cultural, religious, and personal belief roles created by a social norm. LGBTIQ community

challenges these social norms. For some people the shift in the social norms is acceptable and complete in acceptance of the community. However, for other, this shift is far from being bearable. This leads to further stigmatization of the community. The stigmatization manifests in different forms, such as discrimination, harassment, and violence towards these individuals or their communities. These actions have harmful consequences for the mental and physical well-being of LGBTIQ individuals (Wright, Adams, & Bernat, 1999) as illustrated in Figure 6. That is highly relevant in the context of Georgia where society is considered socially conservative, mainly in areas of religion, gender roles, and perception of traditional family (Nodia, 2018).

Figure 6: Clashing with social norms: Dual outcomes



Source: Author

As noted above it is necessary to understand which part of society tends to rather reject and manifest homophobic behaviors towards LGBTIQ individuals. The following section therefore aims to clarify what are the predictors of homophobia in society. This section includes three parts. Firstly, it describes the social demographic predictors of homophobia – such as gender, age, education, and settlement. Secondly, it explains the effect of knowing an LGBTIQ person on the acceptance of such individuals. Lastly, it discusses if religion should be added to the list of predictors in the context of Georgia as the opinions in the academic discourse differ.

(I.) The effect of gender, age, education, and settlement

Several studies (Aghdgomelashvili, Mchedlishvili & Laperadze, 2022; CRRC & Council of Europe, 2022; Sichinava, Saldaze & The Caucasus Datablog, 2021) indicated that women, young people, and those respondents who have higher than secondary education, and live in the capital are more open and more likely to change their attitude towards LGBTIQ group than males, elders, and respondents from urban and rural areas, who have secondary and lower education. These results are not surprising and correlate with the worldwide trend.

Herek & Glunt, 1993; Kite & Whitley, 1996 indicated heterosexual males are less compassionate and understanding towards gays and lesbians, and hold on to the stereotypical belief that homosexuals are mentally ill, predators, or pedophiles.

Besides, the younger groups tend to be more tolerant towards 'non-traditional' behaviors (Besen & Zicklin, 2007; Ruspini, 2019; Shackelford & Besser, 2007). As Ruspini (2019) argues, millennials (young people whose birth years range from 1982 to the late 1990s) are due to the increasing globalization raised in a variety of family forms and exposed to more cultures and opportunities than previous generations. Thus, they are more likely to support LGBTIQ rights, and same-sex marriage or even more likely to identify as LGBTIQ.

There is also ample evidence (see Andersen and Fetner, 2008; La Roi & Mandemakers, 2018; Van den Akker et al., 2013) that lower-educated people have a more unfavorable attitude toward homosexuality than those higher-educated. As summarized by La Roi & Mandemakers (2018), higher education leads to higher acceptance through its *"stimulation of greater cognitive sophistication and complex reasoning, enabling individuals to better evaluate new ideas"* (p. 1) along with being in touch with other 'progressive' students at education institutions. As Inglehart (2008) claims, education should have a long-lasting effect since education happens mainly in youth and early adulthood which is believed to be the so-called 'formative phase' of life during which attitudes and beliefs are made and changed.

The place of residence, have also impact on the level of homophobia. According to Herek (2002) and Andersen & Fetner (2008), villages and small settlements have a higher level of homophobia than bigger cities. The lower level of homophobia in the capital, Aghdgomelashvili, Mchedlishvili & Laperadze (2022), is explained by the internal migration of younger people and LGBTIQ groups to the capital as the big cities offer more opportunities and less pressure on self-expression. Moreover, the visibility of the LGBTIQ community is higher in the capital than in cities and rural areas. While 23.8% of respondents living in Tbilisi answered that they know at least one member of the LGBTIQ group, in other urban areas it was 11.3% and 5.1% in rural areas.

The effect of knowing an LGBTIQ person

According to Gilbreath & The Caucasus Datablog (2022), people who know someone from the LGBTIQ community are significantly more tolerant than those who do not. Specifically, those who know an LGBTIQ person are 26 percentage points more likely to do business with a homosexual person, ten percentage points more likely to believe that it is important to protect LGBTIQ people's rights, and 46 percentage points less likely to say that they would not want an LGBTIQ person as a neighbor. Importantly, the research indicated that the effect of knowing an LGBTIQ person is

significant in urban areas. In rural areas, no effect has been indicated. The null effect was also shown for people over 54 years (for people 34-54 years, the effect was 39 percentage points, for the population under 34, it has been 31 percentage points). The effect of knowing LGBTIQ person is also higher for people from higher socio-economic backgrounds and higher education. Besides, the effect is particularly large for people with children - 37 percentage points. See the overview in Figure 7.

Figure 7: The level of influence of knowing an LGBTIQ person on the tolerance towards the queer community

	High Level of influence	Low level of influence
Gender	Woman	Man
Age	Under 54	Above 54
Parental status	With children	Without children
Education	Higher education	Non-educated
Socioeconomic status	Wealthy	poor
Residential area	Urban Areas	Rural areas
Additional factors	People with children	Internally Displaced Persons

Source: Gilbreath & The Caucasus Datablog (2022)

(II.) **The (misleading) effect of religion**

Religiosity, as discussed by Mestvirishvili et al. (2017), is often a robust predictor of negative attitudes towards homosexuals and their rights, especially in countries where the influence of the Orthodox Church holds significant sway. Consequently, Babunashvili et al. (2021) propose that the active involvement of priests and their continuous opposition to the LGBTIQ community (further elaborated in Chapter 5.2) may indicate a higher level of homophobia among religious individuals in Georgia. However, the author's analysis reveals that the importance of religion in one's life does not necessarily correlate with holding homophobic views. Hence, the authors propose that the issue of homophobia in Georgia extends beyond religiosity, representing a more pervasive and generalized problem.

4.3 The Problems of the LGBTIQ community in Georgia

Understanding the impact of a homophobic view and resistance to evolving social norms is not just about identifying those who tend to hold these views; it's equally vital to grasp how this mindset shapes the daily experiences of the community. Therefore, the upcoming section outlines the challenges faced by the LGBTIQ community, in addition to what was discussed in the previous chapter regarding their restricted freedom to assemble. That includes hate speech, violence, and

discrimination in the workplace or social services as listed by the Public defender of Georgia and other academic sources.

Hate speech

The study made by CRRC & Council of Europe (2022) indicated that most respondents (26%) believed that the biggest issue the LGBTIQ community faces is that people use hate speech against the LGBTIQ community. International human rights law still lacks a comprehensive definition of hate speech and the concept is still being discussed, particularly regarding freedom of expression, non-discrimination, and equality (UN, n.d). Nevertheless, hate speech is defined in the United Nation Strategy and Plan of Action against Hate Speech as

“...any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language concerning a person or a group based on who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor.” (UN, 2019, p. 2)

According to a research made by the Media Development Foundation, *the number of homophobic utterances (in Georgia) has risen dramatically whereas xenophobic, religiously discriminatory, and racist comments have decreased* (Civil.ge, 2020). The hate speech towards the LGBTIQ community increases especially in a period of struggle for the distribution of political power, such as an election or other political events. The hate speech is mainly raised by the clergy, politicians, or tabloids by appealing to the cultural, traditional, and religious values of Georgia (Aghdgomelashvili, 2012; Gvianishvili, 2020). Many people are afraid that recognizing LGBTIQ groups as a norm will threaten the traditional perception of gender and family (Aghdgomelashvili, 2012) as they are often illustrated as a disloyal part of society (Chelidze, 2014).

The largest share of homophobic messages in tabloids contains anti-Western sentiments, illustrating the West as a neglecter of national culture and imposer of homosexuality on Georgia to form and reinforce the anti-Western sentiment. Also, the messages illustrated homosexuality as a disease and perversion or stated that the LGBTIQ infringes on the rights of the majority (Civil.ge, 2020). The cross-tabulation analysis made by Aghdgomelashvili (2016) indicates the reinforcement is quite successful. 75% of the respondents who agreed with more distanced relations with the EU or United States of America (USA), fully or partly agree that the sexual orientation of homosexuals in Georgia changed under Western influence.

Violence

The Public defender (2021) reported that violence against LGBTIQ individuals, whether in the family or public spaces, was in 2021 a serious problem. According to the Public defender, during the year

the attacks against LGBTIQ persons and those perceived to be associated with the community were raised most notably against transgender women. Nevertheless, Aghdgomelashvili et al. (2022) argue that while the violence towards transgender women has become visible, one should not forget the situation of transgender men (and gender non-conforming people) as they remain in society invisible.

Aghdgomelashvili et al. (2022) also claim that the aggression towards lesbians compared to other countries is unusually high. The authors suggest that it might be due to familial asymmetry and different standards towards women's and men's sexuality, particularly since a lesbian opposes the cultural asexual image of a Georgian mother. Overall needs to be noted that, LGBTIQ women are victims of double discrimination – based on their sex, as well as sexual orientation/gender identity (Aghdgomelashvili & Natsvlshvili, 2014) and while women play quite a substantial role in Georgian society, the domestic violence rate is quite significant and increases (Geguchadze & Urushadze, 2022).

In general, Gvianishvili (2020) claims lesbian and bisexual women remain under-researched, and thus their struggles should not be underestimated.

Reporting of the hate speech and violence

Reporting crimes both of hate speech and violence remains problematic. According to CRRC & Council of Europe (2022), in 2021, the police continued to be the most frequent institution to which people are aware they may turn in the event of hate speech or hate crime. Unfortunately, the survey also revealed that minorities are frequently uneasy doing so. In general, the public did not show an increased faith or knowledge of formal mechanisms to combat hate speech, hate crime, and discrimination. The interviews made by Aghdgomelashvili & Natsvlshvili (2014) even revealed that police officers threaten, or verbally abuse LGBTIQ members. As authors (Aghdgomelashvili, 2016; Aghdgomelashvili & Natsvlshvili, 2014; Gvianishvili, 2020) suggest it may mean, the government's efforts regarding these issues are not sufficient. As Gvianishvili (2020) further indicates, law enforcement agencies are unwilling to take cases of hate crime seriously and the data on violence and discrimination against LGBTIQ minority and human rights defenders are collected only by NGOs.

Negative self-perception and mental health

Most of the community members are not able to come out even to their closest social circle, because of the high level of stigma (Gvianishvili, 2020) and such a hostile atmosphere creates a huge amount of pressure on each individual (Aghdgomelashvili, 2016). For example, in 2016, 44% of respondents considered suicide in the past two years; 7% attempted suicide; 11% overdosed on

medicine, and 16% attempted self-injury. However, just 31% of those polled had used the services of a psychologist in the previous two years (Aghdgomelashvili, 2016).

A high level of stress combined with a negative self-perception can lead an LGBTIQ person to become homophobic and critical of other members of the group. This often involves aspiring to establish absolute moral standards of behavior within the community. Consequently, disagreements frequently arise within the group (Gonsiorek & et al., 1995). The targets of these criticisms are often LGBTIQ activists. The critics believe that these activists attract too much attention and, as a result, spread homophobia in society (Aghdgomelashvili, 2009).

Discrimination in healthcare

A study conducted by Aghdgomelashvili (2014) shows that healthcare staff has a hazy understanding of sexual orientation/gender and the specific needs of LGBTIQ people, and expresses homophobic/transphobic views. Even though homosexuality is not included in the latest version of the International Classification of Diseases, it is described as a behavioral disorder in several Georgian medical textbooks. Consequently, the inappropriate behavior of health care staff leads to the postponement of meetings with physicians or hiding of their sexual orientation, which may cause incorrect diagnoses⁶.

The legal recognition of gender in Georgia remains problematic. To achieve it, individuals have to undergo unnecessary medical interventions (Equaldex, 2023), which are on top of that for most of the population financially inaccessible (Aghdgomelashvili & Natsvlshvili, 2014).

Employment

The Public defender (2021) reported that the discrimination against LGBTIQ persons based on gender identity and sexual orientation remained widespread and underreported. According to the Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (2016), Georgia has no comprehensive study on the employment and labor rights of LGBTIQ persons conducted in recent years and thus, the assessment of the scope of discriminative practices is rather ambiguous.

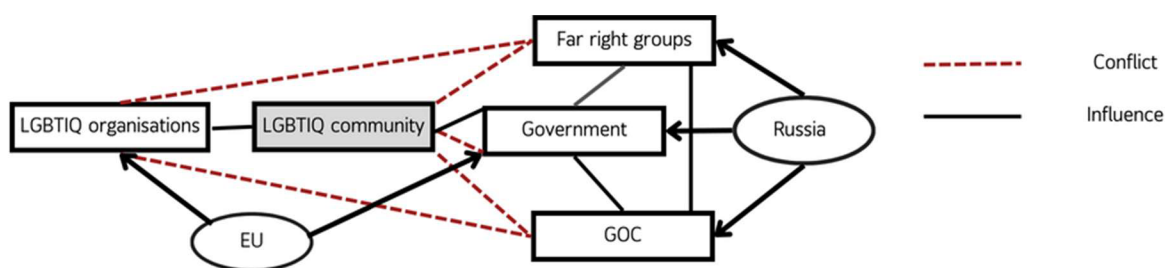
Still, Natsvlshvili (n.d.) comments that even though Georgia has a non-discrimination Article in the Georgian Labour Code making specific reference to sexual orientation, the Code prohibits discrimination only in employment relations, not during the recruitment process. According to Aghdgomelashvili (2016), this makes the biggest barrier mainly for transgender persons who for example, cannot refer to their academic diplomas due to their different gender identification than is stated on paper.

⁶ For a concrete example of discrimination in healthcare see the *National Report on the violation of human rights of gay men, other MSM, and trans people, in particular the right to health, in Georgia 2018* prepared by Kvaratskhelia (2019).

5. Actors Impacting the Current State of LGBTIQ Rights in Georgia

In the previous chapters, we have gained insights into the perception of the LGBTIQ community, we have identified those with negative views and explored the challenges the community faces. Nevertheless, as demonstrated in the previous chapters, various influential actors impact the community and the efforts of the organizations dedicated to safeguarding their rights. Therefore, this section aims to deconstruct the interrelationships depicted in Figure 8. The objective is to facilitate a deeper analysis of how local NGOs approach the problematic LGBTIQ community in Georgia.

Figure 8: Possible interrelationships of actors influencing the LGBTIQ community



Source: Author

The following actors have been selected for further analysis: (I) The government, which shapes policies, enacts laws and is responsible for their enforcement. (II) The Georgian Orthodox Church, and (III) Far-right groups, represent the nativist segment of society that actively opposes the LGBTIQ community in the name of preserving traditional values. Additionally, (IV) the media, which exerts a significant influence on public opinion and plays a pivotal role in shaping the narrative about the community. Throughout the chapters, external factors of influence, such as Russia and the European Union, will be explored with their impact on each of these actors.

5.1 Government

This chapter examines how Georgia's political landscape has changed over time, from when the country transitioned away from the Soviet era to the challenges it faces today. It emphasizes the challenges of democratic consolidation and the discernible decline in recent years, including a shift in foreign relations from the EU towards Russia. Additionally, the chapter takes a closer look at

LGBTIQ rights in Georgia, discusses the laws in place, the gap between these laws and their practical implementation, and displays the government's inconsistent approach to LGBTIQ issues.

