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Beyond Europeanisation: Contestation and Localisation of Gender Equality and LGBT Norms in Georgia

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Abstract

This thesis looks at the puzzling implementation of European Union-promoted gender equality and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans norms in Georgia in the period from 2014 to 2024. The research is set out to explain the puzzle of Georgia's strong societal European Union support and political commitment towards the European Union, on the one hand, and contradictory legislation and anti-European Union rhetoric on the other hand. By investigating domestic dynamics and local actors, the thesis explains this puzzling behaviour of hybrid implementation of externally promoted norms concerning gender-based violence, women's economic empowerment, and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans rights.

To answer the puzzle, the analysis adopts a framework based on Europeanisation theory but improved by incorporating literature on norm contestation and localisation. The advantage of this created framework is to bring domestic actors and their actions of localising or contesting norms to the centre of attention. Accordingly, the domestic agency is seen as more than passive norm recipients. In this way it becomes possible to see how external norms are shaped by local agents, which explains the outcomes observable in Georgia. The qualitative data was collected from semi-structured interviews with local experts from civil society, academia, and international organisations.

The findings of the thesis show that the main driver of the observed outcomes is the strategic agency of domestic actors. On the one hand, state and religious actors engage in "validity contestation", framing gender equality norms, and especially those related to sexual minorities, as a threat to Georgia's identity and sovereignty. As a result, the government engages in legislative "decoupling", formally complying with European Union-promoted norms while restricting the actual legislative impact. On the other hand, civil society actors use the public space they have, to use localisation strategies to create norms based on European Union norms but adapted to the local context.

Ultimately, the study shows that external incentives can influence the direction of a country. However, without strong societal and political support behind adopted changes, it is an easy task for political actors to revert once introduced changes.

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List of Abbreviations

CLIP	Country Level Implementation Plan
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
EU	European Union
GAP	Gender Action Plan
GBV	Gender-based Violence
GD	Georgian Dream
GE	Gender Equality
GEN	Gender Equality Norms
GOC	Georgian Orthodox Church
GREVIO	Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence
IC	Istanbul Convention
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
WEE	Women's Economic Empowerment

1. Introduction

On 28 November 2024, an event occurred in Georgian politics that would impact this thesis's research and shock many Georgians and their dream of joining the European Union (EU). Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze announced that Georgia would suspend its EU accession plan until 2028, which led to unstoppable protests from significant parts of the society (OC Media 2024). This moment, and the ongoing protests at the time of this thesis writing (Gvadzabia 2025), represent the contradiction that is the focus of this research.

The research for this thesis began in a very different atmosphere, one of strong pro-European enthusiasm following Georgia's achievement of EU candidate status in late 2023. The initial focus of this thesis was on understanding the successes and challenges of an EU accession candidate. However, the political developments in Georgia began to transform quickly. The worsening democratic situation, indicating a democratic backsliding, touchable for everyone living in Georgia due to increasingly polarised rhetoric (Smolnik and Tadumadze 2025), presented significant challenges to the research process and sharpened its focus immensely. This rapidly changing environment has made understanding the persistent dynamics of norm contestation in Georgia an academic interest and an important concern for Georgian society and external partners like the EU, which seek to engage effectively with the region. While officially and societal being pro-European, dignity and sovereignty started playing an immense role in Georgia's perception of the EU and their contestation to the level that the Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze, in a pre-election rally in 2024, said: "[B]y 2030, Georgia will become an EU member only with dignity, respect for Christianity, the Church and morality, independence and sovereignty" (Kartozia 2024). The General Secretary of the party Georgian Dream (GD) repeated the same mindset by reiterating Georgia's strong affiliation to Europe, but at the same time taking a strong stance on Georgia's sovereignty and independence by saying that they do not want to "be someone's vassal" (Interpressnews 2024).

Accordingly, this thesis concerns a central puzzle for the observed period from 2014 to 2024: the localisation process of EU-promoted gender equality norms (GEN) in Georgia reveals a persistent gap between the intended normative content diffused by the EU, the formal institutional changes made by the state, and the contested reality on the ground. This discrepancy, and the recent introduction of laws reversing progress regarding GEN, is theoretically puzzling because Western countries saw the Georgian government as a pro-European actor trying to align closer with the EU for an extended period. From the perspective

of Europeanisation literature, Georgia here presents a “more likely” case for adopting EU-promoted norms. The country has consistently demonstrated strong public support for EU integration, the EU-Georgia Association Agreement binds it to specific standards and Georgia officially holds the EU candidate status, which lets the EU hold significant leverage due to an asymmetrical power dynamic. Furthermore, many gender equality (GE) reforms, such as legislative changes, entail relatively low material costs for the state. Accordingly, Georgia has steadily progressed in GE in the past (UN WOMEN 2024, Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum 2025). Given these conditions, a high degree of compliance would be expected.

However, the country witnessed a significant backsliding in democratic standards and specific legislative initiatives in recent years (Smolnik and Tadumadze 2025: 5-6), challenging EU norms. This is counterintuitive, as Georgia was granted EU candidate status in December 2023, which, based on Europeanisation theory, would strengthen EU leverage and conditionality, leading to closer alignment with EU-promoted norms. Nonetheless, this ongoing situation is marked by the Georgian government's increasing contestation of GEN norms and negativity towards the EU and the whole "West". It has passed the “Law of Georgia on the Protection of Family Values and Minors” (2024, so-called “Anti-LGBT law”[1]), which directly undermines the principles of the Anti-Discrimination law by targeting LGBT rights. This gap opens up despite all conditions pointing towards Georgia adopting EU-promoted norms. Based on the external incentives model, the granting of candidate status in 2023, the most powerful reward the EU can offer, should have been the ultimate lever for ensuring norm adoption, as the EU accession conditionality is a tool for norm diffusion through coercion (Gilardi 2012: 455; cf. Börzel and Risse 2020c: 285, Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2020: 829). However, these EU-centric conditions are met with local factors that shape this specific policy area. The tension between strong external incentives pushing for the adoption of GEN and a specific domestic socio-cultural set-up pulling against it makes GEN's selective, uneven, and often contradictory implementation in Georgia so theoretically compelling and puzzling.

The gap between EU-promoted norms and Georgian implementation is empirically observable. The EU’s intended normative content becomes clear from different policy documents. The main programme through which the EU diffuses GEN in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) is “EU4Gender Equality: Together against gender stereotypes and gender-based violence – Phase

[1] This law will be called “Anti-LGBT law” from here.

II", which started its second phase in 2024 (EU in Georgia 2024). Overall, the Gender Action Plan (GAP) III, the EU's foreign policy GE promotion plan, has six key areas of engagement:

> "[1] ensuring freedom from all forms of genderbased violence; [2] promoting sexual and reproductive health and rights; [3] strengthening economic and social rights and the empowerment of girls and women; [4] advancing equal participation and leadership; [5] implementing the women, peace and security agenda, [6] addressing challenges and harnessing the opportunities offered by the green transition and the digital transformation" (European Commission 2020a: 2).

According to the needs of Georgia, the Country Level Implementation Plan – CLIP for Georgia 2021-2025 was set up and updated in 2023, in which the main areas of interest for Georgia are advanced, which particularly include the reduction of significant gender gaps and the empowerment of women [3] and amongst others, the freedom from all forms of GBV [1] (European Union 2023: 6). The other areas of engagement outlined above are also engaged with but to different degrees (European Union 2023: 6).

Accordingly, thesis focuses on three intersecting themes: 1) gender-based violence (GBV) and 2) women's economic empowerment (WEE), based on their relevance to the EU as promoted norms, and 3) LGBT issues due to their high contestation within the society and elite. Especially LGBT issues are contested much more than the other two issues, which nonetheless play a crucial role in GE in Georgia. These issues are examined together as these themes intersect with people facing multiple forms of discrimination. For gender-based violence (GBV), this includes the adoption of frameworks such as the Istanbul Convention (European Commission 2020a: 6) with its consent-based legal definition of rape but also norms related to Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) such as gender-responsive budgeting or labour regulations that allow better integration of women into the labour market or Parliament (European Commission 2020a: 15-16). For Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans (LGBT) people, the EU diffuses norms related to non-discrimination and the mainstreaming of their issues in all policy domains (European Commission 2020a: 3).

Formally, Georgia has introduced institutional changes in response to the EU's norm promotion, such as the ratification of the Istanbul Convention (IC) and passing a broad "Law of Georgia on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination" (2010, so-called "Anti-Discrimination law"[2]), aligning closer with EU standards. This formal compliance, however, does not show the full legal picture. For example, despite the ratification, Georgia's legal definition of rape remains unaligned with the IC (European Commission 2024: 25).

[2] This law will be called "Anti-Discrimination law" from here.

Additionally, the ruling party has abolished mandatory gender quotas that were introduced to increase women's political participation (European Commission 2024: 7). On top of that, Georgia has introduced a law targeting LGBT rights, which directly contradicts the base of the Anti-Discrimination law (European Commission 2024: 46).

To explain this puzzle, this thesis adopts a qualitative approach that moves beyond Europeanisation literature, which often struggles to explain such observations. Instead, it utilises a theoretical framework grounded in norm contestation, localisation, and local agency to analyse how domestic actors actively challenge and reshape externally promoted norms, challenging the EU's expectation of uniform norm adaptation. Localisation here refers to the active adaptation and embedding of external norms into local practices and beliefs by domestic actors (Acharya 2004: 241). Contestation involves local debates, resistance, and differing interpretations of externally diffused norms (Wiener 2014: 12). Local agency encompasses all those agents on the domestic level who influence how GEN are selectively implemented, adapted, or resisted within Georgia. These domestic actors include the Georgian government, the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) and the Civil Society Organisations (CSO). The analysis is primarily based on semi-structured interviews with experts from Georgian civil society, academia, and international organisations. This allows for an in-depth, "inside-out" perspective on these complex dynamics.