The Georgian Democratic Backsliding

The collapse of the Soviet-era leadership in 2003, following the Rose Revolution, was widely viewed as a significant step towards the democratization of the country. Subsequently, Georgia conducted new presidential and parliamentary elections leading to the rise of the United National Movement (UNM) to power. The nation adopted pro-Western liberal policies, modernized state institutions, and witnessed steady economic growth. However, this transformation came at the cost of an authoritarian and executive-centric approach, which posed challenges to the country's democratic ideals (Markozashvili, 2014).

As a turning point, the opposition party Georgian Dream triumphed in the 2012 election, marking a peaceful transition of power. This moment was celebrated as a pivotal achievement in Georgia's democratization journey, as noted by Pokleba (2016).

Nevertheless, a decade later, the latest report from EIU (2021) reveals that Georgian democracy has regressed for the fourth consecutive year. Even though Georgia has regular, competitive elections, they are still affected by vote-buying, boycotts from oppositions, misuse of official resources, and intimidation of voters. Besides, the opposition parties face intimidation, police harassment, surveillance, and arrests based on politically motivated charges. In addition, Georgia has a weak judiciary system controlled by a small group of influential judges and it is not implementing long-sought reforms (Freedom House, 2022; Public defender of Georgia, 2021).

Moreover, civil liberties are inconsistently protected, and policies are not inclusive. The government creates a permissive environment for the far-right groups (Chapter 6.3) and gives GOC a prominent role within the state (Chapter 6.2). Furthermore, the media environment is in a critical condition (Chapter 6.4) and the acceptance of women and minorities together with other faiths, ethnic groups, youth, persons with disabilities, and members of the LGBTIQ community remains limited (Kakachia & Lebanidze, 2023).

The democratic backsliding in Georgia has become notably pronounced in the most recent year, 2023. The ruling party, Georgian Dream, has developed closer ties with Moscow and moved away from the European Union values and democratic principles, despite the contrasting views of the Georgian population (Fix & Kapp, 2023). For example, according to the IRI (2022a), 85% of Georgians either "fully support" or "somewhat support" joining the alliance. Among those who support joining the EU, 60% support joining it even if it means cutting trade relations with Russia.

Besides nearly 90% of Georgians supports Ukraine in the ongoing conflict, attributing responsibility for the war to Russia and Putin (NDI, 2022). Paradoxically, the trade between Georgian and Russia has increased by roughly 22% since the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Gavin & Aarup, 2023), and the Georgian government lifted the 2019 ban on Russian airlines operating direct flights from Georgia to Russia (RFERL, 2023).

One of the most striking examples of the Georgian government aligning with Russia, against the wishes of the Georgian population, was the introduction of the Foreign Agent Law in March 2023. This law closely resembles Putin's 2012 Foreign Agent Law, which mandated that organizations receiving over 20 percent of their funding from foreign sources register as foreign agents. This bill contradicted at least two recommendations from the European Union, as explained by Kintsurashvili (2023). One of these recommendations is to create an environment that promotes free and independent media. The other urged the involvement of civil society in decision-making processes at all levels.

This law was eventually withdrawn in response to massive protests on the streets of Tbilisi. Demonstrators strongly criticized the government for adopting what they perceived as a "Russian-style" bill, confirming the anti-Russian stance of the Georgian population on this matter.

Georgia's LGBTIQ Rights Landscape: Legislation, Enforcement, and Critiques

As previously mentioned, Georgia does have an antidiscrimination law (No. 2391-II) against the discrimination of the above-mentioned minorities. However, while the law clearly states that discrimination is prohibited, according to Aghdgomelashvili & Natsvlishvili (2014) it fails to establish effective mechanisms for combating discrimination in practice.

Shevtsova (2022) argues that rather than Georgia's conviction in the necessity of such reforms, the country's LGBTIQ equality legislation was implemented as a result of pressure from EU institutions and the promise of political and financial gain. Shevtsova (2022) contends that in 2000, Georgia repealed portions of the Criminal Code that made same-sex relationships unlawful to comply with the standards of the Council of Europe and the European Convention on Human Rights. The adoption of anti-discrimination legislation in 2014 was a requirement for the country to sign an Association Agreement with the EU and receive visa free travel for its citizens. Correspondingly, the labor code was revised to include Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) to comply with EU standards.

Several other authors (Buyantueva 2020; Tolkachev & Tolordava 2020; Luciani 2021; Pokleba, 2016) agree that the legislation that has been passed does not accurately reflect the situation that the

LGBTIQ community is facing. As Shevtsova (2022) notes, no court cases involving discrimination against people based on their sexual orientation or gender identity have been filed since the laws have been passed.

The government is also highly criticized for its passivity in this matter, mainly after the events of July 5, 2021. While the government was already accused several times of using disproportional force against the protestors (HRC, 2020), the investigative body and the government did not interrogate any anti-LGBTIQ protest organizers on July 5, 2021, until a joint statement was released by diplomats from diplomatic missions (Kandelaki, 2021).

Besides, as Mestvirishvili et al. (2017) argue when it comes to LGBTIQ issues state officials lack a consistent approach. On one hand, 2 months before the Tbilisi Pride 2021, 15 Georgian parties agreed to defend LGBTIQ rights, including an agreement to not allow their representatives the use hate speech and incite social strife based on sexual orientation and gender identity (Civil.ge, 2021a). On the other hand, for example, Prime Minister of Georgia, Irakli Garibashvili, marked Pride as “provocative, and impermissible” and reacted to the cause of violence with words that “violence happens everywhere” (Civil.ge, 2021b). This speech represents an example of homophobic rhetoric inconsistency from the ruling party and its allies. For example, the prime minister recently attended the Conservative Political Action Conference in Budapest, hosted by Orbán, the Hungarian president, where he asserted that LGBTIQ "propaganda" was destroying traditional family values (De Waal, 2023).

5.2 Georgian Orthodox Church

This chapter examines the significance of the GOC in Georgian society, as well as the factors that led to the GOC's comeback under Patriarch Ilia II and the legal structure that grants it specific privileges and safeguards. It also analyzes the GOC's position on LGBTIQ issues and its impact on social beliefs. Finally, the chapter investigates the complicated link between the GOC, Europeanization, and Russian alignment, which has resulted in internal divides among both the Church and Georgian society.

Importance of GOC in Georgian Society

According to the Pew Research Center (2017), with the fall of the Soviet Union, religion has once again established itself as a significant component of both personal identity and a country's identity in many nations where communist regimes had suppressed religious practice and encouraged atheism. Georgia is not an exception. Nowadays, a vast majority (78%) of Georgian society considers themselves Orthodox Christians (CRRC, 2021a). As Shevtsova (2022) stated, under the leadership

of Patriarch Ilia II, who became the head of the Georgian Orthodox Church in 1977, the GOC underwent a “great renaissance”. While just 25% of Georgians reported being very or somewhat religious in the 1970s and 1980s, that number rose to 87% at the time of the research, representing a 62 percentage points increase (Pew Research Center, 2017).

As of 2022, Patriarch Ilia II is regarded as the most trusted public figure in Georgia, with 92% of respondents expressing a favorable opinion of him. Additionally, the church receives 81% institutional support, with only the army obtaining slightly more at 84%⁷ (IRI, 2022b).

The relation between GOC and Government

With such enormous popularity, it is hardly surprising that the church's engagement in national politics has progressively intensified (Shevtsova, 2022). Although Orthodox Christianity is not the state religion and there is a legal division of powers between the state and religious organizations, the GOC has been granted some rights by the constitutional agreement between the church and the state called *Concordat* in 2002. The state is not permitted to intervene in religious matters under this agreement. However, there is no reference to the Church interfering in governmental issues (Kakachia, 2014). Nevertheless, according to Gegeshidze & Mirziashvili (2021), in addition to the public trust and legal protections granted to the GOC, mainstream political parties have reportedly been inclined to stick behind the GOC to win votes. Besides, Georgia's Orthodox Church, much like other Orthodox churches across the world, seldom criticized government officials and emphasized the propagation of profoundly conservative ideas – including its harsh position toward the LGBTIQ population (Stefes & Paturyan, 2021). According to Chkareuli's (2023) observations, one can find the ruling party's key messages in Georgia by attending the church services. The clergy frequently discusses “certain groups” seeking to reshape the global order under the guise of “freedom” - with “certain groups” referring to the Western entities. These groups are perceived as eroding the moral values of Christianity, particularly among the younger generation. The discourse gained a prominence mainly after the withdrawal of the Foreign Agent Law. Moreover, the invasion of Ukraine by Russia has emerged as a significant theme for the church. The clergy often voices concerns about the consequences of this conflict and the influence of foreign powers, particularly Western forces, in the region, warning that Georgia might be drawn into the war based on these influences.

⁷ However, figures from the CRRC point to a ten-year drop in faith in the church that has been slow but constant. The author makes the argument that recent controversies involving the GOC are to blame for the downturn. These controversies include money-making schemes, the so-called Cyanide Scandal (in which a priest was found guilty of trying to kill Patriarch Ilia II's secretary), accusations that the Church's Patriarch is a pedophile, and other scandals involving sexual assault (Gilbreath, 2020).

The GOC approach to the LGBTIQ community

The cornerstone of the GOC's typical discourse on LGBTIQ identity is the notion that homosexuality, in some ways, poses a threat to the Georgian country, and it “cannot be compatible with Georgian values and religious identity” (Shevtsova, 2023). As the survey by the Pew Research Center (2017) shows, 81% of the Georgian population consider being Orthodox as very or somewhat important to truly be the national of their country, and 85% of people completely/mostly agree with the statement that their culture is superior to others. Therefore, not surprisingly, the frame of bringing together religion and nationhood (“being a good Georgian means being a Christian and sharing the same values”) is widely used by GOC, as analyzed by Shevtsova (2022). Anything inappropriate for the Church in this situation should, implicitly, also be unacceptable for anyone who identifies as a Georgian. As a result, the GOC's influence now extends to everyone who identifies as a Georgian, not only its members. Since homosexuality is strongly condemned by the Orthodox Church, the general public is likely to hold a similar view (Mestvirishvili et al., 2017).

According to Rubin (2006), sexual conflicts have become “vehicles for displacing social anxieties.” The political and economic changes that Georgia has undergone, together with the ongoing conflict in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, are according to the author the main causes of these concerns. Given these difficulties, it is understandable that throughout time, more religious leaders and public people have started to embrace populism, and that efforts to construct the image of Georgian identity have been effective in using the construction of the “other” (Gvianishvili, 2020).

Shevtsova (2021) also noted that GOC is to mobilize its supporters’ arguments with the need for protection of the institution of the heterosexual family or with fear for children’s mental health.

An example can be given the set-up of *traditional family day* on the 17th of May (the same date as IDAHOT) or by the statement made by the Patriarchate of Georgia in 2021 before the planned Tbilisi Pride:

“The organizers of LGBTIQ+ Pride have announced the so-called March of Dignity, which, in reality, has nothing to do with dignity. This confuses universal values and represents a purposeful distortion of the concepts of these values by them, which has a drastically negative impact on the psyche of minors and undermines the best interests of children” (Patriarchate, 2021a).

These themes are brought to the public through several instruments – including private media channels (ertsulovneba.ge) or the Theological Academy of Tbilisi’s overarching range of seminaries and schools throughout Georgia (Kandelaki, 2021).

GOC successfully mobilizes its supporters, slowing down the progress and preventing the adoption and implementation of LGBTIQ rights norms. For example, GOC has strongly opposed the 2014 Law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination. They voiced concerns about how it might affect Georgian religious beliefs and cultural values, and the Patriarch personally demanded that the word "sexual orientation" be taken from the list (Civil.ge, 2014a).

In another example, the Patriarchate advocated for the passage of legislation against what they called "queer propaganda." This proposed regulation attempted to restrict "attempts to promote a lifestyle they considered perverse." Nonetheless, this proposition was defeated (Civil.ge, 2023b).

The disagreement within the GOC and its selective Europeanization

In Georgia, the acceptance or rejection of LGBTIQ rights became synonymous with the foreign policy choice between Europeanization (approximation with the European Union) and backing with Russia (Shevtsova, 2022). Not only does this contribute to societal division, but it also adds to polarization within the Georgian-Orthodox church (Geguchadze & Urushadze, 2022; Shevtsova, 2022). As Gegeshidze & Mirziashvili (2021) noted, the GOC is made up of a variety of voices that frequently clash. While older priests see the *"West as a source of immorality and degeneration of spirituality"* and revere closely the Russian Orthodox Church and Russia in general, the younger generation of the clergy is encouraging Georgians to study in the West and see Russia more as an occupier.

The GOC is aware that it needs to accommodate pro-European views to some extent. Especially as the survey of IRI (2022) showed that 74% of Georgians fully support Georgia joining the EU. Therefore, the GOC is calling for "selective" or "alternative" Europeanization, in which just a subset of European standards and policies is to be embraced by the respective nations. The remainder, including LGBTIQ rights and comprehensive sexuality education, will be disregarded (Shevtsova, 2022). In other words, according to the GOC:

"The European Union, the European Parliament should take into consideration individual countries' traditions and mindset and give them a possibility to make a free choice for the local population to sincerely wish to connect themselves with modern European culture" (Civil.ge, 2014b).

Similarly, they exhort to not interfere in the religious and cultural practices of Georgian citizens. See the reaction of the Patriarchate two days before the Tbilisi Pride 2021:

"The drastic interference of certain embassies and some of the members of the European Parliament in our public and spiritual life is a matter of severe concern and

unacceptable for our Church and our citizens, and we believe that it is an abuse of their authority” (Patriarchate, 2021b).

5.3 Far-Right Groups

This chapter aims to describe the far-right groups in Georgia as they are part of a nativist society that goes against a liberal order in the world (Nodia, 2018), and thus an LGBTIQ community. As Baranec (2018) stated, *the extreme right in Georgia today is still rather a colorful mosaic of groups, organizations, and parties*. The right groups in Georgia are extremely heterogeneous, using different strategies and having different ideologies and goals. The groups cover all scales from the right to the center-right. Therefore, the term far-right is used, as it covers all Georgian-right groups universally.

This chapter first characterizes the similarities and differences among the Georgian far-right groups. Subsequently, it explains the reasons behind the rise of these groups. Then, it shortly zooms in on their position towards LGBTIQ and in the end, it looks at the possible future development of the Georgian far-right groups.

Similarities and differences among the Georgian Far-Right groups

Despite the variety of the far-right movement, Tabatadze (2019) was able to summarize several similarities between these groups:

- perception of Turkey as an enemy (stressing the religious differences)
- negative perception of immigrants
- belief that Christian values have to be strengthened, as nowadays are weakened
- disapproval of Islam propaganda
- understanding of gender equality and family violence as Western propaganda
- opposition to the free manifestation and expression of sexual minorities
- belief that anti-discrimination law is damageable to Georgian interest
- view of the political elite and politicians as corrupted, foreign-funded individuals who do not express the will of people
- support of social chauvinism (prioritizing ethnic Georgians)

Tabatadze (2019) also includes a *desire to restore political relations with Russia*. However, according to Gordon (2020), while some groups strongly align with Russia due to Orthodox values, Russia’s ongoing occupation of the northern territories is unjustifiable for many groups as it goes against the Georgian nation, which needs to be protected. This argument is confirmed by the study made

by DRI (2020), which analyses the relationship of Georgian March with other far-right groups, concluding that the group is not favorable as it is too much for Russia.

Nevertheless, Tabatadze (2019) found two differences among the groups. Firstly, their position with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the EU. One of the explanations is, that the younger generation of far-right activists is affected by Western patterns of life through social media and finds inspiration groups in Europe and the United States (Gordon, 2020). Furthermore, they are less concerned than the older generation with preserving traditional values. Instead, they are rather focusing on a purported *cultural war waged against white people, the evil influence of George Soros, and anti-Semitism* (Baranec, 2018).

Tabatadze (2019) also discovers that groups differ in the way they carry out their activities. While roughly one-third of surveyed people wanted their activities to fall within the legal framework, others did not refuse to violate the law. That shows the scale of extremisms among the groups.

The reason behind the rise of Georgian far-right groups

Many Georgians, according to Baranec (2018) fear that Russia is behind the Georgian far-right. Russia is financing or even leading the Georgian far-right in an attempt to weaken the country's pro-Western foreign policy and destabilize it. However, Gordon (2020) argues that even though these organizations are frequently referred to as "pro-Russian" their affiliations with the Russian government are not entirely obvious since, as previously mentioned, it would be conflicting for individuals who claim to uphold "Georgianness" to support a nation that Tbilisi views as "an occupier."

Still, Transparency International (2018) analyzed that Russia focuses on influencing and supporting the leadership of these groups, either directly or indirectly. However, Baranec (2018) believes that despite the Russian ability and will to strengthen some of the extreme-right organizations in Georgia, Russia does not create any far-right groups per se, and the rise of far-right groups in Georgia is pushed and motivated by local factors. In other words, the far-right groups in Georgia are not passive recipients of propaganda from Moscow, but active creators.

Several authors (Aghomeshvili, 2015; Baranec, 2018; Gelashvili, 2019; Gordon, 2020) agree that far-right groups echo public opinion, and many of the far-right narratives can gain mainstream legitimacy as they correlate with influential GOC. While at the beginning far-right groups were joining the GOC manifestation, far-right groups started to organize marches on their own around the year 2012⁸ (Baranec, 2018). According to Gordon (2020), the church has given them plenty of

⁸ The same year was the first public attempt of activists to promote LGBTIQ rights publicly.

unofficial assistance, notably to the movements' efforts to persecute the LGBTIQ community. The participation of many clergymen in the Tbilisi Pride 2021 counter-demonstrations (Lazerava, 2021) and the subsequent transfer of accountability for injured journalists to the Pride organizers (Civil.ge, 2021c) rather of the attackers (far-right groups) itself become one of the recent example.

The emergence of the far-right group's mobilization can be traced back, as suggested by several researchers (Baranec, 2018; Gordon, 2020; Tabatadze, 2019), to the power shift in 2012. When Mikhail Saakashvili rose to power in 2003, Georgia embarked on a path toward Western integration, aiming for EU and NATO membership. However, this move toward Europeanization faced opposition from a conservative faction within society. However, in 2012, when the UNM was replaced by the new ruling party Georgia Dream, several far-right figures received amnesty and were enabled to vocalize their dissatisfaction with the liberal reforms implemented under the UNM. Not only did the far-right groups oppose the empowerment of sexual minorities in Georgia, but also the privatization, enormous layoffs in the public sector, non-inclusive economic growth, and numerous human rights violations.

The Georgian far-right groups and LGBTIQ

As already described above, the Georgian far-right movement is opposing the LGBTIQ community. It is actively and violently targeting its community members as they believe that they are a threat to the traditional Georgian society. However, based on Kvakhadze's (2018) idea, far-right groups do not oppose the existence of LGBTIQ individuals but are against their propaganda – their appearance in media and the open manifestation of their sexual orientation. The propaganda is supposed to be brought by the Western NGOs, who want to underestimate Georgian traditions by making gay culture a social norm. To add, according to Abzianidze (2021), the far-right groups in Georgia are not very successful in pushing their discursive agenda via the country's mainstream television (TV) media. However, the issue of the LGBTIQ community is an exception, as based on Abzianidze's analysis, the blaming and protesting against this group is relatively visible. On the other hand, the mainstream media frequently critiques the Georgian far-right groups.

The Georgian far-right's future

As stated, although the Georgian far-right groups are heterogeneous, they share many similarities. The question is if this remains in the future or if the groups will consolidate and consequently receive wider support among the population. For example, Gelashvili (2019) wrote that the far-right movement hardly indicates consolidation in the future and will remain fragmented until a *new charismatic and popular extremist actor uses the opportunity* and changes the situation. Two years

later, Gelashvili (2021) pointed out to the rise of Levan Vasadze who established a political movement called 'Unity, Essence, Hope' and called for the unification of far-right forces.

However, it seems the consolidation under Vasadze will be far too complicated. Firstly, many of the key figures of the Georgian far-right movement did not particularly welcome Vasadze's new movement with open arms as they perceived Vasadze's ideological expansiveness and his financial assets as a threat to their career (Civil.ge, 2021d). Also, Vasadze's new party is not very popular among Georgian citizens. According to the IPSOS survey made for Mtavari TV that only one percent of the population would vote for 'Unity, Essence, Hope' if the local elections were organized tomorrow (GT, 2021). On top of that, Vasadze was recently diagnosed with Amyloidosis (Civil.ge, 2021e), and thus can be predicted that his political ambitions will be postponed.

Similarly, in 2019, Sandro Bregadze, a leader of the Georgian March, called for unity of the far-right movement claiming he found an agreement within the far-right groups and would set up a new political movement, which would succeed in the election and take part in all political processes (DF Watch, 2019). Bregadze's claim was, nevertheless, far too ambitious and misleading. Based on the study made by DRI (2020), far-right activists rather distanced themselves from his group as the party has a too-close relationship with Russia, which goes against Georgian nationalism. Moreover, Bregadze is considered by the public more as a comic figure than a serious politician. See, for example, a case of Bregadze's portray as Walt Disney's Sleeping Beauty when he insisted on staying in the hospital even though doctors did not find anything wrong with him (Lomsadze, 2018). As a result, his party obtained only 0.48% in the 2020 parliament election and thus, did not receive any parliamentary seats (OSCE, 2021).

The only far-right group in Georgia that made it to parliament is the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG). The Alliance was founded in 2013 to be the *'third force' in Georgian politics, in addition to Georgian Dream and UNM* (Gelashvili, 2021). Already in 2016, the party entered the Georgian parliament winning 6 seats with 5% of the vote, being the third most successful party in the election (OSCE, 2017). In 2020, the party was less successful winning only 3.14% of the votes the party received this time only 4 seats in the parliament⁹ (IRI, 2021). According to Gelashvili (2021), these results could be influenced by vote splitting as some far-right supporters opted for the Georgian March and Georgian Idea. The vote for all far-right parties was only 3.8%, which is still lower than APG's share in 2016 (Gelashvili, 2021). Additionally, the Alliance is as well as the above mentioned

⁹ Important is to mention that until 2019, a party needed 5% to get a parliamentary seat. From 2020, each party receiving at least 1% gets a place in parliament (see Organic Law of Georgia No 6723, article 196, p. 3)

groups disliked by other Georgian far-right groups and is *often condemned as an artificial political creation to sweep up votes from ultraconservative segments of the population and supported and controlled from afar by the Georgian Dream party...the billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili* (Gordon, 2020).

Attention should also be directed towards the group known as Alt-Info, which established a political party in late 2021 under the name "Conservative Movement" (Agenda.ge, 2021). Although this party has not yet participated in the elections, it has gained notoriety for openly targeting the LGBTIQ community, prompting Members of the European Parliament to call for targeted sanctions against the members of the group. Their influence should not be underestimated, especially given their officially registered legislative proposal to "prohibit LGBTIQ propaganda," as previously indicated. This proposal aims to forbid all gatherings and demonstrations that intend to or have the potential to exhibit, promote, or popularize any form of sexual orientation (Civil.ge, 2023c).

For now, it seems that the consolidation of the Georgians remains only a dream for a few leaders as their political power is weak. On the other hand, the groups still communicate together and participate together in rallies (Baranec, 2018), and over time become even larger and more violent (Gelashvili, 2019). Once more, the counter-demonstration against the Tbilisi Pride 2021 can be used as an example. Nevertheless, the far-right „failure“ in the elections should not be “celebrated“ without caution. As Baranec (2018) and Gelashvili (2021) claim, the biggest threat is not the immediate damage these groups cause but the far-right narratives entering the mainstream parties, far-right parties changing and mimicking moderate parties over time and producing more and more policies based on exclusion.

5.4 Media

Since the 17th century, media has been recognized as a tool utilized as a *“watchdog, guardian of the public interest, and conduit between governors and the governed”*. The mass media is frequently seen as the fourth branch of government - an essential principle of a modern democracy. In theory, the media is intended to help establish a robust democracy. However, that is not always the case, and in practice, as the media may sometimes contribute to democratic decay (Coronel, 2003). The media itself is not enough for a functional democracy. As summarized by Mwengenmeir (2014), it is necessary to consider several questions: Does the media represent a wide range of opinions or just its segment? Are they state-owned or independent? Do they serve the public or their owner? What is the quality of the news? Media are a very powerful tool as they can quickly change people's perspectives and beliefs, in span of even a few minutes (Ullah & Khan, 2020). This could bet he worry here, considering the level of homophobia in Georgia and the fact that tabloids frequently use hate speech toward the LGBTIQ community (Freedom House, 2023). The purpose of this

chapter is to offer insights into the present condition of the media in Georgia, focusing on the obstacles it faces, the overall media landscape, and its exploitation by conservative forces.

Media Freedom Challenges in Georgia

Georgia does have a constitution and law providing freedom of speech and press. However, according to the Country Report on Human Rights Practices made by the Public defender of Georgia (2021), it is not sufficiently protected by the government, and the government even prevents the pluralism of the media. According to the annual assessment of the media environment in Georgia published by Transparency International (2021), the current media environment is described as 'critical'. Journalists' professional activities have become life-threatening and dangerous. Transparency International (2021) also reports mass surveillance of journalists and the uncovered files reveal the details of the covert wiretaps illegally carried out by the State Security Service. These were made available to the public on September 13, 2021.

Kavtaradze (2021) believes that the current state of media is mainly caused by the government as *“political actors, including the government and political parties, significantly affect the way these media organizations work”* (p. 1) and thus *“mainstream media outlets behave as direct extensions of political actors, contributing to the divided and radicalized political atmosphere”* (p. 1).

The research conducted by Zondler et al. (2023) provides evidence in favor of this argument. According to the authors, both national and provincial media in Georgia exhibit complete polarization with an exclusive focus on party political agendas. The media is consistently linked to specific individuals, and those attempting to maintain independence face persistent efforts by the authorities to foster an inhospitable environment, characterized by harassment and persecution.

Media Landscape in Georgia

The main source of news about Georgia is TV, accounting for 53% (CRRC, 2021b). According to CRRC (2021c), the most trusted channels among Georgian citizens include Imedi TV (40%), Mtavar Arkhi (16%), and Rustavi 2 (14%). These channels, however, come with their share of controversies. While Imedi TV is owned by a person with close ties to Russia, the critical Mtavar Arkhi is dealing with the persecution of its director and Rustavi 2 is dealing with disputes over ownership. For closer detail, see Figure 9. These controversies are concerning as they raise doubts about the integrity and independence of these television channels.

Nonetheless, the percentage of people who rely on television as their primary information source is steadily declining. In 2015, 87% of people cited it as their first source) and is gradually being replaced by social media, which has become the primary information source for 21% of Georgians.

The internet (excluding social media) is a source for 18% of the population (up from 7% in 2015), yet only a small fraction of the population reads print newspapers (CRRC, 2021b).

Because the internet is hardly controlled and the newspaper is not in the government's interest due to its low impact, both the internet and the media can usually operate more freely than the TV and in opposition to the government. However, these media still have their weaknesses. Regarding the print media, the problem of independence needs to be raised as well. Due to its small pool of readers and therefore limited advertisement market, the media is fully dependent on government grants or international donors (Akerlund, 2012). Despite their wider pool, digital media outlets face the same funding problems, and they need to seek help from international funding, which can affect their agenda even though it will likely not change their general picture (Kavtaradze, 2021).

Figure 9: The three most trusted TV channels in Georgia

TV channel	Name of the owner	Closer information
Imedi TV	Irakli Rukhadze (Hunnewell Partners – UK), 100%	I. Rukhadze is one out of 11 people in Georgia, who is requested by the Ukrainian government for sanction as he has a close tie (business partner) with ex-premier of Georgia, Bidzina Ivanishvili who lobbies the interests of one of the richest people in Russia.
Mtavar Arkhi	Ni. Gvaramia (51%), Kakhaber A. (42%), Rurua G. (2.5%), Russia A. (2.5%), University of Georgia (2%)	So-called “opposition” minded TV. It was established in 2019 by the team of former journalists and managers working at Rustavi 2 who left as they believed that their freedom of speech was restricted. N. Gvaramia (former director of Rustavi 2, ex-minister of Minister of Justice and Education and Science, the head of the TV, known for his harsh critique against the government, was in May 2022 sentenced to 3,5 years in prison Both, the Public Defender of Georgia and Transparency International agree, that there is no legal ground for this sentence.
Rustavi 2	K. Khalvashi (60%), Panorama Ltd. (40% - entirely owned by K. Khalvashi)	In July 2019 Khalvashi regained ownership of the channel. As mentioned above, in 2019 a new owner Khalvashi dismissed Gvaramia and appointed Paata Salia (his lawyer) for the position of director. Gvaramia left Rustavi 2 with most of the staff and set up the Mtavar Arkhi channel. Khalvashi claims that Gvaramia put the TV company into Bankruptcy. The former opposition channel is now questioned about its independence as under Khalvashi the channel is no longer critical to the government.

Source: (Agenda.ge, 2019a; Agenda.ge, 2019b; Civil.ge, 2019; Civil.ge, 2021f; CPJ, 2022; War & Sanctions, 2022)

The issue of misinformation and false news should not be overlooked, as there is an increase of internet users and social media as information sources and the production and distribution of fake news as well as hate speech are expanding all over the world. 59% of Georgians are already very much worried or somewhat worried about false information on Georgia's internet and social media

(CRRC, 2021d). The LGBTIQ issues, as a conservative topic, not surprisingly, is the target of fake news as well as hate speech. See the examples of fake news: *“Members of the LGBTIQ+ community have joined the June 20 rally (Gavrilov night) and plan to turn it into pride”* (Kistauri, & Talakhadze, 2021), *“Gay marriage as one of the preconditions of the EU integration in the EU questionnaire”* (Dangadze, 2022), or that former head of Tbilisi Pride proclaimed *“Our time will come too and I am already promising that Stalin’s repressions will be nothing in comparison”* (Gluchadze, 2021).