This thesis argues that the answer to the puzzle lies in the domestic arena, where local actors actively challenge the EU-promoted GEN norms. Unlike traditional Europeanisation approaches, this thesis adopts an inside-out perspective, aligning with the evolving trend (see Tholens and Groß 2015). It moves from Europeanisation to norm diffusion, contestation and localisation literature, aiming to de-centre studies of the EU's external governance.

1.1 Research Questions

The following research question aims to solve the research puzzle: *What explains the selective and hybrid localisation of European Union-promoted gender equality norms in Georgia?*

Closely connected sub-questions ask:

- *How do different domestic actors in Georgia strategically contest, interpret, and adapt EU-promoted gender equality norms?*

- *What are the specific localisation outcomes for these norms?*

The thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 presents the conceptual and theoretical framework, first outlining the insights and limitations of Europeanisation literature before developing the norms-based framework of contestation and localisation that guides the analysis. Chapter 3 introduces the empirical case of Georgia, providing the necessary historical and political context and establishing the specific EU norms that are the subject of inquiry. Chapter 4 outlines the research design, justifies the selection as a critical case study and methodology, and details the qualitative approach, data collection and analysis methods, and ethical considerations. Chapter 5 presents the core of the research, analysing the interview data through six key themes that explore the domestic context and the specific strategies of contestation and localisation. Additionally, it synthesises the findings, reflecting on their contribution to the academic literature and answering the central research questions. Finally, Chapter 6 concludes by summarising the thesis and gives an outlook on future research avenues.

1.2 Positionality

Due to this thesis's qualitative nature, in this section I will look at how my position, including my perspectives, my upbringing and my interpretations shape my interactions and interpretation (Holmes 2020: 2-3). In this way it will be possible for the reader to understand what influenced the data collection, the interpretation of these data and the analysis (Goundar 2025: 2).

Firstly, my position is influenced by my academic and personal interest in GEN, the EU as a whole and the EU's external governance in particular. As I come from Germany, I have a view on GE and LGBT rights as an important part of Germany's and the EU's identity. Accordingly, GE contributes, in my view, positive to the societal development. With this in mind, I might ask different questions or draw conclusions another person would not.

Secondly, as a Western European, I am seen as an outside researcher from the perspective of Georgia and the study participants. It might therefore be difficult for me to fully understand local details related to GE or traditions. This in turn can lead to misinterpretations or simplifications of otherwise more complex dynamics. My personal experience of living in Georgia and studying at Ilia State University helps minimise these possible shortcomings. Additionally, interviewing Georgian participants is useful for receiving deeper insights, however, as I am an outsider to Georgia, their answers might be influenced.

Thirdly, as a male person, my understanding of gender inequality or discrimination is limited. To overcome this issue, I used self-awareness strategies throughout data collection and the writing of this thesis.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework: From Europeanisation to Norms

This chapter explores the underlying theoretical framework for this thesis, including ideas from Europeanisation and literature on norms, specifically localisation and contestation, to achieve a framework that combines both strands of literature to help understand how GEN are contested and localised in Georgia. It begins by reviewing relevant Europeanisation literature. It provides established insights into the mechanisms and processes by which EU-diffused policies and norms are transferred and internalised by member and non-member states, such as Georgia. In particular, Europeanisation concepts like conditionality and socialisation help explain how the EU attempts to influence countries in its neighbourhood, making it essential for understanding the overall dynamics behind EU norm diffusion, as well as, more specifically, the EU's promotion of GEN in the neighbourhood. However, Europeanisation literature has limitations when applied to non-EU member states like Georgia, primarily due to its often top-down perspective. Another limitation concerns the limited ability to capture the political and societal situation of the local agency leading to domestic contestation in highly sensitive and contested fields such as GEN. Therefore, acknowledging these limitations, the second step of the theoretical framework introduces the literature on norms, focusing on localisation and contestation concepts, to better understand how local actors actively contest, localise, reshape or resist externally promoted norms. Norm localisation literature, drawing primarily from the influential works of Acharya (2004), as well as norm contestation literature by Wiener (2008, 2014), offer a more detailed understanding of how EU norms are diffused and thereby undergo adaptation within specific local contexts, moving beyond passive acceptance to active reshaping by domestic actors.

The integration of Europeanisation insights into a norms-based framework is further justified through recent scholarly efforts by Börzel and Risse (2020a), Dandashly and Noutcheva (2022) and Slootmaeckers (2023). Börzel and Risse (2020b), for example, in their introduction to their special issue, integrate Europeanisation literature "into the larger research on transnational diffusion processes" (26) and show which processes and mechanisms both literatures can make use of. They argue that Europeanisation research can be understood "as a special instance of policy and institutional diffusion" (Börzel and Risse 2020b: 29), which helps address limitations in top-down approaches. Although they do not go into more detail specifically on norms, this gap is addressed by Dandashly and Noutcheva (2022: 415) regarding the European neighbourhood, who underline the importance of domestic contestation and local agency in the neighbourhood states' response to externally promoted norms. They argue that domestic

contestation and local normative structures play a key role in accepting or rejecting external influences (Dandashly and Noutcheva 2022: 415) and "investigat[e] societal and elite reactions to externally promoted political norms" (Dandashly and Noutcheva 2022: 416). Slootmaeckers (2023) proposes a reconceptualisation of Europeanisation as a transnational and relational process to emphasise that the meanings of norms are continuously negotiated between the EU and candidate countries rather than unilaterally diffused or passively received. His perspective foregrounds the political and contested nature of norm transfer, highlighting that these norms are mutually redefined in interactions between EU and local actors (Slootmaeckers 2023).

In summary, this chapter justifies why Europeanisation literature is initially used to outline the general dynamics of EU norm diffusion before introducing the literature on norm localisation and contestation, explicitly chosen to address Europeanisation's shortcomings and better capture the role of local actors and processes in Georgia. While Europeanisation has often been employed to explain the EU's influence in non-member states, it mostly struggled to capture the role of local agency and dynamics, which are important to highly contested norms such as GEN.

2.1 Europeanisation Literature

Europeanisation became a popular concept in academic discourse in the 1990s. Since then, it has undergone various transformations, resulting in different understandings and uses of the concept (Wach 2015: 11-12), criticised for lacking a standard definition or consistent usage across different fields of study (Wong and Hill 2011: 11). Adding to the confusion, Europeanisation has been used to describe effects of the EU but also of Europe as a whole (EU-isation vs. Europeanisation, e.g. Flockhart 2010), or to look at quantitative and qualitative markers of policy or value congruence (Denti 2014: 10). A comprehensive and frequently used definition by Radaelli (2003: 30) defines Europeanisation as:

> "Processes of (a) construction, (b) diffusion, and (c) institutionalisation of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, 'ways of doing things', and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the making of EU public policy and politics and then incorporated in the logic of domestic discourse, identities, political structures, and public policies."

This definition highlights the central logic of Europeanisation as a process through which EU-developed norms, rules, and ways of thinking become integrated within national domestic contexts (Radaelli 2003: 30). Initially, it only looked at countries already part of the EU and recent scholarship has expanded the scope. Börzel and Panke (2022) define the concept in the

following way: “Europeanization captures the interactions between the European Union and member states or third countries (including candidate countries and neighbourhood countries)” (113). This expansion of the definition highlights that Europeanisation goes beyond formal membership, impacting various categories of states differently.

Generally, Europeanisation has been conceptualised primarily through two main perspectives: top-down and bottom-up (Börzel and Panke 2022: 112-113). The top-down perspective focuses on how the EU influences states, while the bottom-up perspective looks at how the states affect the EU, making the EU itself the object of interest (Börzel and Panke 2022: 112-113). By analogy, researchers talk about either downloading or uploading, respectively, referring to the stream of ideas and influence (Börzel and Panke 2022: 114). A third perspective views Europeanisation not simply as a unidirectional flow of ideas but rather as a multidirectional flow of ideas at all times (Denti 2014: 12). This approach integrates both the top-down and bottom-up perspectives, highlighting the EU's influence on local actors while acknowledging their power in reshaping EU suggestions (Dyson and Goetz 2003: 20). As Bandov and Kolman (2018: 143) suggest, this multidirectional approach could address limitations found in research that only approaches from either perspective in isolation. Additionally, initially, Europeanisation was primarily viewed as an outcome-oriented concept measuring how effectively European norms were adopted (Denti 2014: 11). However, recent shifts see Europeanisation as a long-term transformative process, focusing on how changes do or do not occur over time (Exadaktylos and Radaelli 2015: 206).

Georgia was associated with the EU through the EaP for the longest period. Only in 2023 has the country become an EU candidate country. In October 2024, the EU decided to freeze the candidate status after adopting several laws not in line with EU expectations. Therefore, the Europeanisation literature on candidate countries and neighbourhood countries is relevant.

2.1.1 Europeanisation Beyond EU Member States

Since the initial stages, Europeanisation has increasingly expanded beyond its initial focus on EU member states. Following the EU's Eastern enlargement in 2004/2007, scholarly attention turned towards non-member countries, particularly those in neighbourhood programmes (Schimmelfennig 2010) and candidate states (Sedelmeier 2011). Whereas the literature on Europeanisation about accession states is voluminous, Europeanisation outside the EU has only recently become increasingly studied. Researchers began examining how the EU influences countries formally not part of the EU by examining the power of conditionality (e.g.,

Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004, 2005c, Grabbe 2006, Hughes et al. 2005), especially the membership prospect (e.g., Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004, Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005a: 217, Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2008: 91-93, Sedelmeier 2011: 31) in combination with the *acquis communautaire* and its rules and norms (Schimmelfennig 2015: 5). It has become accepted that the EU's formal borders do not restrict the process of Europeanisation. As Börzel and Panke (2022: 113) show in their definition, the interactions between the EU and non-member or third countries, candidate countries and those in the EU's neighbourhood are included. Schimmelfennig (2015) underlines the necessity of distinguishing between Europeanisation within member states and "Europeanization beyond Europe", as they differ in their "goals and contents […]; instruments and strategies[…]; and effectiveness and impact" (6).

As this chapter argues, Europeanisation in the neighbourhood, inside the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the EaP, is characterised by weak external drivers, leading to various outcomes. At the same time, candidate countries follow a much stricter course of action. The EaP was upgraded in 2009 from its predecessor, the ENP, with a stronger focus on civil society in the countries (Flenley 2018: 48) while initially explicitly ruling out membership perspective (Sedelmeier 2011: 31) and mainly working with the mechanism of positive conditionality (Pożarlik 2019: 146). The main goals of the ENP and the EaP include increasing stability in the countries and, therefore, increasing the EU's security (Flenley 2018: 51), but also spreading normative values (Delcour 2022: 469) and democratisation (Silander and Nilsson 2013, Freyburg et al. 2011). However, the impact of the EaP is often described as a limited success (e.g., Delcour and Duhot 2011, Silander and Nilsson 2013: 454-455, Korosteleva 2017).

The neighbourhood countries have a special place within the broader landscape of the EU's external relations, as they differ from other structures, such as the European Economic Area (EEA) and the official candidate countries. Schimmelfennig (2015: 25) describes these different relationships as "concentric circles", with differing levels of power symmetries, as the EEA members are deeply integrated through the single market, and candidate countries have high incentives due to a future single market access, neither of which applied to the neighbourhood countries for the longest period. Instead of asymmetrical interdependence, the relationship with neighbourhood countries is more symmetrical, impacting the goals of the EU's Europeanisation in those regions (Schimmelfennig 2015: 25).

For candidates, the goal of Europeanisation is straightforward and includes the transfer and adoption of the “acquis communautaire” (Schimmelfennig 2015: 5). This largely top-down process follows the EU's expectations. It contains oversight from the EU, where they regularly check legislation and its alignment with EU law (Sedelmeier 2011: 22, 29). The primary incentive, the credible prospect of full EU membership can be seen as the ultimate tool to influence candidate countries through strong conditionality (Sedelmeier 2011: 31). In the neighbourhood, however, the substance and incentive of Europeanisation is less predetermined and more varied, conditioned by weaker incentives and less clear EU commitment (Schimmelfennig 2015: 5). As there is no credible membership perspective, weaker incentives connected to specific issues are deployed to influence the countries, such as visa liberalisation (Schimmelfennig 2015: 22). Accordingly, the EU, together with its partners, makes plans that are acceptable to both, based on the principle of "joint ownership" (Schimmelfennig 2010: 332). This, though, means that both sides can avoid those changes that are seen as too difficult or too costly for one side (Schimmelfennig 2010: 332), due to too little bargaining power from either side.

The theoretical literature on Europeanisation has primarily relied on two institutionalist approaches to explain how the EU induces domestic change, which, however, explain little in the neighbourhood context. While the rationalist institutionalist approach highlights the power of conditionality, following the “logic of consequences”, the sociological institutionalist approach emphasises the power of persuasion with its “logic of appropriateness” (Sedelmeier 2011: 11, Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005b: 8-9). One of the most prominent rationalist institutional models, the external incentives model, introduced by Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier in 2004 in the context of the eastern enlargement, is based on rationalist assumptions, assuming the actor's will for maximising one's power and welfare, which is achieved by the EU's instrument of conditionality (663). Conditionality works best when the incentives provided or promised by the EU are credible and clear and include the prospect of membership, which should also include low adaptation costs and high state capacity (Sedelmeier 2011: 12-15). The model demonstrates that EU incentives, such as the membership perspective or promise, significantly impact candidate countries (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005a: 220, Sedelmeier 2011: 23).

Accordingly, the logic of this model cannot be transferred to the EU’s neighbourhood, as the core criteria cannot be met. Firstly, for the longest period, the rewards offered were smaller than full membership, limiting the effectiveness and leverage of the EU (Sedelmeier 2011: 29).

Secondly, the consistency of the EU's conditions is low, changing according to the EU's geostrategic interest, limiting the bargaining power of the EU (Sedelmeier 2011: 23). Thirdly, the domestic adaptation costs are often seen as too high, especially in the neighbourhood countries with hybrid regimes (Sedelmeier 2011: 14-15). As such, for Georgia, authors criticised the lack of use of conditionality and a membership perspective, limiting the effectiveness of democracy and human rights promotion (Rommens 2017; Darchiashvili and Bakradze 2019). Consequently, the rationalist institutional model can predict a highly selective and limited adaptation pattern in low-cost policy areas but not fully explain these outcomes.

Moreover, the conditions of the sociological institutionalist approach, with its primary mechanisms of socialisation and persuasion, are rarely met in the EU's neighbourhood. Socialisation is more effective when the promoted norms are seen as legitimate, when the country holds a positive view of the EU, and when there is a value fit between the promoted norms and the country's pre-existing beliefs (Sedelmeier 2011: 15-16). First, depending on the neighbourhood country, the identification with and legitimacy of the EU are weak, making closer alignment more undesirable (Sedelmeier 2011: 16). Second, there is often a mismatch between the EU-promoted rules and norms and the domestic contexts, which leads to unlikelier adoption of these sets of values (Sedelmeier 2011: 15). Accordingly, while socialisation may be helpful in specific policy areas, where the above-mentioned criteria are fulfilled, it does not explain, why a state decides against socialisation with the EU.

Altogether, this leads to several superficial or incomplete implementation forms, often characterised by a significant gap between formal rule adoption and substantive change. One of these forms is the "Potemkin harmonisation", where reforms are introduced to satisfy the EU but at the same time making sure that these changes are not institutionalised and do not impact the domestic elites (Sedelmeier 2011: 10). Another form is the so-called "decoupling", where norms and rules have been adopted formally but the everyday practices remain the same and therefore hinder their application (Schimmelfennig 2015: 15). A third form is called "dead letters", referring to laws that have been transposed into the national law but remain unenforced (Sedelmeier 2011: 26).

To conclude, the Europeanisation literature provides insights into EU-induced change, even for the neighbourhood countries. It does this, however, by putting the EU at the centre of the stage. This focus on the EU being the main reason for adopted changes provides a basis but an incomplete tool for understanding the dynamics of external pressure and the strategic

interactions between the EU and third countries. This limitation highlights the necessity of critically re-examining this theoretical approach, prompting the introduction of the literature on norms that better accommodates local agency, contestation, and localisation, a task to which the subsequent chapter will be devoted.

2.1.2 Limitations of Europeanisation Literature in Non-EU Countries

The Europeanisation literature presents several limitations to understanding complex contexts like Georgia. A strong EU-centric focus on Europeanisation approaches is insufficient for capturing essential explanatory factors such as local agency, domestic contestation, and broader historical and societal contexts.

Firstly, scholars have convincingly argued that the EU-centric perspective of traditional Europeanisation literature overly simplifies the norm diffusion process, largely neglecting the impact of actors and influences beyond the EU itself (Schimmelfennig 2015: 6). Schimmelfennig (2015: 6) demonstrates that Europeanisation frameworks typically under-emphasise domestic actors' responses and external geopolitical factors, focusing instead primarily on direct EU impacts. This becomes especially important in areas of norm diffusion, where there is a strong cultural misfit and high adaptation costs, such as GEN. Accordingly, Börzel and Risse (2012a: 2) argue that countries further away from the EU's immediate sphere of influence are less likely to experience Europeanisation, suggesting that Europeanisation's explanatory power weakens when other regional or global powers diffuse norms in a country. For example, Raik et al. (2024) show how China and Russia more or less effectively influence ENP countries by spreading anti-democratic narratives and norms.

Empirical studies further highlight that the EU's conditionality framework often cannot fully account for selective or partial compliance observed in neighbourhood countries (Schimmelfennig 2015: 22-23). While the expectation is that there is weak Europeanisation in ENP countries due to high policy misfit, weak state capacity, and the absence of EU membership incentives, empirical evidence reveals that anticipatory adaptation and asymmetrical interdependence with the EU can lead to selective rule adoption, challenging the idea that Europeanisation effects are equally weak throughout the ENP region (Schimmelfennig 2015: 22-23). Accordingly, rather than conditionality having a significant impact on candidate countries, the EU's political norms are at the forefront of being important to the candidate countries (Schimmelfennig 2015: 11). Hence, by exclusively emphasising EU-driven factors, Europeanisation literature risks missing key explanatory dynamics present in the EU

neighbourhood, including the competition or coexistence of alternative normative frameworks promoted by other geopolitical actors.

Secondly, Europeanisation literature is criticised for its inadequate consideration of historical and societal preconditions within individual countries, overly focusing on structures (Slootmaeckers 2023: 32). Most Europeanisation literature takes a top-down approach (Checkel and Katzenstein 2009: 10), neglecting the local reality with its domestic actors, adding to an EU-centric view of their promoted rules being fundamental (Bandov and Kolman 2018: 142). This critique is reinforced by Slootmaeckers (2023), who argues that the top-down approach implicitly assumes "that EU rules and norms are foreign to candidate countries - or, when present, not European enough" (31-32). While GEN represent a policy area with a particularly high misfit for many conservative societies, such as Georgia, it cannot be assumed that no local actors have advocated these norms before the EU diffused them (Szulecka and Szulecki 2013). Furthermore, the lack of focus on how the EU and its policies are perceived by governmental and non-governmental actors in the neighbourhood is a notable gap, despite the understanding that the EU's identity and actorness are constructed partly through interactions with its outside 'Others' (Checkel and Katzenstein 2009).