Media and Conservative Forces

According to Geguchadze & Urushadze (2022), conservative forces use manipulative myths to create a false public impression about the LGBTIQ issue, which Aghdgomelashvili (2015) believes, contributes to stigma, and prevents processes of coming out and integration. Besides, LGBTIQ discourse in the media is also used as a propaganda tool by Russia to depict the West as Georgia’s enemy and emphasize the restoration of Russian-Georgian “friendship” (Dzvelishvili & Kupreishvili, 2015) based on common cultural ground as already described in Chapter 3. In addition to spreading false information into Georgia through media (see world.ge, Saqinform, and Sputnik), the Kremlin also provides financial support to local Georgian organizations that promote its objectives, such as the Alliance of Patriots and Georgian March, both of which are anti-liberal (more in Chapter 5.3). The media workers are not under pressure from the government of Russian influence only, the GOC is, according to Kandelaki (2021), also creating a hostile environment for journalists. The covenant signed between GOC and the government granted GOC, besides legal recognition, exclusivity in religious matters as well as exclusivity in the media. Therefore, the criticism of the GOC, disapproved of by the Patriarchate, became a taboo in traditional media outlets and in some way GOC prevailed over the law and the freedom of speech in Georgia. Moreover, social networks emerged as tools to disseminate information in an alternative space and foster public debate about GOC. However, in recent years the alternative media also started to report GOC scandals (see Chapter 5.2) as well. Kandelaki argues that assaults on journalists by Bishop Anton of Vani and monks at the David Gareji Monastery illustrate a concerning trend. These incidents, according to Kandelaki, have instigated physical aggression among both the GOC and media figures. He suggests that the events of July 5, 2021, represent the apex of a prolonged phase characterized by growing intolerance and aggression within the GOC towards the media. This period has witnessed a radicalization of the GOC’s stance, aiming to “purify” public discourse and space by eliminating unwanted elements.

6. Results

Through a thematic analysis of gathered interviews, this chapter provides an investigation into the difficulties experienced by local LGBTIQ-focused NGOs in Georgia.

As already described in Chapter 2., the data were coded and subsequently clustered into the categories. As the analysis progressed, new codes and categories naturally emerged or on the other hand were connected. The final version of categories and codes are presented in Figure 10.

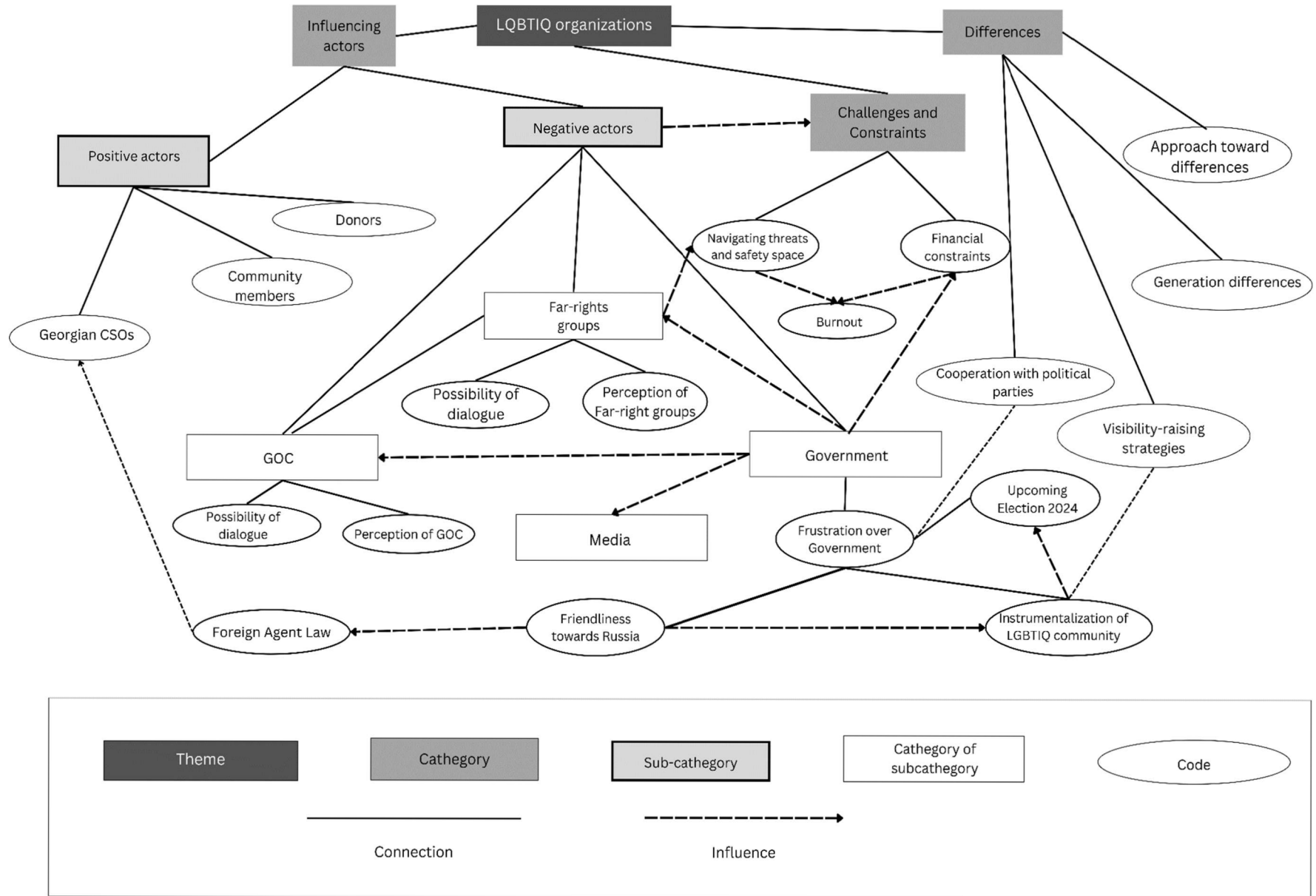
Figure 10: Coding scheme

Category	Subcategory	Category of Subcategory	Code	
Influencing Actors	Positive actors		Donors	
			Community Members	
			Georgian CSOs	
	Negative actors	Far-right groups		Perception of Far-Right groups
				Possibility of Dialogue with Far-right groups
		GOC		Perception of GOC
				Possibility of Dialogue with GOC
		Media		Media
		Government		Frustration over government
				Foreign Agent Law
				Instrumentalization of LGBTQI group
	Friendliness toward Russia			
Challenges and constraints		Upcoming election 2024		
		Financial constraints		
		Navigating threats and Safe space		
Differences		Burnout		
		Approach towards differences		
		Generation difference		
		Visibility		
		Cooperation with political parties		

Source: Author

Additionally, the scheme depicting the relationships between the codes and categories is showcased in Figure 11. In constructing the diagram, the categories were initially linked, followed by the subcategories, and finally, the connections among the codes were incorporated. Not only does this method delve into the complexity among categories but also the details, revealing connections that were initially not apparent.

Figure 11: Interrelationship among Categories, Subcategories, and Codes



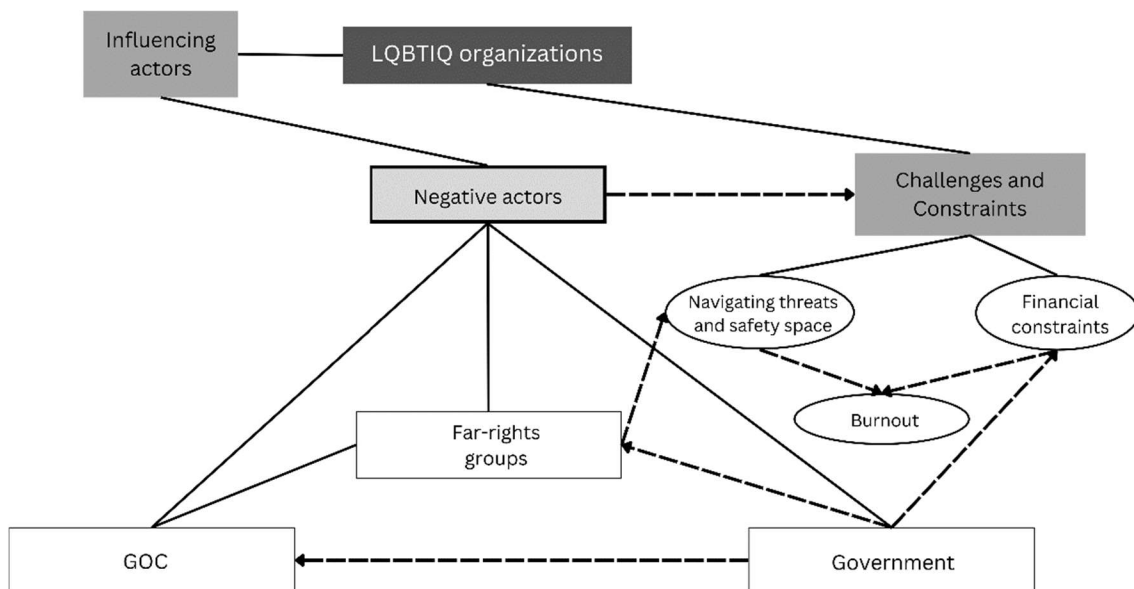
Source: Author

6.1 Results Overview

This chapter aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of the intricate environment within which these organizations operate. It starts with a thorough summary of the outcomes shown in Figure 11 and specifically describes some parts of the mind map (Figure 12, Figure 13 and Figure 14). It underscores the complexity and interconnectedness of the landscape, serving as an overview to facilitate a deeper comprehension of the details presented in the following chapters.

Organizations naturally do not function in isolation; they are shaped by external forces. Some of these influences may be negative, while others proved positive and beneficial for the LGBTIQ community. These negative factors create a more challenging landscape, imposing constraints on their work (see Figure 12)

Figure 12: Snip of Figure 11 - The negative actors



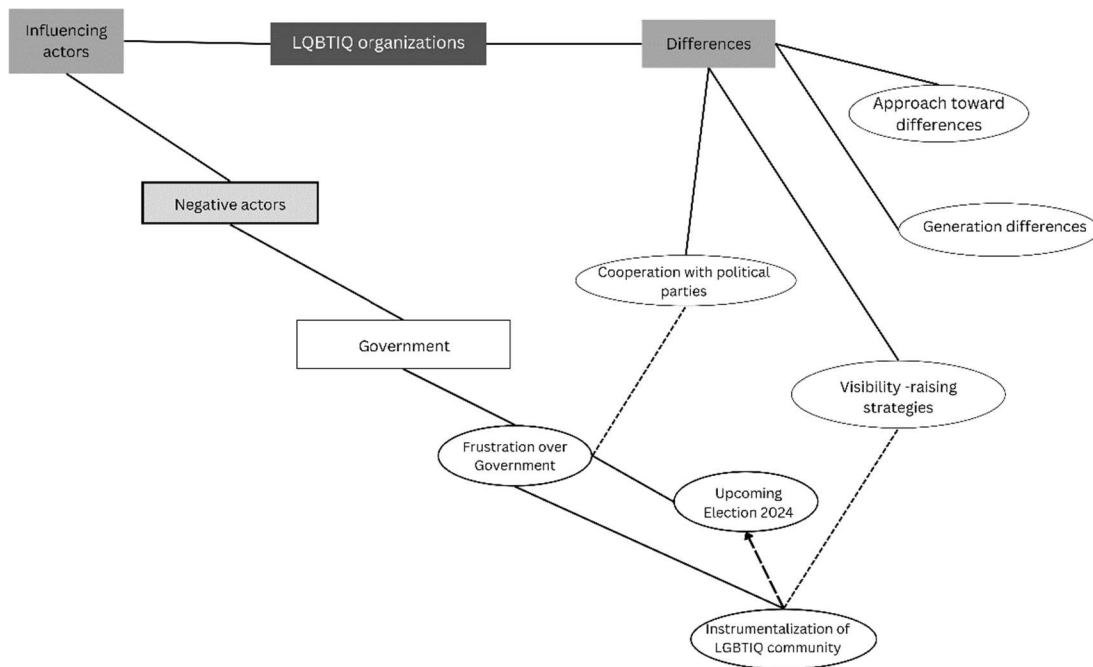
Source: Author

These negative influences include (1) threatening by far-right groups, compromising the safety of organizations, (2) a government that, through their lack of support, amplifies financial burdens for NGOs. Both financial constraints and safety concerns contribute to worker burnout, prompting migration. However, the influence of (3) the Georgian Orthodox Church should not be underestimated. While participants may not have viewed GOC as the primary threat, the interplay between GOC, far-right groups, and the government become evident from the interviews. Firstly, all of the actors reinforce each other's homophobic rhetoric, fostering a hostile environment and attempting to rally the more conservative segments of society. Additionally, the substantial influence of Russia on these groups was acknowledged by all interviewees. The primary concern

has been marked the government, which according to respondents, is seen as supporting the hate speech and violent actions of both the GOC and far-right groups, without taking any measures to halt or enforce the law. Furthermore, it is necessary to note that the government is utilizing the media to exacerbate the situation and shape public opinion and perception according to the current political agenda.

Interestingly, even though respondents perceive the dialogue with the GOC or far-right groups as impossible, some organizations persist in engaging with political parties. Despite deep frustration over government actions, they believe this engagement is crucial for further democratic progress and the advancement of their rights (see Figure 13).

Figure 13: The snip of Figure 11 - Government and differences among organizations



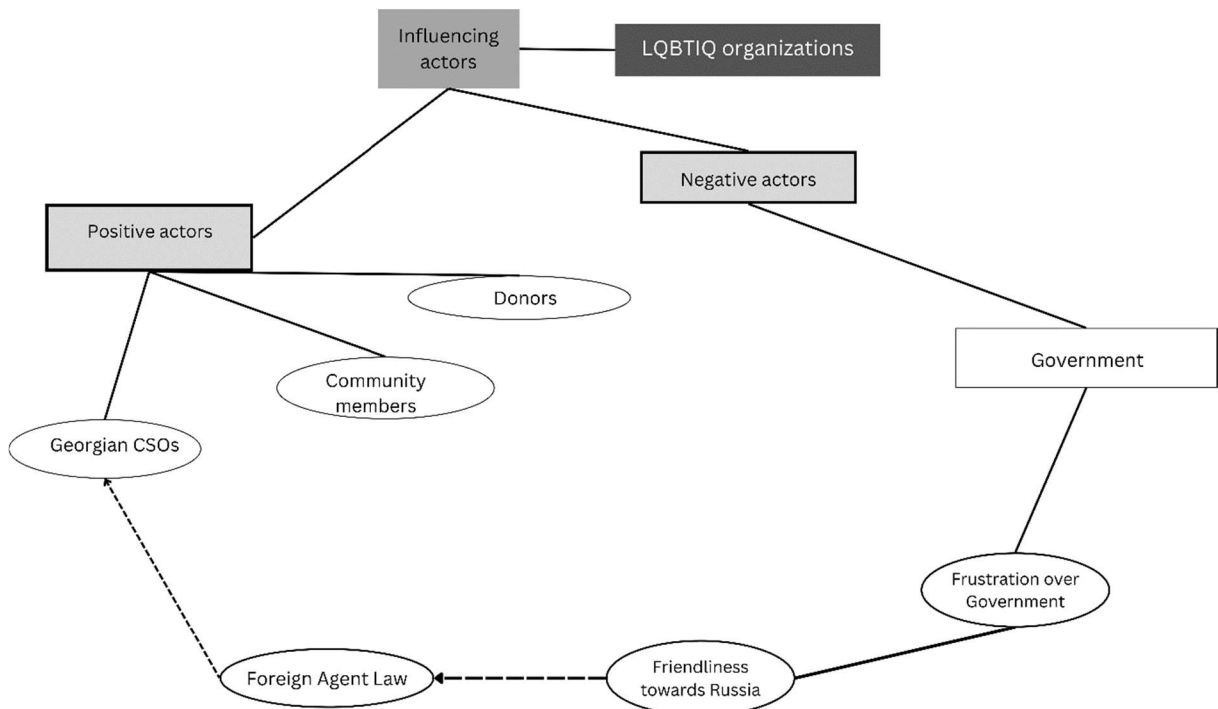
Source: Author

In contrary, others outrightly reject these actions, believing that certain political parties exploit such engagements to appear "progressive" and aligned with Europe, while in reality, they offer no substantive support to the community. Another point of contention among LGBTIQ organizations is their approach to visibility-raising strategies. While some see it as a means to garner support, others argue that it allows the government to manipulate its appearance as inclusive while not safeguarding their rights, even supporting violent groups against them. This concern is amplified, especially considering the forthcoming 2024 elections. Additionally, differences have been noted among generations of activists, with the younger cohort being described as bolder, more rebellious, and more inclusive of the transgender community. Nonetheless, despite these differences, activists

generally embrace diversity, maintain mutual respect, and perceive these disparities as indicative of the community's growth.