Ultimately, the neglect of local agency is a main shortcoming of traditional Europeanisation frameworks. Europeanisation's primarily top-down analytical lens implicitly assumes local actors are passive recipients, inadequately recognising their active role in contesting or localising externally promoted norms (Slootmaeckers 2023: 28-29). Thus, focusing primarily on EU conditions and pressures offers a limited and overly simplified explanation of how and why norms are adopted or contested locally. At the same time, it remains unclear if a multidirectional or bottom-up perspective of Europeanisation could be used for non-EU member states like Georgia. As postcolonial researchers have argued, the EU exerts significant power over non-members, creating an asymmetrical power dynamic that limits the ability to upload ideas and contest the norms towards the EU (e.g., Filipescu 2016, Grabbe 2003: 318). Additionally, while the bottom-up conceptualisation has been proposed as an alternative to address these shortcomings (e.g., Radaelli 2003), it remains underused precisely because the implicit Eurocentrism of existing literature favours hierarchical, asymmetrical understandings of the EU enlargement or neighbourhood processes (Slootmaeckers 2023: 32-33).

In sum, these critical shortcomings of Europeanisation literature, its strong EU-centric focus, insufficient attention to historical and societal preconditions, and inadequate recognition of

local agency creates the need for expanding the analytical scope. As Langbein and Börzel (2013: 574) show for the ENP countries, it is not sufficient to look at macro-level factors most relevant to Europeanisation literature, such as the membership perspective. According to them, it is important to look at the domestic setup in specific policy domains (Langbein and Börzel 2013: 574).

Integrating norm contestation and localisation literature directly addresses these limitations. It does so by shifting the analytical focus away from the EU as the primary driver of change and onto domestic actors and their local agency, treating them not as passive recipients but as active agents who challenge, and reshape norms. Additionally, it closely examines the domestic socio-political landscape to understand how and why external norms are contested. It also provides the conceptual tools to explain the resulting outcomes, which traditional Europeanisation models often struggle to account for and explain.

Therefore, this framework turns to the concepts of norm contestation and localisation to provide the necessary tools to analyse the power of local agency. The subsequent chapter introduces this norm-based framework, explicitly incorporating local agency, contestation, and localisation processes as central explanatory factors to understand better the selective implementation and reinterpretation of EU-promoted GEN in Georgia.

2.2 Literature on Norms

The preceding discussion highlighted the limitations of traditional Europeanisation literature. Its tendency towards an EU-centric, top-down perspective often neglects the specificities of local conditions and the role of the local agency in shaping outcomes in EaP countries like Georgia. To address this issue and better explain the observed variations in norm implementation, this thesis turns to the literature on norms within International Relations, explicitly focusing on concepts developed within its "third wave": norm localisation and contestation.

While the EU promotes various policies and rules, this study concentrates specifically on norms, generally defined as "a standard of appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity" (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 891). Focusing on norms is crucial because GEN are deeply embedded in social values and identities. Therefore, their diffusion is not about technical compliance, as might be the case in other policy domains captured by Europeanisation, but about processes of social construction and resistance. The literature on

norms provides the conceptual tools to analyse these complex dynamics, moving beyond the top-down view of transfer in Europeanisation literature.

Norms research within International Relations gained prominence following the coining of the term “constructivism” by Nicholas Onuf (2013) and the constructivist turn (Checkel 1998), followed by works from many different academic disciplines. The key element of constructivism, in comparison to other schools of thought, is the idea that everything is socially constructed and that, amongst other things, norms influence the thoughts and behaviour of actors (Wunderlich 2020: 15). Accordingly, not only structures influence the agents but also the other way around (Wendt 1992). Since its emergence, norms research in International Relations has undergone a significant transformation in three waves, which all display different characteristics.

The first wave was primarily concerned with norm diffusion on the international stage and the emergence and internalisation of norms. The most influential work in the first wave, and for norms research in International Relations in general, is "International norm dynamics and political change" by Finnemore and Sikkink (1998), who brought forward the idea of the life cycle of international norms (888). According to them, this cycle includes three stages: norm emergence, norm cascade and internalisation (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998: 896). While it did have a crucial influence on the studies of norms (Lantis 2017), it did not remain without critique from other scholars, such as Krook and True (2012, 122-123), who argue that norms cannot be seen as things that remain unchanged, but instead as processes. A similar problem exists in other popular models in the first wave, such as the boomerang model (Keck and Sikkink 1998), the spiral model (Risse et al. 1999) or the world polity model (Meyer et al. 1997). The main points of Krook and True (2012, 123) are that these models only allow for one way for norms to travel and do not consider the possibilities of different actors involved in the norm process, changing the norm or its content and its trajectory.

The second wave, therefore, took a different approach and focused more than before on internalisation and socialisation, especially in the context of the enlargement of the EU at the beginning of the 2000s, intersecting more with Europeanisation literature. Stronger emphasis and interest were put into the power of the EU in accession countries to change norms and structures outside their member countries. The main areas of interest stemming from the intersecting Europeanisation and the literature on norms were processes and instruments such as coercion, manipulation (conditionality), socialisation and persuasion (Börzel and Risse

2020b, 30-31). Tholens and Groß (2015) rightfully criticise this second wave of norm research and its underlying assumptions about the candidate countries by looking at the Western Balkan accession process. They criticise that rather than looking at the interests of national actors, the research is conducted with a top-down approach from the perspective of the EU (Tholens and Groß 2015: 251). Rather than asking what internal processes take place in the countries that allow norms to be internalised, the literature focuses on the conditions that limit the influence of international organisations (Cortell and Davis 2005) or the EU for their norm diffusion (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005; Schimmelfennig et al. 2006).

The third wave, where this thesis locates itself, tries to address the criticism of not considering the domestic side of norm diffusion by focusing on two concepts, localisation and contestation and therefore making "contestation patterns, localisation practices, and translation strategies the subject of analysis" (Tholens and Groß 2015: 249). Key concepts here are norm contestation and norm localisation.

In this thesis, norm contestation and localisation are not considered separate phenomena but as acting together. The concept of norm localisation builds on Acharya's (2004) groundwork on the localisation of transnational norms promoted by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and moves beyond a simple dichotomy of acceptance or rejection. From his work, he finds out that local actors are important to norm diffusion, as they are the ones who localise it to their population. It, therefore, “describes a complex process and outcome by which norm-takers build congruence between transnational norms (including norms previously institutionalised in a region) and local beliefs and practices” (Acharya 2004: 241). Localisation highlights the active role of local actors (“norm entrepreneurs”, “norm-takers” or “norm-recipient”) in interpreting and adapting external norms into the domestic context. The concept shifts the analytical focus from the exporters of norms to the agency of the norm-taker (Capie 2012: 76). It demonstrates that local actors do not passively receive norms during the norm diffusion process. However, they may actively contest or accept normative change (Björkdahl and Gusic 2015: 269).

Within the process of norm localisation, there are several key mechanisms, such as framing, grafting and pruning. Framing describes the active construction of linkages between a pre-existing norm and a newly diffused norm, often using language to make a norm appear local (Acharya 2004: 243). The goal of grafting is to increase the acceptance of a norm by associating it with a pre-existing norm that is socially accepted (Acharya 2004: 244). Pruning is a process

whereby only certain elements of a promoted norm which fit into the social and political context are adopted (Acharya 2004: 250).

According to Acharya's (2004: 251) model of norm localisation, it is a dynamic trajectory driven by local actors who actively manage the reception of external norms. The process begins with "prelocalisation", a phase of resistance and contestation against new norms, which can evolve if local actors see potential benefits in them (Acharya 2004: 251). This is followed by "local initiative", where trusted local actors frame the diffused norms to make them appear as a benefit for the local population (Acharya 2004: 251). In the subsequent "adaptation" phase, these actors adapt the norm to fit better into the local context by using mechanisms like grafting and pruning (Acharya 2004: 251). The final stage "amplification" results in a new framework where local influences remain highly visible and may even allow elements of the local normative order to gain wider external recognition (Acharya 2004: 251).

Important to this thesis, Acharya finds four factors or conditions that influence the likelihood of localisation positively: a) the assessment of the norm-takers that the new norm will strengthen the authority and legitimacy of institutions, b) the existence of strong local norms, c) the capacity of local actors to influence the norm localisation, and d) a sense of identity shaping the norm-taker's ideas of values (Acharya 2004: 248-249). Nonetheless, norm localisation does not always lead to substantive change. The process can result in decoupling, where the formal adoption of a norm is merely a "cosmetic" act to gain external legitimacy while traditional practices remain unchanged (Anderl 2016: 200).

Norm contestation, influenced significantly by Wiener (2008, 2014), involves "the range of social practices, which discursively express disapproval of norms" (Wiener 2014, 1) and gained popularity in the late 2010s. Contestation is not merely resistance but a process through which norms are debated, challenged, and potentially reshaped, thereby generating social change (Wiener 2014: 1, 11). Contestation is a "norm-generative practice" where norms are challenged and changed through interaction (Orchard and Wiener 2022: 54). The literature on norm contestation has focused on issues such as the responsibility to protect (Welsh 2013), shrinking civil society support (Poppe and Wolff 2017) or more recently the ENP (Dandashly and Noutcheva 2022). This concept is the key to solving the research puzzle, as it explains why and how certain EU norms, like those related to GEN, face opposition or generate significant debate within Georgia, driven by specific local actors, even when EU incentives are strong. Focusing on contestation shows that implementation is not a technical adoption process but a political

and societal struggle over the meaning and legitimacy of norms. This helps explain why highly contested norms result in different outcomes than less contested ones. This perspective treats domestic contestation not as a failure of EU policy, as Europeanisation might see it, but as a productive political process through which local agents actively shape policy outcomes.

Furthermore, two key distinctions within norm contestation literature are important. First, contestation can target different aspects of a norm, which affects its resilience, or "robustness". Validity contestation, on the one hand, challenges how "right" or "correct" a norm is about a community's moral standards (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann 2020: 56-57). Widespread validity contestation, however, likely leads to a lower level of norm robustness (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann 2020: 51). Applicatory contestation, on the other hand, does not question the norm's overall value but disputes how, when, or to whom it should be applied in a specific situation (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann 2020: 57). This type of contestation, while conflictual, can strengthen a norm by clarifying its meaning through debate (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann 2020: 58).

Second, contestation can take different forms depending on the actor's intent. A key distinction can be made between reactive contestation, which is a dissent with norm compliance, and proactive contestation, which is a more constructive, critical engagement with a norm to clarify or change its meaning (Orchard and Wiener 2022: 54). Reactive contestation usually includes contestation both on the level of discourses and the level of acts showing disagreement such as protests, whereas proactive contestation is performed alone through interaction in discourses and is therefore key to generating new, shared meanings (Orchard and Wiener 2022: 54). This matters for understanding the implementation of EU-promoted norms in Georgia because it allows for a deeper analysis of domestic contestation. By distinguishing between validity and applicatory contestation, differentiating between a fundamental rejection of a norm's principles and a more practical debate over its implementation becomes possible. This helps to explain why some EU-promoted norms are contested and rejected outright, while others are debated, modified, and ultimately localised in a hybrid form.

Together, norm contestation and localisation help to understand the dynamics of implementation of EU-promoted norms in neighbourhood countries by shifting the analytical focus from the external promoter to the domestic side, revealing how local actors actively work on the final form of the norms. While contestation explains the "pushback", norm localisation explains what happens to norms as they are adapted and embedded into a new environment.

Having established the key concepts of norm contestation and localisation, the next section will synthesise these theoretical tools into a focused analytical framework. This framework will outline how the dynamics of EU norm diffusion and domestic reception will be examined in the Georgian case and will set out the core expectations that guide the empirical analysis of this thesis.

2.3 Analytical Framework

This thesis employs an analytical framework that combines Europeanisation literature with key concepts from the third wave of International Relations norms research, specifically norm contestation and localisation. This integrated approach is necessary to overcome the limitations existing in Europeanisation literature and to provide a more detailed understanding of how EU-promoted GEN is contested or localised within the complex domestic context of Georgia. The framework guides the analysis by focusing on the interplay between external pressures and internal dynamics, ultimately aiming to explain the observed outcomes.

The Europeanisation literature provides the essential starting point and context for this study. It helps identify the EU as a significant external actor promoting specific norms within its neighbourhood, including Georgia, particularly through instruments associated with the EaP, the Association Agreement, and, more recently, the candidate status. This literature highlights mechanisms like conditionality and socialisation through which the EU attempts to exert influence. However, as established in the preceding sections, traditional Europeanisation approaches, especially when applied to non-member states, exhibit significant limitations for this thesis, such as EU-centrism, neglect of local context and insufficient focus on local agency. While acknowledging the EU's role as a norm promoter, this framework moves beyond these limitations by incorporating insights to analyse domestic reception and agency.

To address the gaps left by Europeanisation literature, this framework draws heavily on the third wave of norms research, focusing on norm contestation and norm localisation. Hereby, Acharya's (2004: 248-249) factors for localisation play a key role in understanding the likelihood and nature of norm adaptation: legitimacy and authority enhancement, congruence with existing local norms, local agency and capacity, and identity and value fit. These factors provide concrete analytical levers to examine why localisation processes unfold as they do in Georgia, moving beyond description towards explanation.

This integrated framework conceptualises the diffusion and reception of EU-promoted GEN in Georgia as a dynamic, multi-level process: The EU acts as a key external source of normative

pressure and incentives. These external norms enter the domestic sphere characterised by specific pre-existing norms, political configurations, and societal values. Local actors actively engage with these norms, driven by their interests and values, and potentially influenced by outside actors. This engagement manifests as contestation and localisation, mediated by factors like congruence, legitimacy considerations, actor capacity, and identity politics relating to Acharya's (2004: 248-249) factors. The outcomes are variable and context-dependent, ranging from rejection and widespread contestation to selective adaptation, or hybridisation. Synthesising these theoretical assumptions and insights, this thesis advances a central assumption: the observed variation in the implementation of EU-promoted GEN in Georgia is primarily explained by the agent-driven domestic processes of norm contestation and localisation. This process involves actively contesting a norm's validity and application, producing the observed outcomes of localisation.

This central assumption creates a set of expectations for the empirical analysis. Firstly, given the documented misfit between certain aspects of GEN (particularly LGBT rights) and dominant conservative/religious norms in Georgia, significant and multi-faceted contestation by various state and non-state actors is anticipated. This contestation shapes the political discourse and influences policy outcomes. Secondly, as a consequence, the localisation process is expected to produce different outcomes. This variation can range from hybrid adaptation and policy decoupling, particularly for the most contested norms. Local governmental and civil societal actors can actively interpret or adapt and potentially reshape norms to align them with perceived local values, political interests, or institutional capacities. Finally, the specific outcomes of contestation and localisation depend crucially on various local actors' strategies, capacities, and influence. The power dynamics between these actors are central to explaining observed variations. From the perspective of the norm promoter, the success of localisation will depend on Acharya’s (2004: 248-249) factors.

Applying this integrated framework to the 2014-2024 period, this theoretical framework, centred on contestation, localisation, and local agency, provides the analytical lens to investigate the puzzle of selective GEN implementation in Georgia, offering a more detailed understanding than Europeanisation literature alone allows. It directs the empirical analysis towards examining the specific practices of contestation and localisation strategies used by different actors within the Georgian context.

Having established this theoretical framework, the following chapters will apply it to the case of Georgia. Chapter 3 will first introduce Georgia as an interesting case and outline the domestic context into which EU norms are introduced. Subsequently, Chapter 5 will use the core concepts of contestation and localisation to analyse the empirical findings, thereby demonstrating how these domestic dynamics, rather than EU incentives alone, shape the ultimate outcomes for GEN in the country.

3. Overview of Empirical Case: Georgia

Relevant to this thesis, the empirical case of Georgia, as a case of an ENP and EaP country reacting to EU-promoted norms, needs to be described. Therefore, it is important to specify the relationship between Georgia and the EU on an institutional level and Georgia's relationship with GE with all the leading actors who influence Georgia's relationship with the EU or towards GE. As this thesis studies the particular case in detail, a comprehensive overview of the necessary background helps to understand the outcome.

3.1 Georgia and the EU

Georgia's modern history with the EU/European Communities started shortly after Georgia restored its independence in 1991, including signing a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement in 1996 and many milestones since. One of the first public exclamations towards Georgia's aspirations for joining the EU and coming closer to Europe was the famous words "I am Georgian, and therefore I am European" from the Chairman of the Parliament of Georgia, Zurab Zhvania, which he said at the Council of Europe in 1999 (Georgian Journal 2013). While this sentence has become a widely quoted saying ever since, it also shows the self-perception of Georgians and their desire to join the EU, foreshadowing the foreign policy for the coming years (Mestvirishvili and Mestvirishvili 2014: 52).

An important period for Georgia and Georgian aspirations for joining Western institutions started in 2003 with the Rose Revolution. The Rose Revolution followed a rigged election, which led to active protests and culminated in Shevardnadze's ousting, followed by Mikheil Saakashvili as President (Fairbanks 2004: 110). One key aspect of the revolution was its pro-Western and especially pro-European outset (Jones 2012: 13), which was followed by a strongly pro-Western foreign policy (Gvalia and Lebanidze 2018). In 2009, after the formation of the EaP, Georgia became part of it, increasing cooperation in many areas, culminating in two significant milestones for Georgia and the EU: the signing of the Association Agreement in 2014 and the visa-free travel for Georgians into the EU since 2017. Before applying for EU membership, a special constitutional amendment was achieved in 2017, which came into force in 2018: a constitutionally inscribed aspiration to join the EU. This is outlined in Article 78 of the Georgian constitution, meaning joining the EU must be the goal for any government's actions.

Finally, in March 2022, Georgia applied for EU membership, which was followed by the most significant and most recent milestone: the granting of the candidate status to Georgia, which,

however, did not last long. Before the EU granted Georgia candidate status, 12 priorities were set out by the European Commission, which addressed issues such as democratisation, human rights nad notably GE issues such as GBV (European Commission 2022). In 2023, the European Commission re-evaluated Georgia and found that while three priorities were completed, nine were still uncompleted (European Commission 2023b). In the same Enlargement Package, the European Commission recommended that the European Council grant the candidate status to Georgia once the requirements are fulfilled (European Commission 2023a). The European Council followed the recommendation and granted the candidate status to Georgia on 15 December 2023 (European Council 2023).

However, after years of pro-European movements within the society and the political elite, a harsh shift occurred in 2024 after adopting the "Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence" (so-called "Foreign Agents law"[3]). Consequently, the candidate status and the accompanying accession process were de facto halted in June 2024 by the European Council due to the backsliding of reforms (European Council 2024). Not long after this, another law that would stand in the way of EU accession was adopted, the Anti-LGBT law. EU officials highlight that these laws go directly against the EU's values and must be reversed to continue the accession process (DG NEAR 2024, EEAS 2024). A resolution of the European Parliament even goes so far as to question Georgia's eligibility for visa-free access to the EU (European Parliament 2024), constraining the relations between Georgia and the EU.

Despite the recent developments, Georgia and especially Georgian society have had a positive image of the EU for most of the time (Delcour and Wolczuk 2021: 164), which is also represented in surveys regarding the public attitude towards the EU. Public attitudes towards the support of Georgia's membership in the EU from 2011 to 2024 peaked in 2012 with 72% of the respondents, following a decline to 42% in 2015 and reaching a new high of 71% in 2024 (CRRC 2024). Georgians see themselves as European (Mestvirishvili and Mestvirishvili 2014). The EU's impact on Georgia and the importance of Georgia for the EU are further underscored by the amount of financial assistance given to Georgia, which amounted to 340 million euros for the period 2021-2024, making it the largest provider of financial support (European Union 2024).