However, it is crucial to note that the government is not just unfriendly towards LGBTIQ organizations; it is also trying to copy Russian policies, like the Foreign Agent Law, which undermines the efforts of the entire Georgian civil society (see Figure 14). In March 2023, the entire Georgian civil society, including LGBTIQ organizations, mobilized and stood up against the government, leading to the successful withdrawal of the bill. Organizations highlighted this as the first instance of civil society mobilizing against such a significant adversary. They emphasize the importance of not exclusively focusing on LGBTIQ issues but collaborating with other actors addressing diverse concerns like women's rights, environmental issues, healthcare access, education, poverty reduction, and inequality.

Figure 14: Snip of Figure 11 - The interrelation between the negative and positive actors



Source: Author

Among the positive influences on their operations, organizations have highlighted the community itself as a central figure in their work. Emphasizing a community-centric approach, these organizations stress the necessity of conducting tailored research to understand community needs better and emphasize the importance of enhancing community participation. Another influential actor is donors. However, as elaborated in the following text, this relationship is not free of issues.

While organizations appreciate the support, they are also willing to voice criticism against practices that do not consistently align with the genuine needs of the community.

With the introductory overview and complexities highlighted, subsequent chapters focus on an in-depth exploration. It begins by detailing the influential actors shaping organizational work, followed by an exploration of the challenges and constraints. Subsequently, the focus shifts to examining the differences among these organizations.

6.2 Actors Influencing LGBTIQ-focused Organizations

As previously outlined, organizations do not function in isolation; they are significantly shaped by the environment in which they operate. This chapter seeks to offer insights into how respondents perceive various stakeholders that, in their view, impact their work. These stakeholders range a broad spectrum, including the government, the Georgian Orthodox Church, far-right groups, media, donors, the LGBTIQ community itself, and the whole CSOs in Georgia. First, the actors with the intention to harm (also referred to as negative actors) are examined, and subsequently, the actors with a tendency to help (so-called positive actors) are analyzed. Nevertheless, it is essential to view these actors not only as isolated entities but also as participants who mutually influence each other.

6.2.1 Negative Actors

The following subchapter describes so-called negative actors, whose actions hinder and undermine the efforts of organizations, thereby negatively affecting the community. As we examine the text, several recurring themes become apparent. Firstly, the high influence of Russia on these actors. Secondly, the strong interconnection among the actors, often using hate speech as a tool for advancing their interests. Thirdly, the respondents' frustration over these groups, indicating a bleak outlook for any potential future collaboration.

6.2.1.1 Government

This section examines the general dissatisfaction among respondents with the current political environment in Georgia. It goes into detail on the effects of Russia's influence on Georgia's administration, including the concerns about the LGBTIQ community being used for political gains, such as the upcoming parliamentary elections in 2024 or the strong inspiration by Russia through trying to implement the Foreign Agents Law.

Friendliness toward Russia

All participants indicated deep dissatisfaction with Georgia's present political situation, voicing that advocating with the government is becoming more and more challenging. According to respondent 7, efforts to collaborate with the government yield minimal visible outcomes: *"We are trying to*

work with the government as well, but we can hardly see the result of this work.” Respondent 3 shared a similar sentiment, highlighting the challenge in establishing productive communication with government officials: “It also becomes more and more difficult now with the government... it is difficult even to sit with them together at one table...it was always challenging, to be honest, but now it becomes more and more challenging to do advocacy projects.”

The key reason for the strained relationship with the government, according to all the respondents, is the current the Georgian government's allegiance and its close ties with Russia. Respondent 5 underscored the government's strong alignment with Russia, stating, *“You know, our government is strongly connected to Russia. So basically, they lean more towards Russia and Russia's politics and just completely disregard not only Europe, but pretty much everything else.”*

Respondent 6 added context by describing the geopolitical dilemma faced by Georgia, saying:

“We're literally in the middle of these two countries and at the intersection of two continents. For us, it has always been like it's either Russia or Europe. It has been a black-and-white choice for us. Georgia has always had Western aspirations, and it wants to be a part of the European family. However, Russia is doing everything in its power to prevent that, making our geopolitical context very tough.”

In other words, the country's geographical position between Russia and Europe symbolizes a longstanding choice between these two powerful influences. Despite Georgia's aspirations for Western integration and a desire to be a part of the European community, Russia and its current government continuously hinders these aspirations and act against the will of people.

As respondent 3 highlighted, *“they [the Georgian government] just copy all the policies, rhetoric, and discourses [of Russia].”* One of the policies under discussion was the so-called Foreign Agent Law, which was a topic mentioned by most respondents during interviews.

The Foreign Agent Law

The Foreign Agent Law emerged as a highly sensitive issue among respondents, triggering significant concerns and fears. They were all in agreement that the proposed legislation had a significant influence on their work and the broader civil society landscape in Georgia.

“This Foreign Agent Law, it was kind of a backlash from them that affected our work and strategies.”, emphasized respondent 3. According to respondent 8, the situation worsened when the government withdrew the proposed Foreign Agent Law and the “homophobic campaign” started fully. Respondent 2 stated,

“After they had to vote down the so-called Russian law, they started this really homophobic campaign, blaming NGOs working on LGBT issues for conducting so-called LGBT propaganda in Georgia. And this is why we need to know, we need to have more information regarding their budget, whose interests they are acting on, and whose influences they are representing here.”

Respondents shared a collective fear not only of the immediate consequences for their NGOs and other CSOs but also for the broader implications for the country. Respondent 7 expressed, *“This Foreign Agent Law and this propaganda have affected what other people think about NGOs. No matter what you do, there is like negative propaganda, and people really do not trust NGOs.”*

Despite these challenges, respondents expressed pride in the resilience of civil society organizations. They recounted instances of unwavering determination, even in the face of forceful government measures such as tear gas, pepper spray, and water cannons. *“No matter what force they used on us, we kept coming back in front of the parliament. We kept clashing with the police, and we were powerful enough to make them withdraw the bill.”*, asserted respondent 6.

Instrumentalization of the LGBTIQ community

All respondents agreed that the ruling party in Georgia tries to use anti-LGBTIQ and conservative attitudes for a political benefit. One of the arguments of the respondents is that while research reveals that Georgians are becoming more accepting of LGBTIQ rights (Aghdgomelashvili, Mchedlishvili & Laperadze, 2022; CRRC & Council of Europe, 2022; Pew Research Center, 2017), the government portrays the opposite. In the words of respondent 4:

“If you look at public polls asking about asking the Georgian society about how accepted LGBTIQ rights, you can see that the percentage is increasing. So it can't possibly be true that the number that they are saying are their supporters so anti-LGBTIQ is actually true because like all the credible research shows that it's actually um vice versa. So in conclusion their strategy is to bring out as many people and bribe as many people as they can but it's not an accurate representation of the majority of Georgian people they just want to portray it that way so you can they can capitalize on it politically.”

In simpler terms, the government is manipulating public perception of the acceptance of LGBTIQ rights to mobilize and gain support from those with conservative or traditional values. They then use this support to justify their actions against NGOs that openly criticize the government's behavior.

Many respondents also criticized the government's two-faced approach. As stated by respondent 6: *“They want to show to Europe as though they are pro-European as though they want to candidacy*

status but on the other hand, they're doing all these like sneaky things which are not very visible to the general public.” On one hand, the government projecting a pro-European stance while, in reality, pursuing less visible and possibly conflicting agendas. Respondent 2, in particular, pointed out, *“They try to support LGBT community in Georgia very superficially by just stating that people have the right to conduct Pride march, but they never say something substantial about real problems that people face every day, like access to health care...being unable to be employed.”*

The recurring event of Tbilisi Pride has become an illustrative example of how the government maintains an illusion of support for the LGBTIQ community while failing to take meaningful steps to combat the prevailing polarization and homophobia. Respondent 2 emphasized: *“It gives the government mechanism to just say, oh, we gave the opportunity to organizations and queer people to conduct Pride...but then actually doing nothing to decrease the polarization and level of homophobia.”* Respondent 8 echoed this sentiment, stating, *“The government's approach to Tbilisi Pride allows them to maintain an illusion of support for LGBT causes while failing to take meaningful steps to combat the prevailing polarization and homophobia.”*

Respondent 2 offered an explanation of why the government doing so: *“They [EU and Western donors] measure how many legislative improvements you have and if you have Pride. It's a very simple, sophisticated way of measuring progress and democratization of the country.”* This suggests that the government's support for events like Tbilisi Pride might be more about creating a positive image for external assessment rather than a genuine commitment to the causes these events represent. It is a calculated move to meet specific indicators and gain favor in the eyes of international bodies concerned with democratization and human rights.

Upcoming Parliament Election 2024

When the respondents were asked about what they believe should be done in this challenging political environment, their outlook appeared quite pessimistic. Their main concern revolved around the upcoming 2024 elections. As respondent 6, put it, *“The upcoming year is likely to be the toughest for civil society in Georgia, especially for feminist and queer organizations.”* Respondents shared the common worry that the ruling party in Georgia might exploit conservative sentiments and even seek support from Russia if they perceive a threat to their electoral support. Respondent 10 pointed out, *“Homophobia could be a significant factor in winning this election.”* Respondent 8 noted, *“The government is trying to appeal to what they perceive as the homophobic majority in the electorate.”*

Additionally, respondents expressed concerns that the government might clamp down on the activities of civil society organizations, especially those supporting Ukraine and advocating for

Georgia's EU candidacy. Some respondents mentioned that despite government statements, no concrete actions have been taken, and they believe there is a deliberate effort to sabotage Georgia's EU candidacy.

In this challenging political context, respondents 6 and 4 stressed the lack of viable alternatives in the opposition. The ruling party remains in power largely because of this lack of credible opposition. Therefore, respondent 10 sees encouraging people to vote for smaller parties as a realistic alternative to challenge the centralized power and make the next parliament more representative. Ultimately, most of the respondents believe that true change can only begin by getting rid of the current regime.

6.2.1.2 Georgian Orthodox Church

This chapter explores respondents' perspectives on the Georgian Orthodox Church. That includes its connections to Russia, involvement in political and civil matters, internal dynamics, and the loss of trust. The chapter further discusses the prospects for dialogue with the church.

Perception of the Georgian Orthodox Church

Many respondents voiced their criticism of the Georgian Orthodox Church, highlighting its substantial influence from Russia due to its long-shared history and the current geopolitical situation. They also emphasized its strong connections with far-right groups. Moreover, it was observed by respondents that the church often interferes in various matters, including political and civil issues.

Respondent 5 elaborated on this point stating that, *“the church and government, they play the same game and they are empowering one another.”* A similar opinion was held, by respondent 6 who claimed, *“Obviously government in order for them to expand and maintain their power over and over they need believers and 84% of Georgians are Christians... religion was something that has kept us together as a nation.”*

The year 2013 marked a significant demonstration of the Georgian Orthodox Church's influence within the country as the GOC was able to mobilize 30 000 counterdemonstrators to disrupt the celebrations of IDAHOT (Antidze & Dobkina, 2013) and proclaimed May 17 as a traditional family day (Aghdgomelashvili, 2015).

As expressed by respondent 2, *“In 2013, the church demonstrated that they have such a big influence on the people that they have power.”* This event showcased the church's ability to assert its authority and sway public opinion. However, over time, the Georgian Orthodox Church has encountered a series of challenges to its authority, as most respondents have noted.

"The church has less trust now in society.", stated respondent 3. As respondent 4 further pointed out, economic challenges, poverty, and social insecurity have worsened the erosion of trust, fuelling public discontent and hostility toward the church, *"we see how many resources they have and how much finances they have. So yeah, people are just living in poverty, and they are also angry at this."*

Furthermore, respondent 8 provided an additional perspective, suggesting that the church is losing its supporters due to public disapproval of violent attacks in the streets of Tbilisi.

Respondent 10 also provided another perspective, highlighting a generational shift in the church's influence, *"influence of church is very low now because young people they are not supporters of the church, they have their own understandings and their own rights."*

This perspective contrasts with respondent 6, who expressed concerns about young people potentially being mobilized by young conservatives closely tied to far-right movements, *"You know younger conservatives and pro-churchists can um can mobilize younger people...they have their own tv channel their own, social media platforms their own organization. They propagate pro-Russian ideas."*

Nevertheless, despite facing criticism and diminishing support, the Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church remains an influential figure in Georgia as pinpointed by respondent 4.

Respondents also highlighted that internal criticism from inside the church demonstrates the institution's continuous internal changes. Respondent 2 observed that changes are occurring within the church, leading to power struggles and conflicts among its members, *"there are some changes, also inside the church, there is also a clash for the power. There are conflicts."* Meanwhile, respondent 3 indicated that certain church members who publicly criticize patriarchal traditions are often forced to leave the church because of their opposing beliefs.

The possibility of a dialogue

During the discussions about a possibility of a dialogue with the Georgian Orthodox Church, it was evident that many respondents found the idea somewhat amusing, often responding with laughter or wearing a smile. This attitude emphasizes the idea that engaging in dialogue with the GOC is highly unlikely.

To provide an example, respondent 8 firmly stated, *"I think that dialogue is not possible."* Respondent 5 expressed frustration, saying, *"I think we've somehow lost the effort to even try talking with them."*

However, respondent 6 took a different stance, immediately rejecting any possibility of a dialogue with the Church due to moral disagreements and concerns about the Church's influence and financial support from Russia. Despite this stance, respondent 6 expressed a glimmer of hope, suggesting that under different circumstances with more significant resources or a changed political context, a dialogue might be feasible. Interestingly, this respondent also pointed out a key reason behind the reluctance to engage in a dialogue: *"They're blackmailed, as I told you. They're bribed, they're blackmailed, they're scared—scared to communicate with us."*

6.2.1.3 Far-right groups

This section looks at the perception of Far-right groups by the respondents. It closely investigates how is the homophobic rhetoric used by far-right groups in Georgia. As well as how these narratives have evolved, moving from being mostly promoted by the church in 2013 to being more secular and receiving assistance from the government. The government's employment of far-right groups, their tactics, and their connections to Russia are also indicated. Despite their financial instability and lack of clear objectives, some respondents believe that these organizations still pose a severe threat to LGBTIQ communities. The section also discusses the potential for communication with these groups.

Perception of Far-right groups

In 2013, the epicenter of homophobic counter-attacks resided predominantly within the church, as articulated by Respondent 2: *"In 2013, these counter-attacks were mainly ruled by the church, and all these homophobic narratives were like concentrated in the church."*

Over the years, the nature of these homophobic narratives has undergone a significant transformation, as respondent 2 further noted: *"These narratives have become more secular. They don't need the church to voice it or other groups now. They are representatives of the government."* This development demonstrates a move toward the secularization of homophobic speech, being rather espoused by government representatives.

The involvement of the state in anti-LGBTIQ efforts is a recurring theme among respondents, suggesting that the state actively supports these groups. Respondent 4 asserted, *"Personally, I do not think that this far-right group is the main problem. The problem here is that the state authorities and the state itself are behind this...the state doesn't have an interest in controlling them."* Furthermore, respondent 5 pointed out that, *"...they themselves create barriers for us by instrumentalizing hate groups and mobilizing hate groups and financing hate groups."*

Respondents also revealed that far-right groups employ various tactics to bolster their influence. This includes targeting vulnerable populations, as respondent 6 noted, *“...targeting the most vulnerable people...the poorest people, which is not hard to find in Georgia.”* Respondent additionally provided a personal observation, claiming that promises of free beverages and monetary benefits tempt some people to join these groups.

Multiple respondents highlighted the links between far-right groups and Russia, often characterizing these groups as not only beneficiaries of Russian financial support but also conduits for spreading Russian propaganda. As articulated by Respondent 4, *“...we had several far-right or self-proclaimed far-right groups in Georgia that openly received funding from Russia.”* respondent 8 confirmed, *“They are funded by Russia, and they are open about that.”* These accounts shed light on the significant external forces at play, influencing the conduct and narratives of far-right entities within Georgia. Respondents also underscored the broader impact of far-right and anti-gender movements globally, noting that these groups are increasingly connecting and sometimes sharing strategies.

Possibility of a dialogue with far-right groups

When questioned about the possibilities of a discussion with far-right groups, respondents unanimously opposed the concept, citing the pro-Russian views maintained by these groups. However, respondent 6 expressed hope in finding common ground based on shared societal challenges such as economic insecurity and social issues, *“If I have the opportunity to stick with these people, we will find common ground because essentially we have the same problems...”*

It is worth noting that, even though respondents described far-right organizations as financially insecure, controlled entities lacking a defined objective, and represented by recruited individuals, they are still dangerous for the LGBTIQ community. As several respondents underlined, these groups possess the capacity to shape local political dynamics and shape public attitudes, posing a significant risk to the community.

6.2.1.4 Media

This chapter explores the difficulties that respondents encounter in collaborating with Georgian media. It focuses on respondents' experiences and worries about limited media independence and government influence. It also investigates political parties' effect on traditional media, negative experiences with national television, frustrations in engaging with journalists, and the impact of July 5th on media.

Most of the respondents pointed out the significant challenges in collaborating with the media in Georgia, primarily due to restricted media freedom and political interference. In words of respondent 7, *“Media in Georgia is not that free. They are divided. They are under influence of political parties. They are directly being financed and owned by political parties actually.”* Moreover, respondent 9 expressed frustration, criticizing the political polarization of media and its tendency to prioritize topics important to specific political parties rather than societal issues, *“Media is politically polarized, they always broadcast what is politically important, like what is important for some particular political parties, not for society.”*

Many respondents also shared negative experiences, particularly regarding being interviewed on national television. Respondent 3 expressed, *“When they mention you on national TV, it means that you can also face some attacks, personal attacks.”* Furthermore, Respondent 2 mentioned, *“We don't go because they use and cut in a way that we are never satisfied with the results.”* Respondent 5 echoed similar sentiments, stating, *“There is no hope with these national TV channels.”* and adding, *“We just wish that they should not cover this topic at all because they make it more harmful sometimes.”* Respondent 8 shared the same sentiment, explaining that, *“We are also sometimes invited to some programs, but we talk about women's labor rights and so on... It is very difficult to talk about LGBT groups and the queer movement in Georgia on national TV.”* As Respondent 7 pointed out, mainstream media often lacks sensitivity toward queer people and struggles with appropriate language, leading to discriminatory language in some cases.

Consequently, many respondents preferred online media, with Respondent 2 considering it more ethical, *“So we don't cooperate with them [national TVs] but we cooperate with online media which are more ethical and which we trust.”* Moreover, respondent 5 expressed an opinion that certain online platforms aimed to provide an authentic portrayal of queerness comparing the traditional one, *“We have to mention these media platforms which are not part of mainstream media and they are more digital media and I think some of them are trying to show an actual side of queerness, an actual side of being queer in the country...”*.

Besides, respondents indicated their engagement with journalists, but some of them expressed frustration. For example, Respondent 3 claimed, *“NGOs have tried to train journalists on how to cover violence or gender issues and so on, but we don't see any results... They have some code of ethics, but none of the journalists follow these guidelines that are prepared, available, and they have been trained, but with no results.”* Nonetheless, respondent 8 held a more positive view of their work with media organizations and broadcasters, noting that *“media has changed a lot”* and is

becoming more LGBTIQ-friendly and that broadcasters sometimes connect with them to seek guidance on proper broadcasting.

The same respondent (5) also elaborated on the impact of the unfortunate incident on July 5, when 53 journalists were assaulted, noting that *“this was the time when people in media realized that homophobia doesn't directly affect only LGBTIQ people but everyone in society”* and explaining that this realization led to some broadcasters changing their policies, refusing to broadcast certain far-right marches or celebrations, such as Family Purity Day on May 17.

6.2.2 Positive Actors

This subchapter explores the role of "positive actors" whose influence on the organization's work is perceived as desirable and positive for the targeted LGBTIQ community. It emphasizes the significant influence of the community itself on the organization's activities. Additionally, it discusses the impact of donors, which is generally valued but sometimes lacks of alignment with the community's actual needs. The subchapter also highlights the collaborative efforts of various civil society organizations, with a focus on intersectionality and the interconnected nature of various social issues.

6.2.2.1 Community members

The section focuses on the impact of community members on the organizations' work. It underscores the necessity of adopting a community-centric approach, stresses the importance of tailored research to identify community needs, and highlights the significance of strengthening community participation.

“The community is affecting our job the most I would say.”, emphasized respondent 8, mirroring the sentiments expressed by other participants. As respondent 8 highlighted, listening to community members and understanding their needs takes a center stage in this job, *“We should also listen more to community members and understand from them what they need and want.”*

The tailored research on community needs is therefore another cornerstone of the work for some of the organizations. As expressed by respondent 2, *“So our priorities are based on what we identify through our research. For example, this is why we are focusing on issues like trans health care, hate crimes, discrimination, and unemployment, rather than marriage equality, which is not a current priority for the Georgian LGBTIQ+ community.”* However, it is crucial to acknowledge the significant challenges related to resource constraints for funding the research, as further discussed in Chapter 6.3.1.

Some respondents also noted the importance of empowering community members to actively engage in NGO decision-making processes. As explained by respondent 1, *“We’re always striving to empower community members by putting them in leadership roles. It’s based on our capacity, and we mobilize each of our participants.”* Using this strategy encourages a sense of belonging and cohesion among the group, converting people from passive recipients into active contributors.

6.2.2.2 Donors

The interactions between LGBTIQ-focused organizations and their international funders are covered in this section. While NGOs value the assistance given by donors, they occasionally run into challenges due to donor restrictions that do not always align with the actual needs of the community. The section also sheds light on NGOs' pursuit of autonomy in choosing their partners, highlighting the importance of equal collaboration and countering any patronizing donor behavior. Finally, it articulates NGOs' expectations and desires for future donor support.

Overall, respondents were deeply appreciative of the international support and generosity of donors. However, they also acknowledged certain challenges stemming from donor requirements that sometimes did not align with the community's actual needs. As expressed by respondent 10, *“We often find ourselves following donor agendas, losing sight of the real needs within our community.”* Respondent 2 added, *“They do a huge work, but sometimes their agenda is not really what it has to be to be more beneficial and useful for our community.”*

Many respondents criticized that the donors support *“forms of activism that are more acceptable or visible for them and for this international society.”* as respondent 7 stated. Many respondents expressed their concerns about donor influence in a diplomatic manner, such as respondent 3, *“I think also donors also influence us in some ways also because yeah, it is just normal thing.”*, reflecting the need for NGOs to maintain good relationships with their donors. Nevertheless, respondent 2 was unafraid to voice a more direct critique, *“It’s an example of colonialistic approach when we are not considered the experts of our country and when for example donor knows better what we need in the region.”* This statement suggests that donors may not always respect the expertise and local knowledge of the organizations they support.

Additionally, respondents highlighted their innovative approach in addressing community needs. Despite not always receiving support from donor organizations, they pursued initiatives that weren't prioritized by donors. For instance, respondent 8 shared that, when they initiated community empowerment programs, there were no grants available for such endeavors. Thus, they embarked on these efforts pro bono. Respondent 2 also mentioned their proactive approach, stating, *“Well, we do a lot pro bono. That’s why we work overtime... We always voice our needs to*

donor organizations.... it depends how donor organizations are open to our needs. But we don't avoid criticism of donor organizations."

Some of the respondents also noted instances of patronizing behavior from donor organizations, where donors would dictate who respondents should work with and choose their partners. Respondent 2 challenged this approach, asserting their autonomy by saying, *"We are capable of deciding our partners ourselves,"* and added, *"We don't work with the principles of demand and then delivery. We first place, and then demand will appear."* Respondent 2 also expressed sadness that some organizations had become overly dependent on donors, sometimes hesitating to voice their criticisms, a sentiment that was confirmed by respondent 1 who said, *"Resources are very limited for NGOs in Georgia in general, especially for small NGOs...we are also dependent on your funds and donors."*, suggesting that donor funding is essential for the survival and operation of many NGOs.

In addition to the lack of funding for creating safe spaces for the community, the respondents expressed the need for programs that would support resiliency and sustainability of their NGOs, such as programs focused on providing psychological support for their staff and creating security measures. Another funding challenge was related to research as further elaborated in Chapter 6.3 "Challenges and Constraints".

Another recurring issue mentioned by respondents was the lack of flexibility in donor funding and the sense of urgency attached to it. Respondent 7 remarked, *"We have to address community members' needs when they seek shelter or when they need financial assistance... sometimes we cannot meet their needs due to this lack of flexibility."* Another respondent (1) highlighted the mismatch between donor priorities and real emergencies, citing the COVID-19 pandemic as an example, saying, *"Urgent grants are not always truly urgent, as we saw during COVID."*

6.2.2.3 Civil Society Sector

This section provides a closer look at how not only queer community organizations work together but also the entire civil society sector due to the tough political environment. The importance of intersectionality in the work of these NGOs is emphasized. Instead of focusing solely on queer issues, these organizations consider them alongside other important factors like women's rights, environmental issues, healthcare access, education, poverty reduction, and inequality.

Respondents displayed a sense of pride in their ability to mobilize the civil society sector and compel the government to withdraw the Foreign Agent bill as already mentioned in the section 6.2.1.1. Respondent 6 expressed this sentiment, stating, *"I am very happy to be a part of organizations that played their role in this process. It was one of the first instances where the Georgian civil society*

really self-organized.” The collaboration among NGOs and the *work-together approach* were perceived as instrumental for the success.

Furthermore, respondents stressed the importance of coordination and communication among civil society groups. They recognized that when such threats arise, unity is essential, as individual efforts may prove insufficient. Respondent 8 noted, *“We are all NGOs, and when such a thing happens, we need to find a solution together because separately, we cannot do anything. Coordination and communication among these groups are very important, as well as having a strategy in place before another crisis occurs.”* Respondents also called for increased support from international partners, particularly in light of the Foreign Agent Law and the propaganda campaign against NGOs, as respondent 3 stated, *“The thing is that we feel support from our international partners sometimes. We feel it in our daily work. But I think they might try to do even more.”*

A collaboration within the entire realm of CSOs has been consistently emphasized as crucial. Many respondents highlighted the significance of intersectionality, emphasizing the need to connect queer issues with women's rights, environmental issues, healthcare access, education, poverty, and inequality. Some of the respondents also viewed economic insecurity and social problems as common challenges that not only affect CSOs but also resonate with groups holding anti-LGBTIQ views. This shared ground potentially serves as a basis for dialogue and understanding, as expressed by respondent 6: *“Essentially we have the same problems because what unites us is fucking economic insecurity social issues health issues like all these like all these problems that are caused by ineffective governance.”*

Interestingly, respondents frequently acknowledged their responsibility to address the gaps left by *ineffective* governance. Their collective effort aims to fill these voids in various aspects of politics, including education and healthcare. As respondent 3 put it, *“What we have to do is try to fill these gaps—fill all these gaps in our politics, like educational policies, healthcare policies, and so on.”*

In their pursuit of effective advocacy, respondents noted the existence of both official and unofficial coordination platforms and coalitions with different human rights NGOs. Respondent 7 highlighted the challenges of advocating alone and emphasized the importance of coordination. However, respondent 7 also pointed out a current lack of a sustainable coordination system, saying, *“Sometimes we feel and see the lack of coordination and intersection in our work.”* Adding to this sentiment, respondent 8 mentioned the scarcity of opportunities and practices for a sustained collaboration, stating, *“We have some initiatives, but they are not continuous. Sometimes we meet each other, and we realize that we might work together, but you know, we need a more sustainable way of working.”*

6.3 Challenges and Constraints

This chapter examines the various challenges and constraints that the NGOs working on queer issues face, including financial constraints and a lack of human resources, centralization of the activities in the capital city, safety concerns, a lack of safe space for the queer community, and the burnout of the workers.

6.3.1 Financial Constraints

All respondents emphasized the scarcity of financial and human resources within NGOs in Georgia. Nevertheless, as indicated by the respondents, these constraints are particularly pronounced in rural areas and regions. Respondent 3 stated, *“the organization in the region, they have even less grants and they don't have services.”* Moreover, respondent 4 underscored the centralization challenge, noting, *“Georgia is an extremely centralized country, which means that if you live outside Tbilisi, you have nothing.”* This challenge was associated also with limited communication with remote regions as respondent 5 stated, *“NGOs, unfortunately do not have much communication with these people [living in the rural regionst].”*

Despite resource constraints, NGOs in Georgia have strategically planned for the expansion of their activities into rural areas and regions. This strategic expansion is driven by the organizations' commitment to addressing centralization challenges and fostering inclusivity. Respondents expressed their desire to *“Reflect on the problems that are also in the regions.”* (respondent 7) and to *„decentralize the activism”* (respondent 5). Additionally, as respondent 1 pointed out, *“expansion into the regions is a fundamental aspect of our long-term strategy.”*

Importantly, responders frequently highlight their clients' financial difficulties, particularly in regard to housing and limited possibilities for employment. Respondent 7 shed light on this issue: *“LGBT people in Georgia and specifically I would emphasize trans people in Georgia have a really hard time as anywhere else finding decent jobs.”* The dire situation has forced some to resort to sex work for financial support, as respondent 7 further revealed: *“They have to like support themselves financially by doing sex work which is also like not safe in Georgia for many reasons.”*, stressing the important need for stronger labor rights and safer work opportunities for the community, particularly trans individuals.

6.3.2 Safety

As mentioned above, the respondents and the queer community in general face repeatedly a numerous threat of violence and backlash from far-right groups as the hostile political climate is further exacerbated by state authorities.

NGOs have developed security safeguards and safety regulations in response to these risks, as described by respondents, and have begun to conduct training sessions on safeguarding digital devices for their employees and clients. Furthermore, they began to address physical security problems, such as office security.