However, one area where Georgia is less positive towards the EU is in the area of GE and sexual minorities' rights, which became apparent during protests after the adoption of the Anti-

[3] This law will be called "Foreign Agents law" from here.

Discrimination law that was required to receive visa liberation, an example of direct EU conditionality (Delcour and Wolczuk 2021: 164).

The loss of traditions and values and the disagreements with EU-promoted norms become visible in the public opinion questionnaires from 2021, with 36 % of the population agreeing or rather agreeing that the EU threatens Georgian traditions (CRRC 2023) and 13% of those against Georgia's membership in the EU see the loss of Georgian culture and traditions as the main reason to be against membership (CRRC 2021). While this leads to the contestation of the GEN, it does not lead to Euroscepticism, as factors such as democratic and socio-economic development outweigh potential fears (Javakhishvili and Butsashvili 2023). Speeches relating to these fears gained new momentum during the pre-election campaigns of the government party GD and continued after the election. Irakli Kobakhidze recently said at a talk given in commemoration of Ilia Chavchavadze, a Georgian hero and "Father of the Nation" who spread European liberal ideas in the 19th century: "a man who absorbed all the best from European culture without neglecting Georgian" (Government of Georgia 2024), showcasing on the one hand the pro-European ideas but on the other hand the deeply engrained opposition against non-Georgian values. This rhetoric, starting to become more anti-European, started appearing more obviously in 2019 when a Russian Member of Parliament, Sergei Gavrilov, gave a speech at the Georgian Parliament in Russian while located at the Parliament speaker's chair (Tsuladze 2023: 256). This event sparked protests and is often called "Gavrilov's Night" due to its immense impact, as it became apparent that the government's rhetoric no longer aligns with what large segments of Georgia's society desire for their country's future towards the EU.

3.2 Georgia and Gender Equality

Many international organisations and indices have assessed Georgia's GE issues and generally find similar problems and areas of improvement despite continuous improvements. In the most recent Global Gender Gap Report 2024 by the World Economic Forum, Georgia ranks number 69 with a score of 0.716, which is a marginal improvement by 0.0007 in comparison to 2023, which is a worse rank than Armenia in position 64 (World Economic Forum 2024). The UNDP publishes the Gender Inequality Index and the Gender Development Index, where Georgia scored 0.257 (UNDP 2023b, the lower, the better) and 1.009 (UNDP 2023a, the higher, the better). Some of the main areas where international organisations and indices see problems in Georgia include tackling poverty and inequality, which goes hand in hand with better female

employment (especially in higher positions) and economic opportunities, improving access to healthcare and reproductive services, combating GBV and child marriage, ensuring greater representation of women in decision-making and public positions (World Bank 2021: 6-9; UN WOMEN 2024: 10-13; Asian Development Bank 2018: x-xviii). Only some of the international organisations acknowledge the challenges faced by LGBT individuals, who are one of the most vulnerable groups (UN WOMEN 2024).

Since Georgia's independence, it has tried to improve GE by establishing new institutions to bring forward inter-agency cooperation and advising and awareness institutions. Within the Parliament, a "National Gender Equality Council" was created in 2004 and made a permanent body six years later, which was followed by municipal-level implementation of Gender Equality Councils (European Union 2023: 3), operating in almost all municipalities (Public Defender of Georgia 2022: 6). The Council is tasked with the oversight of the coordination, implementation and review of gender equality laws (European Union 2021: 8). Moreover, an "Inter-Agency Commission on Gender Equality, Violence against Women and Domestic Violence" was set up in 2017 to implement and oversee National Action Plans concerning the UN Security Council resolutions on Women, Peace and Security (Inter-Agency Commission on Gender Equality, Violence against Women and Domestic Violence 2023: 18). With its members, consisting of state ministries and other public offices (Human Rights Secretariat 2025), they have the right to vote and, together with UN Women, create National Action Plans (Inter-Agency Commission on Gender Equality, Violence against Women and Domestic Violence 2023). Additionally, one influential office is the Gender Department of the Public Defender of Georgia, created in 2013, tasked with defending citizens' rights regarding GE, raising awareness and, therefore, strengthening GE in Georgia (Public Defender of Georgia 2025).

On the legislative side, several remarkable steps forward were made, including the adoption of the "Law of Georgia on Gender Equality" (2010), which constitutes "equal rights for men and women in political, economic, social and cultural life" (Art. 4), and the Anti-Discrimination law in 2014, which aims to "eliminate every form of discrimination [...], irrespective of [...] sex, [...] sexual orientation [or] gender identity and expression" (Art. 1). Relevant to this thesis, Georgia signed the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence

against Women and Domestic Violence (so-called "Istanbul Convention"[4]) in 2014 and ratified it in 2017 (Council of Europe 2025).

While these institutions and laws represent a significant level of formal commitment to GE on paper, a persistent gap remains between these official structures and the lived reality in Georgia, particularly on GBV, WEE and LGBT issues, which the next sub-chapters dive deeper into.

3.2.1 Gender-based Violence

The European Institute for Gender Equality defines GBV as "any type of violence based on someone's gender from physical to emotional to financial to reproductive violence", which primarily affects women (EIGE 2025). One of the key documents on this issue is the Istanbul Convention (IC). While the IC calls it Violence against Women, this thesis uses the term GBV, as this term includes LGBT people (Krizsán and Roggeband 2021: 18)[5] and is used by the EU for its programmes. Amongst others, the IC aims to protect women from all forms of violence by encouraging international cooperation and integrated approaches (Article 1, Council of Europe 2011). This aligns with what the EU promotes, including legal harmonisation with international standards, victim-centred response systems and preventing femicides (European Commission 2020a: 9-10).

In Georgia, GBV remains a huge issue. The 2022 nationwide study on GBV in Georgia highlights that violence remains widespread, with over half of Georgian women experiencing some form of violence during their lifetime, particularly intimate partner violence (22.9%) and sexual harassment (24.5%) (UN WOMEN 2023: 184). The research indicates persistent sociodemographic vulnerabilities, significant underreporting, and deeply ingrained conservative gender attitudes that reinforce gender inequalities and the normalisation of violence (UN WOMEN 2023: 185). Additionally, since Georgia ratified the IC in 2017, the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) has conducted several monitoring visits on the implementation of the IC. In their latest report, they recognise Georgia's policy improvements towards GE but highlight persistent stereotypes around traditional gender roles and societal expectations, hindering progress in combating GBV (Council of Europe 2022a: 13). At the same time, the EU has found several gaps, including the unsatisfying legal definition of rape and high femicide rates (European

[4] This convention will be called "Istanbul Convention" from here.
[5] For a short discussion of the terminology, see Krizsán and Roggeband 2021: 18.

Commission 2024: 25, 44). Relevant to this, research has found that social norms and stereotypes are one of the main drivers for GBV (Oczkowska et al. 2024: 266).

3.2.2 Women's Economic Empowerment

Women's economic empowerment is, according to UN WOMEN, understood as "ensuring women can equally participate in and benefit from decent work and social protection; access markets and have control over resources, their own time, lives, and bodies" (UN WOMEN 2025). According to research, it is significantly constrained by discriminatory gender norms, which limit women's labour market opportunities and reinforce workplace inequalities (Marcus 2018: 1). These gender norms shape societal expectations around domestic responsibilities, acting as structural barriers to women's full economic participation (Marcus 2018: 2). Accordingly, the EU promotes norms related to the recognition of the care economy and labour laws promoting a better work-life balance (European Commission 2020a: 2, 12-13).

An analysis of Georgia's existing legal framework from 2017 shows that, despite institutional frameworks, WEE in Georgia remains severely limited due to inadequate policy effectiveness and insufficient access to financial resources (Margvelashvili 2017: 5). This leads to the case that WEE is largely dependent on NGO initiatives (Margvelashvili 2017: 5). The EU finds similar flaws. They criticise, for example, the labour laws hindering women's participation in the labour market (European Commission 2024: 44, 59, 76-77).

This limited WEE also impacts the level of GBV. Financial dependency on male partners significantly restricts women's ability to escape and report GBV, reinforcing a cycle of abuse (World Bank 2017: 13-15). Accordingly, the two issues of WEE and GBV need to be looked at together, as WEE is important to combat GBV.

3.2.3 LGBT

The situation for LGBT people is the worst in comparison to the two areas discussed before. However, their situation is also linked to the areas discussed above. Despite legislative improvements in the 2010s and increased cooperation with NGOs primarily driven by international obligations, LGBT individuals in Georgia continue to experience severe discrimination (Public Defender of Georgia 2021: 7). The widespread homophobia is not combated as the state responds ineffectively (Public Defender of Georgia 2021: 7). As such, the EU promotes norms related to the legal protection against discrimination and hate speech

as well as mainstreaming of LGBT issues in all policy frameworks (European Commission 2020b: 5, 11, 17-19). Despite recent decreases in homophobic attitudes in Georgia, significant stigma and prejudice persist (WISG 2022: 16). Once again, the state policies are inconsistent in combating issues related to this (WISG 2022: 16). Transgender individuals remain disproportionately visible and vulnerable to violence and discrimination (WISG 2022: 16).