Respondents also explained that these security considerations apply to event planning as well. For example, they ensure that sensitive information, such as event addresses, is not revealed on public posters in order to reduce the possibility of a clashes with far-right organisations.

However, ensuring safety is not limited to online and event security. It also extends to everyday interactions. One challenge is approaching service providers while maintaining anonymity and ensuring they are LGBTIQ friendly as respondent 1 noted: *“For example, we want to rent a room, they ask, who are you and... I cannot say we are LGBTIQ plus group would like to use your service it's like I make the come-out people which is illegal and also, I can't say that but also, I have to make sure they are not homophobic there.”* Respondent 1, also revealed other practices such as reserving cars for emergencies and having legal help immediately accessible in the event of an incident.

Numerous respondents have underscored the need for safe queer spaces. Respondent 7 articulated the significance of these spaces by stating:

“...community members do not have enough spaces to see each other, to communicate with one another. We tend to focus on training, workshops, or educational gatherings. However, there is a pressing need for safe spaces that facilitate self-understanding and understanding of others within our community. Because it helps community to grow, to accept themselves personally, emotionally because we still live in a very homophobic and transphobic society.”

Furthermore, respondent 1 explicitly emphasized the necessity for safe spaces designed specifically for queer women due to their marginalization and enduring experiences of harassment within traditional queer spaces, *“There is no safe space for queer women. Even within queer spaces, we have been marginalized, harassed, and sexually harassed.”*

Addressing this concern, the community recognized the underrepresentation of trans women in these spaces, leading to the creation of separate environments tailored to their needs. As respondent 9 put it: *“And then we realized that trans women were not represented as much as cisgender women. So, we created a separate space for trans women.”*

Besides, the respondents also highlighted that the ‘danger’ is not only in public spaces but also at home. Respondent 9 emphasized the dire situation, stating that the slogan *‘home is not a safe*

space' resonated frequently among community members. This view evolved from the realization that both public areas and home present risks, including incidents of domestic violence. As respondent 5 put it, *"Because the most dangerous space is not only public space and also home because there are cases of domestic violence."* Additionally, the housing issue extended to discrimination faced by LGBTIQ individuals, with instances of queer couples being evicted after their landlords discovered their sexual orientation, as respondent 7 shared: *"We've had queer couples who have been kicked out because their landlord found out that they were queer."*

The community consequently perceives queer friendly clubs as the sole place that is safe. However, the majority of respondents expressed concerns about the prevalent club culture in Georgia's queer community, where high levels of drug and alcohol use have aggravated mental health problems and financial instability in the community. Respondent 1 even expressed criticism of the practice of NGOs on the trend of organizing series of queer party events, often held in queer-friendly socializing spaces like bars and clubs. Respondent 2 also raised concerns about peer pressure and the promotion of alcohol use in these settings, observing that *"in all queer-friendly socializing spaces like bars and clubs, there is this peer pressure and this encouragement to use alcohol."*, or as respondent 5 noted, *"It's very problematic here, especially the recent surge in drug and alcohol use. Thanks to larger organizations providing addiction services, we are beginning to address this problem."*

In response to these issues, alternatives to traditional social events involving alcohol and drugs have emerged, characterized by strict non-alcohol and drug policies. Respondent 1 explained, *"Most spaces were primarily centered around bars and events that involved substance use. Our main motivation was to socialize without the influence of alcohol or other substances."*

6.3.3 Burnout

In general, the respondents repeatedly raised concerns about burnout, which in turn leads to instability within the organizations they work for. Respondent 4 highlighted this by stating, *"When you're working in the human rights field in general, you're facing burnout and many challenges, so it's really hard to focus on your work. And many people are leaving the organizations."* Respondent 7 also commented on the lack of human capacity within the sector, saying, *"In many occasions we are reaching burnout condition. And there is always like difficulty of, despite having the desire, sometimes we have difficulty of doing everything we want, yeah, it's partially just because of capacity, human capacity."*

The personal observation also confirms the high load of the respondents, as through interviews with each participant, it became evident that they are incredibly busy, often juggling multiple jobs

across different NGOs. Respondent 8 mentioned, *“Every one of us has a side job, the main job, and this is a side job.”* Respondent 6 revealed, *“I currently work for 3 different NGOs.”*

The burnout experienced by some respondents has been also evident in their answers. Respondent 10 expressed, *“We can hardly see the result of this work.”* Another (respondent 7) added, *“We cannot see the result, which is touchable, you know? It works as a demotivation, leads to demotivation.”*

However, burnout is not solely attributed to a lack of human capacity or lack of motivation. As respondent 8 noted, *“Another kind of burnout is because of threats and security concerns.”* Respondent 7 shared a harrowing experience, saying, *“They are writing us all the time, like they are going to beat us or kill us, it's horrible.”*

The significant safety risks confronted by activists and the community are also reflected by the significant issue of migration, mentioned by several respondents: *“Migration is quite a big topic that we face.”* This is particularly relevant in the context of LGBTIQ organizations. Respondent 2 explained, *“We faced one huge wave of migration of activists in 2013 after the May 17 attack. And another big migration wave was after July 5, after Pride events.”* Respondent 8 placed this in context by noting, *“LGBT community-based organizations are founded by LGBT activists, and many people left Georgia, actually, after they founded the organization because they faced public backlash and, of course, violence.”* Though it is a subjective observation, it is worth to note that the casual use of the phrase *„of course“* in the context of violence sent shivers down the spine.

6.4 Differences within the LGBTIQ-focused NGOs

This chapter explores the distinct characteristics that differentiate queer CSOs. Specifically, it examines the differences within generations of activists and in their approaches to visibility-raising strategies (such as organizing Pride marches) and working with political parties. At the conclusion, the organizations' perspectives on differences are explored.

6.4.1 Generational Division

The conducted interviews also made clear that there is a generational division in Georgia's queer activism. The elder generation of activists is highly respected for having laid the groundwork for queer activism in the country. However, according to information provided by respondent 6, elder activists frequently display a protective attitude in an effort to protect younger activists from the difficulties they previously faced while engaging in activism. Inversely, this protective attitude may unknowingly limit the creativity and independence of the younger generation, who have considerably more radical and rebellious ideas. In the words of respondent 6, *“I understand because*

they're traumatized, they have this like very caring role to which they wanted to protect us from everything but also it like limits the space for our bravery sometimes because we might not be as scared for a lot of reasons as they were might."

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that generational differences are not unique to the queer activism sphere but extend into the feminist movement in Georgia as well. As respondent 7 stated: *"Older organizations, movements are often trans-exclusive... I also understand why, because they're from different generations and they have gone through different struggles and they still focus on more like women's experience, which they understand as a cisgender women's experience."* while stating *"younger activists embrace more trans-inclusive perspectives in their work."* and reflecting a broader and more contemporary understanding of gender, one that encompasses the experiences of transgender individuals and challenges traditional binary concepts.

6.4.2 Cooperation with Political Parties

Another notable area of contention revolves around the willingness of queer organizations to collaborate with political parties. Some respondents believe that a cooperation with political parties strategically can advance LGBTIQ rights in the legislative and policymaking spheres.

"...we must focus on building bridges and partnerships with political parties...we have to raise awareness about the needs and challenges. We need to have parliament composed with sensitive parliamentarians. This can strategically advance our rights in the legislative processes," emphasized respondent 8.

Other respondents adopted a more cautious stance towards collaborating with political parties and prioritized maintaining independence and autonomy in their activism. Respondent 8 firmly articulates this critical perspective, stating:

"We are pretty critical towards political parties. We do not work with political parties, and that's why we always focus on working with structures that bring about tangible changes, rather than aligning with political parties that may seek to exploit LGBTIQ issues for votes... they never say something substantial about real problems that people face every day, like access to health care."

The diversity of viewpoints within LGBTIQ advocacy underscores the complexity of the landscape. While some perceive strategic collaboration with political parties as a means to drive systemic change, others prioritize autonomy and avoid collaboration due to concerns of exploitation. They perceive political parties as superficially supportive of European ideals without implementing practical measures to aid the community.

6.4.3 Visibility-raising Strategies

With time, the visibility strategy of the LGBTIQ NGOs has experienced a considerable change that is defined by a complex interaction of safety worries, political concerns, and shifting objectives within the activist and the organizational scene. As articulated by respondent 9: *„Some of the community organizations are trying to do their work with less focus on visibility and they are more focused on having like providing this necessary and basic needs to members.“*

The key driver behind the shift away from public events like Pride March, as echoed by most respondents, revolves around safety concerns. As articulated by respondent 3: *“Visibility events like Pride march or Pride-related other activities are usually not safe for queer people in Georgia, not only for those people who try to engage directly in these activities and participate in demonstrations.“*

Most of the respondents voiced concerns about the underlying motives behind visibility events. They raised the issue of the Georgian government's opportunistic use of these occasions to present themselves as legitimate authorities on the international stage while at the same time propagating anti-LGBTIQ rhetoric and failing to protect participants from hate groups.

Respondent 2 brought forth an additional perspective, expressing reservations about the imported nature of visibility formats, such as May 17 and Pride events. *“...we do not support this kind of events...and this format of visibility, which is mainly imported.“* This criticism emphasizes the attitude that some CSOs have regarding externally sponsored visibility strategies.

Interestingly, respondent 8 adopted a notably neutral position concerning the Pride March. *“We are obligated to support the community...as I mentioned, they have different opinions, and many of them might not support Pride Weeks, so that's why we chose to change our visibility policies and remain neutral.“*

6.4.4 Approach toward the Differences

During the interviews, it became clear that the respondents are deeply emotionally invested in their work, with many having strong connections to the communities they represent. Some respondents noted that this high level of dedication can sometimes lead to passionate debates and occasional interpersonal conflicts within the community. For instance, one respondent 6, pointed out:

“...we are obviously very emotional very traumatized very driven people who chose to be activists in such a country so obviously it's understandable that we would have like very heated arguments, but the problem is that it gets at some point very personal so it creates all these like divisions to the

point where we're later not able to unite against a bigger enemy and it feeds this like 'us versus them' mentality."

This viewpoint is in line with responders 3 and 8, both of whom wish to promote a polite and fruitful conversation within the LGBTIQ community.

However, it is critical to underline that these emotional confrontations do not decrease the activists' underlying respect for one another. As respondent 9 stated, *"The community is not a homogenous entity. We have different political views. We have different viewpoints... Some of them will be for pride, for more liberal approach, and others will be more for labour rights. And that's fine. Respondent 2 further added, "This diversity should be celebrated, we should be capable of embracing criticism within the community, even though we lack a culture of constructive criticism, unfortunately. "*

Some respondents view these differing opinions as a sign of growth within the LGBTIQ community. They think that a variety of ideas and the participation of persons with diverse viewpoints may drive development and create more inclusive settings for LGBTIQ people. As respondent 6, expressed: *"The existence of these divisions may initially seem negative, but it signifies our community's potential for growth and positive outcomes. "*

7. Discussion

This chapter is designed to address the research question by integrating findings from both qualitative research and the theoretical framework. It begins with examining the strengths of the LGBTIQ NGO sector and subsequently shifts its focus to the challenges (overview in Figure 15). The second part analyses the approach towards engaging with other stakeholders. In the conclusion of this discussion, a set of recommendations for both implementers and donors are provided.

Figure 15: Strengths and Challenges of LGBTIQ-focused organizations

Strengths	Problems
unwavering commitment to addressing the community's needs	financial constraints
community-centered fundraising model	centralization
being critical of donors	violence and backlash from far-right groups
dedicated individuals	absence of safe spaces
use of an intersectional lens	burnout
regular contact and open communication	donor expectation
partnership and collaboration across CSOs	hostile political environment

Source: Author

7.1 The Strengths of LGBTIQ-focused NGOs

In response to Question 1.1: "[What are the strengths of the NGO sector focusing on protecting LGBTIQ rights in Georgia?](#)", one of the significant strengths of the current Georgian LGBTIQ sector is the **unwavering commitment to addressing the community's needs**. From the analyses it is clear that the community needs are put in the centre of the NGOs work. To address the needs of the community NGOs are employing tailored researches, and go the extra mile by involving community members in decision-making processes while entrusting them with leadership roles and offer their services pro bono when the community needs are not reflected in the grant calls. Some of the organizations are not afraid to be highly **critical towards the donors**, even when doing so may entail donor support risks.

Most of the interviewed organizations align themselves with the **community-centred fundraising model** and its guiding principles. This approach emphasizes open and honest dialogues with donors and focuses on building genuine partnerships. It stands in contrast to the donor-centred fundraising approach, which primarily caters to donors' goodwill and places donors' interests ahead of the community's needs, as critiqued by MacQuillin (2022) and Koshy (2019).

However, this resolute commitment is not limited to being critical of donors. It is crucial to acknowledge that these **dedicated individuals** are often subjecting themselves to significant risks. As both interviews and literature (Aghdgomelashvili et al.,2022; CRRC & Council of Europe, 2022; Gvianishvili, 2020) revealed. They face harassment in various forms, be it at home, on the streets, or in the online sphere, which can manifest as mental or even physical harm. They do so without the assurance that law enforcement will provide protection as it may even stand against them.

Besides it is important to acknowledge the organization's adoption of **an intersectional approach**. Instead of tackling LGBTIQ issues in isolation, they interconnect them with other issues, such as women's rights, environmental issues, healthcare access, education, poverty reduction, and inequality. As referred by Ng (2016), one's identity extends beyond their sexual orientation or gender identity and individuals within the LGBTIQ community are part of several social groups concurrently, with each of these groups influencing their distinct identity. This lens of intersectionality enables to understand the diverse experiences within the community, emphasizing the differences and avoid the assumption that they have identical needs.

Another significant strength can be enlightened by answering on the Question 2.2: "[*How do these NGOs collaborate?*](#)". As the interviews revealed LGBTIQ NGOs maintain **regular contact and open communication among themselves**. Despite occasional disparities in their strategies and tactics, they exhibit a profound sense of interconnectedness and mutual support. Moreover, disagreements are perceived as integral to the maturation and advancement of the LGBTIQ community. Embracing these differences and a constructive dialogue is a shared aspiration.

Similarly, as mentioned earlier, LGBTIQ non-governmental organizations do not function in isolation but collaborate with other civil society actors, uniting their efforts to address "shared challenges." This holds significant importance as Bakke et al. (2020) assert that civil society mobilization places pressure on governments to improve their practices. The withdrawal of the Foreign Agent Law in March 2023 might serve as concrete evidence of this impact.

Partnerships and collaboration across CSOs are widely recognized as an efficient tool for sharing information, know-how, and strengthening capacities of organizations (Abdel Samad, 2003; Van Wessel, Naz, & Sahoo, 2020). However, it is imperative that these collaborations are undertaken voluntarily, as several of the interviewed NGOs express a strong desire for greater autonomy in selecting their partners and collaborators. They emphasize the significance of equal collaboration over having donors dictate partnerships. This sentiment aligns with the findings of Grossmann

(2023) and Luciani (2021), both of whom highlight that organizations often feel pressured by donor organizations to construct artificial networks.

7.2 The Challenges of LGBTIQ-focused NGOs

On the other hand, revealing the Question 1.2: “[*What are the challenges of the NGO sector focusing on protecting LGBTIQ rights in Georgia?*](#)”. All the respondents have pointed out, that **financial constraints** pose a significant challenge that impacts the operations of NGOs. This concern has also been documented by Mikaladze (2021). Notably, this financial challenge is particularly acute in rural areas, and it is closely interlinked with the issue of **centralizing projects and activities primarily in the capital**, as corroborated by the situational analysis conducted by Puig (2016).