Moreover, societal acceptance is weakest regarding LGBT individuals' rights to family formation, and expression, illustrating entrenched heteronormativity (WISG 2022: 17-19). While the attitude towards LGBT individuals has become better in recent years, problems such as hate crimes, hate speech (Council of Europe 2022b), labour and health rights (Public Defender of Georgia 2021) remain strong. The EU also found that the National Action Plan does not address LGBT issues directly (European Commission 2024: 7, 46). The persistence of anti-LGBT attitudes stems from a lack of education and myths (WISG 2022: 22) that persist and are reinforced at schools and universities, e.g. by the GOC (The Danish Institute for Human Rights 2011). One of these myths is that LGBT individuals "are fighting against the Orthodox Church" (WISG 2022: 22), framing LGBT rights as an existential threat to national security (Mestvirishvili et al. 2017: 1266).

3.3 Main Actors: The Governments, the Church and the Civil Society

After establishing the definition and situation in all three domains of this thesis, GBV, WEE and LGBT, the thesis now turns to the local actors who mostly make up the local agency in Georgia: the Georgian governments, the GOC and CSOs. The investigation and findings will become clearer by looking at their perspective on GE issues and their societal standing.

3.3.1 The Governments

Generally speaking, the Georgian governments, both the Saakashvili-led (2004-2012) and the GD party (2012-today) governments, have been openly pro-European to varying degrees, which was showcased in the adoption of laws and following the path of European integration (Gvalia and Lebanidze 2018). However, before being granted the candidate status, the Georgian government showed a blend of ambition and frustration in its relationship with the EU due to Georgia's perception as deserving of candidate status but also asymmetrical dependence (Tsuladze 2021b: 174-175). Nevertheless, this has changed to a more anti-European path in recent years, marked by normalisation approaches towards Russia (Kakachia et al. 2018, Kakachia 2022). The foreign policy orientation of the Georgian government followed accordingly: While during the 2010s, Georgia's restrictive foreign policy behaviour towards Russia and very pro-Western approach represented an exception among similar smaller states

(Gvalia et al. 2013), in the 2020s, it turned to “bandwagoning by stealth” (Lebanidze and Kakachia 2023) and later to transactional hedging (Kakachia et al. 2024). While still publicly supporting European integration, the government and the political elite started aligning more with Russia (Tsuladze 2023) while contesting the EU and their ideas (Aprasidze 2024), as well as creating a discursive disengagement from the EU (Tsuladze et al. 2024). However, the government and political elites turned even more anti-European by promoting Euroscepticism (Tabatadze and Gigauri 2025), which has been successful in some sections of Georgian society (Minesashvili and Gozalishvili 2025: 8). This became apparent with the adoption of the Foreign Agent Law and the Anti-LGBT law, which go directly against requirements set out to join the EU.

To fully understand the government's actions, it is also necessary to consider Georgia's governance style, in which patronal politics and informal institutions play an immense role. Henry Hale (2014) ascribed this style to many Eurasian and post-Soviet countries, a style where individual political and economic endeavours happen “around the personalised exchange of concrete rewards and punishments through chains of actual acquaintance, and not primarily around abstract, impersonal principles such as ideological belief or categorisations like economic class” (9-10). Accordingly, the system is built on a patron whom his clients serve (Hale 2014: 10). On top of this, Magyar and Madlovics (2022) show that in Georgia, Shevardnadze started building informal patronal networks that became too strong even for Saakashvili and his reforms, culminating in persistent patronalism, which GD built upon (241-242). As such, Georgia was described as a “patronal democracy”, highlighting competing patronal networks that fail to singlehandedly control the state while co-opting formal and informal institutions for their own interests (Magyar and Madlovics 2022: 57, 71). For Georgia, the rise of informal governance can largely be attributed to the oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, who influences and manipulates formal political processes from the backstage (Tsuladze 2025: 138-140), therefore acting “along with the state”, changing laws and rules according to their interest and needs (Tsuladze 2021a: 43).

3.3.2 The Georgian Orthodox Church

The GOC shows similar patterns to those of the government and the political elites. As the leading religious institution, they play an important role in forming Georgian identity (Chitanava 2015: 42), as over 80% of the Georgian population identifies as Orthodox (Geostat 2014). They are an important actor, as they are one of the most trusted institutions, with 73% of Georgians trusting religious institutions and religion playing an important role in the

everyday lives of 93% of Georgians (CRRC 2024). Georgians see the church as a positive force in society (Charles 2010), opening avenues for influencing society and people's perceptions. Internally, the church is split between pro-EU and pro-Russian narratives (Gordeziani 2016: 4), presenting itself as the defender of human security in Georgia (Metreveli 2019) with a recent shift in tactics from the GOC in trying to appear both pro-EU and pro-NATO (Shevtsova 2023: 2068, 2078), which exhibits the trait of supporting European integration but also a conflicting nature (Khakhutaishvili 2024: 32). Additionally, the church also displays anti-modern and anti-globalist characteristics that culminate in anti-Western tendencies (Gavashelishvili 2012), which often supports the agendas of both Russia and far-right groups in Georgia (Kandelaki 2021: 8).

Generally, the church can be seen as a leading actor against GE, especially when it comes to LGBT rights. Considering their support and trust in society, as well as their connections and influence on politics, public opinion is highly influenced by views expressed by the GOC (The Danish Institute for Human Rights 2011). As shown above, they often frame the ideas of LGBT rights as unacceptable to Georgia and its traditions (Hug 2015: 9-10). Empirical research consistently links homophobic attitudes in Georgia to factors such as gender, age, and settlement type, but also, amongst others, religiosity (WISG 2022: 26, 78).

Moreover, the GOC selectively prioritises anti-LGBT rhetoric over other social issues, such as abortion (Vacharadze 2015: 55). Some specific policy areas receive the most substantial resistance, including marriage or adoption rights for LGBT people, as these are not seen as equal rights but rather as privileges for LGBT individuals (WISG 2022: 19). As WISG (2022: 27) states, the positive change towards the attitude of LGBT individuals in Georgia can partly be explained by the lower level of religiosity. Accordingly, the church is identified as the primary institution that sustains homophobic discourse, maintaining high levels of hostility towards LGBT individuals (WISG 2022: 103).

One key event where the connection between the church and homophobia was visible was surrounding 17 May 2013, internationally known as the International Day Against Homophobia. Already before the planned rally from LGBT rights activists, Patriarch Ilia II called for a ban on the demonstration, framing homosexuality as an “anomaly and disease” as well as an attack on Georgian traditions (RFERL 2013). On the actual date, clerics in full regalia organised an anti-LGBT counter-protest (Hug 2015: 10), which resulted in the outbreak of violence, injuring 28 people (Metreveli 2019: 120). Adding to this, the GOC has declared 17

May as the “Family Purity Day”, trying to support the image of traditional families, which has recently received support from the government and GD in particular (Radio Free Liberty 2024). Another key event was the backlash towards the 2014 Anti-Discrimination law, framing the law as an existential threat to Georgian traditions and as anxiety-inducing by threatening the human security of the population (Metreveli 2019: 121). Interestingly, the GOC did not blame the EU but claimed that the reform hindered European integration by discriminating against the broader public (Metreveli 2019: 121).

3.3.3 The Civil Society

The most pro-European force in Georgia is arguably the civil society. Civil society in Georgia evolved from its limited beginnings during the Tsarist Empire, where it attempted to address local community needs, was subsequently transformed under Soviet rule into a tool of party politics that suppressed formal organisation, with NGOs reemerging during the 1990s relying on international donor organisations and for the first time playing a crucial role during the Rose Revolution (Reisner 2018: 242-246). The civil society has come under attack from GD since 2016 with the strongest restrictions being implemented since the introduction of the Foreign Agents law (Kamilsoy 2024: 1). Attacking civil society, and especially those NGOs, that are funded from abroad, is, according to GD, necessary, as they are part of the "global war party", planning to organise a revolution (Tsuladze 2024: 15).

GD's primary goal, however, is to stop NGOs from being able to mobilise enough people to threaten GD's power, especially regarding the pre-election environment in 2024 and thereby acknowledging the power that the civil society can have against the state (Tavkhelidze 2024: 11). Additionally, CSOs were linked with LGBT issues to create a fear of losing Georgia's traditional values, linking Western ideas to Georgia's decay (Tolordava 2024: 17). Accordingly, the pro-European and democratic stance of Georgia's civil society is visible during their very active participation in the protest against the Foreign Agents law and the democratic backsliding (Weller 2024). The protests mobilised different people with a significant correlation between the support for Georgia's EU membership and participation in the protest (Khoshtaria 2024: 24), highlighting the importance of the EU membership aspirations for Georgians and, therefore, civil society members alike.

Moreover, civil society has been playing an important role in advancing GE and bringing the issues to the policy table (Kiknadze 2024: 405), especially in the absence of policymakers taking the issue seriously. Several studies highlight the role CSOs have played in creating

initiatives later turning into legislation (Japaridze et al. 2014: 7) or in raising awareness for issues related to GE (Rusetskaia and Gogoladze 2012: 29). In their roadmap for engaging with CSOs in Georgia, the EU explicitly highlights the role that civil society organisations play for advancing women's rights, especially regarding GBV (EEAS 2021: 16). In their capacity and needs assessment, Kobaladze and Dolidze (2023) highlight the key role CSOs play in promoting GE and women's rights and highlight their diverse presence across the country. However, at the same time, many remain small with heavy reliance on donor funding, which means that many organisations face significant structural and operational challenges (Kobaladze and Dolidze 2023: 8). This includes limited fundraising capacity, leading to difficulties with retaining qualified staff (Kobaladze and Dolidze 2023: 9). This has become worse with the introduction of the Foreign Agents law. CSOs cooperate less with government institutions, which in turn further decreased public trust (Kobaladze and Dolidze 2023: 9). As Rommens (2017: 113) shows, while the EU positively impacted civil society in Georgia, the overall impact of civil society on Georgian politics and democracy promotion has been limited.

4. Research Methods

This chapter outlines the research methods utilised in this thesis to answer the research questions. It details the rationale for case selection, research design, data collection and analysis methods, ethical considerations, and limitations of the study. The methodology is designed to address the research questions and analyse the norm localisation and contestation processes.