In line with the existing literature (Aghdgomelashvili et al., 2022; CRRC & Council of Europe, 2022; Public defender, 2021; Gvianishvili, 2020), the research confirms that financial constraints extend beyond NGOs and affect the queer community in general. These constraints manifest in various ways, including limited employment opportunities, challenges in finding affordable accommodations, and the high costs of leisure activities. Moreover, the interviews align with the findings of these authors, emphasizing that the queer community at large faces recurrent threats of **violence and backlash from far-right groups**. As emphasized by the respondents, this necessitates a vigilant approach in service delivery and event organization to proactively mitigate potential backlash.

The **absence of safe spaces** for the LGBTIQ community has been brought up by several responders, and Jilozian (2018) has also expressed worry about this. They have also highlighted concerns about the widespread queer club culture, which exposes the community to drug and alcohol use, escalating mental health difficulties and socioeconomic instability within the group, an issue already addressed by Aghdgomelashvili (2016). Despite the existing literature on these issues, respondents emphasized the necessity for a more profound understanding and updated research to effectively tackle the problem. This underscores a crucial area where the further academic research could significantly aid to LGBTIQ NGOs in addressing these challenges.

In general, **burnout** is a prevalent concern among respondents, resulting in instability within the organizations they work for, and in some cases, contributing to migration out of the country, which aligns with the findings reported by Luciani (2021).

Another issue highlighted by the respondents is that, **donor expectations** often do not align with the needs of the community. Donors tend to prioritize forms of activism that are more acceptable or visible to the international community. The criticism of Georgian LGBTIQ organizations towards

the EU donor is addressed also by Grossman (2023) who looks at the EU grant calls from the concept of coloniality of knowledge. This concept refers to influence and dominance of Western-centric perspectives within the global politics, whereas alternative forms of knowledge are marginalized and not promoted (Tlostanova, 2012).

The **lack of flexibility** in donor funding and excessive **bureaucracy** has been emphasized (in line with Grossman, 2023; Walther, 2018; Puig, 2016). This led to a situation where the grants that are supposed to be urgent do not always prove to be so in practice.

To the best of my knowledge, the research effectively addressed a research gap by identifying specific needs of organizations in relation to the donor community. The respondents strongly advocated for more funding opportunities focused on the creation of safe spaces for the community, research initiatives, and programs aimed at enhancing the resilience and sustainability of their NGOs. This includes psychological support for their staff and the establishment of security measures.

7.3 The Collaboration of LGBTIQ-focused NGOs with other Stakeholders

Furthermore, it is crucial to emphasize the **hostile environment** in which these NGOs operate, as evident from their responses to the Question 2.2: [*“How do NGOs establish collaborative relationships with various stakeholders, including the government, media, far-right groups, and the church?”*](#).

The interaction between LGBTIQ oriented NGOs and the Georgian government is characterized by **frustration and skepticism**, primarily due to the strained political climate. The respondents express substantial dissatisfaction with the current political environment, with a focus on **Russia's influence** on the country's administration. According to the respondents, the administration puts Russia's interests ahead of Georgians'. The upcoming 2024 parliamentary elections are a significant source of concern for respondents, who fear that the ruling party may further exploit conservative sentiments and possibly seek support from Russia, and using homophobia as a factor in securing electoral victory. The instrumentalization of the LGBTIQ community is not a new concept, for example Shevtsova (2020) analysed this concept in Ukraine, Sloopmaeckers (2021) in Serbia, or Eldenborg (2021) in a global context. In line with these concerns, respondents also raised apprehensions about the possibility of a broader crackdown on civil society organizations, consistent with the findings of Jikia et al. (2023). These concerns particularly extend to organizations advocating for Ukraine and Georgia's EU membership.

When it comes to **dialogue with the GOC**, prospects for future dialogue, partnership, or collaborative projects with the church in the near term are according the interviewed limited. Several reasons contribute to this reluctance, including **moral disagreements, apprehensions about the church's association with far-right movements, and its financial support from Russia**. Nevertheless, it is evident that the church is reluctant to engage in collaboration, perceiving LGBTIQ organizations as a threat to Georgian identity (Shevtsova, 2023). In addition, as asserted by Chkareuli (2023), the church's statements align closely with the government's discourse. Therefore, the prospects for liberalization appear remote, unless there is a shift in the government's approach or a reduction in the strong ties between the GOC and the government.

When it comes to the interaction between **NGOs and far-right groups** in Georgia, it again presents a challenge marked by ideological disparities. The pro-Russian views and **confrontational nature** of far-right groups make constructive dialogues unlikely. Nonetheless, there remains a glimmer of hope among certain respondents that, given specific circumstances like addressing common societal challenges, dialogue might be possible. As research made by Lunberg (2022) suggests, CSOs often see themselves in a watchdog role in relation to right-wing extremism but place the principal responsibility of response to right-wing extremism outside the organized civil society, in the hands of politicians. In theory, in the democratic society the government should assure the exclusion of violence in the state (Schwarzmantel, 2012). Nevertheless, the Georgian government's response to far-right activities has been widely criticized for its inadequacy (Freedom House, 2020) Moreover, there is a widespread perception by respondents that political actors employ the services of far-right groups to further their own interests.

In terms of **engagement with the media**, respondents acknowledge their interaction with journalists, providing training and mentoring to ensure ethical guidelines and sensitive language are employed when reporting on the LGBTIQ community. However, respondents evaluated their **activities as not successful**. Their frustrations arise mainly from interactions with traditional TVs. The reason behind this might be that Georgian TV serves as the primary source of information for the public (CRRC, 2021b) and is highly influenced by political parties, therefore lacking independence (Kavtaradze, 2021). This makes it a potential tool for the government to use against the LGBTIQ community.

Respondents expressed more trust in online media, perceiving them as being more ethical. That can be explained as the internet offers a less controlled platform (Akerlund, 2012). Notably, only one respondent holds a more positive view, indicating that media organizations are becoming more LGBTIQ-friendly and seeking guidance from NGOs on appropriate broadcasting practices. Such

disparities in opinions of LGBTIQ NGO organizations about journalists and media participation certainly call for further investigation.

7.4 The Set of Recommendations

In summary of this chapter, a comprehensive list of recommendations is presented (Figure 16), addressing the research Question 3: *“How should be the LGBTIQ community empowered in the future?”*. These recommendations encompass both organizational strategies and guidelines for donors in their future engagement with the Georgian LGBTIQ community. It is crucial to highlight that these recommendations are a product of cross-referencing the findings of the interviews with the theoretical background in order to assure the credibility of the recommendations.

Figure 16: The set of recommendation for both LGBTIQ-focused organization and Donors

Organizational Strategy:

- Prioritize a service-oriented approach over a visibility-driven one
- Actively involve community members in the NGO decision-making processes to empower the members and foster the sense of belonging
- Ensure that the and needs of transgender individuals are adequately addressed, shift the focus from being trans-exclusive to trans-inclusive
- Giving special attention to woman (not only cis-woman) who are experiencing double discrimination based on both their gender and sexual orientation
- To remind united despite the differences to fight the bigger enemy together and perceive the differences in organization as opportunity for growth
- Collaboration and intersectionality with other civil society groups, particularly those focused on women's rights, environmental issues, healthcare access, education, poverty reduction, and inequality, should be encouraged
- Establish sustainable coordination systems and platforms for communication among civil society organizations to enhance the effectiveness of advocacy and activism, as unity is crucial in addressing common challenges and threats
- Highlight the challenges posed by donor requirements that may not align with the community's actual needs

Donor's Programme:

- Grant calls focused on creating safe spaces, which will promote sense of belonging and self-understanding
- Grant call focused on research in order to be able reflect the real community needs in services and project activities
- Grant calls for providing psychological support and security measures for NGO staff
- Actively involve community members in the NGO decision-making processes to empower the members and foster the sense of belonging
- Recognizing the LGBTIQ community is not homogenous group
- Assure that the emergency funds are flexible enough to in real terms used them in urgent situation
- Preserving the unique local context, listen the voices of local communities and consider local NGOs and initiatives as experts in their respective fields

Source: Author

Conclusion

The primary goal of this thesis has been to unravel the complex landscape of LGBTIQ rights in Georgia, with a particular emphasis on understanding the experiences, challenges, and interactions of non-governmental organizations dedicated to advancing these rights among themselves and with other stakeholders.

The exploration into the strengths and challenges of the LGBTIQ NGO sector in Georgia reveals a multifaceted landscape. The theoretical framework shows that the LGBTIQ rights in Georgia are marked by the disparity between legal advancement and the community's lived reality. Despite anti-discrimination laws, discrimination and violence against the community remain prevalent. Those advocating for LGBTIQ rights often face opposition, including the GOC and far-right groups, resulting in an extremely hostile environment fueled by governmental influence.

Unfortunately, prospects for improvement seem bleak. Collaboration with the church and engagement with far-right groups face obstacles rooted in ideological differences. While far-right groups are not seen as the central issue, their potential for violence poses a significant risk to the community. The intricate connections among these groups— the church, government, far-right groups, and Russia—evoke skepticism and frustration, particularly directed at the government's role in fostering a hostile environment not only for LGBTIQ-focused NGOs but for all civil society organizations. Concerns intensify as parliamentary elections are approaching, raising fears of the community's instrumentalization and a surge in homophobic rhetoric to secure votes from the more conservative sectors of society.

Thus, collaboration within the civil society sector emerges as a critical defense against political threats, emphasizing the significance of intersectionality and unity in confronting these challenges. However, the research also highlights the absence of a sustainable and systematic platform for such collaboration. Furthermore, the research highlights the limited freedom, political influence, and discriminatory practices in traditional media, mainly in national TVs, which present queer people in a negative light. It revealed a preference for online media, which tends to be more queer-friendly.

Nevertheless, despite all the challenges such as a hostile environment, financial scarcity, safety concerns, and burnout of the working staff, organizations display remarkable resilience and innovation. One of the most compelling findings underscores their commitment to placing community needs at the heart of their operations. They employ tailored approaches, involve community members in decision-making processes, and exhibit an unyielding willingness to critique donors when their requirements do not meet the community needs.

However, it is crucial to emphasize the evolving nature of the sector itself and the diverse strategies employed by NGOs. Variations exist among activist generations, visibility-raising strategies, and engagements with political parties, occasionally sparking heated debates. Yet, as participants themselves articulated, this diversity embodies strength. Differing opinions and perspectives within the LGBTIQ community signal potential for growth and inclusivity. As long as there remains an environment of open communication, this diversity serves as a driving force for progress rather than a barrier.

In light of these findings, a set of recommendations emerges aimed at empowering the LGBTIQ community in Georgia. These encompass strategies for organizations to prioritize a service-oriented approach over visibility, ensure trans-inclusivity, give special attention to women, foster collaboration and intersectionality with other civil society actors by establishing a coordination system and platform for communication, and highlight challenges posed by donor requirements. Additionally, guidelines for donors advocate for grant calls focused on safe spaces, research, psychological support, security measures, and flexibility in emergency funds, along with recognition of the diverse nature of the LGBTIQ community. Preserving the unique local context, listening to the voices of local communities, and considering local NGOs and initiatives as experts in their respective fields are also emphasized.

The research findings have also highlighted significant research gaps, indicating the potential benefits of conducting a study specifically focused on current substance use trends among the Georgian queer community. Furthermore, comprehending the distinguishing factors between successful and less effective journalist training programs could significantly enhance the efficacy of organizational efforts.

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Annexes

Annex 1 - Interview guide:

- Can you please, briefly describe your organization and its activities supporting queer community?
- What are the strong and weak points of your organization (in terms of LGBTIQ activism)?
 - What do you focus on?
 - Which barriers are holding you back?
 - What have been your most recent achievements?
- Can you, please, describe the current situation of the LGBTIQ community in Georgia?
 - What are the main problems the community faces?
 - How does the community work? Where do the people meet?
- How does the LGBTIQ activism look like in Georgia? What are the strengths and weaknesses of current LGBTIQ activism in Georgia?
 - Do you have any ideas for improvements?
 - How should the LGBTIQ community be empowered in the future?
 - Who do you cooperate with? How?
- How would you describe the political environment for LGBTIQ people in Georgia?
 - How is the dialogue/ cooperation between your NGO and government agencies?
 - What steps should government do in order to enhance the protection of LGBTIQ rights?
- How do you communicate the problems of the LGBTIQ community with the church? or far-right groups?
 - What does the dialogue look like?
 - How can one ideally address the negative perception of these groups on LGBTIQ?
- How do you communicate the problems of the LGBTIQ community with the far-right groups?
 - What does the dialogue look like?
 - How can one ideally address the negative perception of these groups on LGBTIQ?
- How would you describe the cooperation between you and the media?
 - How does the media cover the problem?
 - How can the media help in the promotion of LGBTIQ rights in Georgia?
- Do you cooperate with any other NGOs addressing LGBTIQ? How? Which way?
 - Are there any disagreements?
- Are there any other actors who are influencing the LGBTIQ activism/community which we didn't mention?
- How does your organization secure funding for its LGBTIQ activism efforts?
 - Can you elaborate on the role of donors in shaping the direction of your organization's activities?

Annex 2 – Informed Consent (screenshot from SurveyMonkey):

Informed consent form

Zuzana Fišerová, a student at Palacký University, has invited you to take part in a research study.

In this survey, you are informed of data protection law provisions and the treatment of your personal data. At the end of this survey, you are asked to grant your permission to process your interview data as described.

Please read the following information carefully. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

Contact details: Zuzana Fišerová, zzn.fiserova@gmail.com

STUDY PURPOSE

The research aims to analyze the local Georgian non-governmental organization (NGO) sector's strategy regarding LGBTIQ protection and the sector's collaboration with other crucial players including the government, media, far-right organizations, and church.

This research is conducted in the context of the Masters thesis at Palacký University, Department of Development and Environmental Studies (Czech Republic).

Description of the study

In the context of this thesis, I would like to kindly ask you to participate in a 90-minute interview. The interviews will be recorded via the video conferencing software Zoom and will be transcribed. The analysis and evaluation of data will be conducted by myself (Zuzana Fišerová). However, the supervisor of my Thesis (Simona Šafaříková), will have access to the transcripts. All the shared information is confidential and will not be shared with any third party. Personal contact data will be anonymized and stored separately from the recordings/transcripts and only accessible to the author. Your personal contact data will be deleted after thesis submission. The results of the research will be shared with you if wished.

Your Rights

- At all times, you have the right to receive information about all the data saved that involves information about your person.
- At all times, you have the right to demand immediate correction and/or completion of incorrect/incomplete personal data.
- At all times and without having to give reasons, you have the right to withdraw your consent to be interviewed, or to change/refuse the terms of the Informed consent.

CONSENT

1. I confirm that I agree with the recording of the interview, and with the processing and storage of this data under the terms described above. I am aware that I can always withdraw my consent. I am aware that interview data can only be reused in strictly anonymized form. I am aware that my participation in the interview is voluntary, and I can always withdraw my participation at any time, without having to provide reasons, and without having to fear negative consequences for me.

Yes

No

2. I am interested to get a result of the research after the Thesis submission.

Yes

No

3. Please type your name in the box below to indicate agreement to participate in this study.

Done