4.1 Rationale for Case Selection

This thesis employs a single-country, qualitative case study design. As such, the case studied here is not the country of Georgia but rather the specific phenomenon of the implementation and responses to EU-promoted GEN within the Georgian domestic context. This focus on a process within a specific policy area allows for an in-depth analysis of the mechanisms that produce the observed outcomes. To provide a focused analysis of the research puzzle, the thesis mainly looks at the period from 2014 to the parliamentary elections of October 2024. The starting point was chosen since 2014 was the year the Anti-Discrimination law was introduced, which was one of the key documents regarding GE. On the other side, the parliamentary elections in 2024 were chosen as the ending point due to the heightened discussions surrounding GEN.

Georgia was chosen as an empirically and theoretically relevant case for understanding the limitations of Europeanisation literature and the dynamics of norm localisation and contestation in the context of the EU's external relations. It can be conceptualised as a “more likely” case for Europeanisation. This classification stems from several features, including a consistent pro-EU public opinion, deep institutional linkages through the Association Agreement and EU candidate status, and a political elite that, for an extended period, explicitly followed a pro-Western foreign policy. In theory, this should create ideal conditions for adopting EU norms. This "more likely" outlook of Europeanisation makes the contestation and localisation of GEN analytically useful. By looking at a case where a theory is expected to hold but faces challenges, this study looks at mechanisms that explain this outcome.

Additionally, this case was selected for its “inferential utility”, to create explanations that might be true for other, similar cases, while not claiming statistical generalisability (Goodman 2024: 62). As such, this study of norm contestation and localisation in Georgia aims to teach more about norm diffusion in general, by identifying how local agency and political instrumentalisation clash with external pressures. This thesis provides a framework for understanding similar dynamics in other EU-associated countries, such as other countries

within the EaP, that share a comparable tension between strong EU aspirations and powerful domestic forces. Accordingly, it is a case of a neighbourhood country implementing a specific subset of EU-promoted norms, which requires justification for selecting the EU as a norm promoter.

The EU has been established in academic discourse as a “normative power” that employs a value-based approach to its external policies (Manners 2002) with a specific way of interpreting and translating values into principles and policies (Lucarelli and Manners 2006: 213). This is particularly evident in the EaP, where its normative influence is significant (Delcour 2022: 472, Larsen 2014: 906). Among the most prominent norms for the EU is GE, which is considered one of the "foundational myths" (Macrae 2010: 155). It is institutionalised through legal frameworks, such as the feminist foreign policy (Guerrina et al. 2023: 495), external policies (Chappell and Guerrina 2020; Debusscher and Manners 2020; Guerrina et al. 2023), especially enlargement policies (Galligan and Clavero 2012; Woodward and Van Der Vleuten 2014) with its “gender acquis” (Locher 2012), and financial instruments (Haastrup 2018: 224, Anagnostakis 2020: 42) since “The Treaty of Lisbon” in 2009 (Thies 2020).

While the EU declares GE as fundamental to its identity, scholars have noted that the practical execution of these values can be inconsistent, often remaining symbolic (Anagnostakis 2021: 42). For countries of the EaP, the EU has been criticised for disregarding the asymmetrical relationship between the EU and EaP countries (Horký-Hlucháň and Kratochvíl 2014: 264-265), presenting its values as inherently legitimate and universal (Nitoiu 2018: 699, 704). Furthermore, the promotion of GEN has been critiqued for sometimes lacking a deep feminist rationale, which can minimise the impact (Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm and Cin 2021: 11-12).

Despite these critiques, the EU remains at the forefront of diffusing GEN, including LGBT norms, which the EU also actively promotes, often using them as symbolic markers of “Europeanness” and democratic belonging (Ayoub and Paternotte 2014: 1-2, Slootmaeckers et al. 2016: 4). However, this symbolic value often exceeds the actual legal competence or power of the EU, leading to charges of “leveraged pedagogy” (Kulpa 2014) and creating divisions between “civilised” and “homophobic” states (Ammaturo 2015: 1155). From this self-understanding and practice, the EU has become the leading promoter of GEN, which is the primary interest of this thesis.

In conclusion, Georgia has been chosen as a case where despite being a “more likely” case for Europeanisation, different outcomes are observable, making it an interesting case to study the

limits of said theory. Additionally, the EU has been selected as it is a primary driver of norm diffusion regarding GEN and LGBT norms, having developed tools to promote equality abroad; however, its impact remains often symbolic. Therefore, understanding the EU as a gender actor requires moving beyond its rhetoric to critically assess how GEN are localised and contested.

4.2 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design. Its approach is most appropriate for achieving the research objectives, focusing on an in-depth understanding of complex social phenomena (Leavy 2014: 2). It explores perspectives related to norm contestation and localisation. By this, it aims to capture the details of local actors' interpretations and strategies, while considering the societal and context in which the local agency acts. This aligns with the constructivist underpinnings of the theoretical framework, emphasising that there can be different realities for people to bring these realities together (Guba 1990: 26) and that there are contrary views co-existing within a society that require contextualised interpretations (Hollinshead 2006: 52). The basic understanding of constructivism, that knowledge is the result of social processes (Pilarska 2021: 64), emphasises the social construction of norms and the importance of context and agency. As Pilarska (2021: 65) describes, constructivism helped them create a presence that allowed them to respectfully research intercultural and culturally diverse matters, which this thesis sought to achieve.

To connect the theoretical framework to the empirical data, norm contestation and localisation were operationalised as follows. Rather than measuring the presence or absence of a concept, the analysis focuses on identifying the specific type and form of norm contestation. During the coding of the interview transcripts, contestation was identified when participants described active disapproval or challenges to EU-promoted norms. In detail, this meant that contestation was coded, when interviewees described rhetoric or actions that challenged the fundamental legitimacy of a norm or when participants described debates not about the norm’s value but about its implementation. Therefore, this can include discursive contestation based on rhetoric, political or legislative contestation based on state actions, or societal contestation related to protests or statements from influential societal actors.

Norm localisation was identified by analysing events and descriptions of norms actively adapted or reinterpreted for the domestic context. Furthermore, for the different mechanics

described above, framing was found when participants described how they or other actors intentionally adapted their messaging to make norms more acceptable, while grafting was coded when participants referenced attempts to connect a “new” norm to local history or traditions. Additionally, pruning was operationalised when participants described the strategic avoidance of more controversial norm aspects to protect the advancement of other, less controversial ones.

4.3 Data Collection Methods

The primary data for this thesis were collected through semi-structured interviews with individuals working on GE issues within Georgian NGOs, international organisations in Georgia, and independent experts or academics with relevant knowledge and experience. This method was chosen for its ability to provide rich and detailed insights into participants' perspectives and interpretations, with discussions going beyond a predefined questionnaire (Brinkmann 2014: 286). For this, a semi-structured interview guide was developed (see Appendix I) covering key themes derived from the research questions and the theoretical framework. The questions include different subjects, including perceptions of GEN, experiences with EU influence, engagement with local actors regarding challenges and adaptation strategies. A purposive sampling strategy was used, selecting participants based on their expertise, involvement in policy processes or advocacy, and ability to provide informed perspectives on the research topic. Participants were asked to refer to other possible interviewees to capture different and varying viewpoints from actors from different parts of society.

Interviews were conducted in person in Tbilisi and online, according to the participants' preference, from February to April 2025. The final sample consisted of 12 semi-structured interviews. This sample was balanced on purpose to capture a range of expert perspectives from different sectors, including four representatives from academia, providing theoretical and long-term analytical perspectives on gender politics and EU-Georgia relations; four representatives from international organisations, offering insights into the strategies of norm promoters and the dynamics of donor-funded implementation; four representatives from Georgian civil society, including three from NGOs focused on GE and one from an independent, state-mandated human rights body, providing an "on-the-ground" perspective of local actors engaged in advocacy and affected by political change. This sample is not intended to be statistically representative, but to provide relatively rich qualitative information on key experts’ opinions in Georgia.

4.4 Data Analysis

The qualitative data collected through interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. As outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a thorough method for "identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (79). A theme can be understood as a response pattern or meaning derived from the data, which is important in answering the research question without needing one pattern to appear a certain amount of time across the dataset (Braun and Clarke 2006: 82).

The rationale behind choosing thematic analysis is clear: It is well-suited for this research, as it allows for the exploration of diverse experiences, perspectives and also shared meanings within the local context (Williamson et al. 2018: 455-456) regarding the complex processes of norm contestation and localisation. It enables a deep engagement with the data to identify key themes relevant to the research questions concerning norm contestation and localisation. As described above, this study adopts a primarily constructivist lens within thematic analysis, aiming to understand how meanings and experiences related to GEN are socially constructed and negotiated by actors within the Georgian context (Braun and Clarke 2006: 85, Joffe 2011: 211), while also acknowledging power dynamics and real-world implications as part of these processes. The analysis focuses on identifying underlying themes, which seek deeper meaning inside the data (Kiger and Varpio 2020: 847). The analysis is primarily deductive, informed by the concepts outlined in the analytical framework, such as Acharya's (2004: 248-249) factors. It is also informed inductively, allowing themes to emerge from the data (Braun and Clarke 2006: 83-84).

The analysis followed the six-phase process recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006: 87-93), adapted slightly to incorporate initial artificial intelligence-assisted coding (AILYZE, AILYZE response to author, April 24, 2025), and informed by Kiger and Varpio (2020: 848-853). Figure 2 shows how the themes underwent six steps to produce the final report. The process of creating the themes went as follows:

1. Familiarisation: The process began with deep familiarisation by transcribing each interview and then reading them multiple times. During this phase, initial notes were taken on recurring ideas and potential patterns relevant to the research questions. These notes include phrases that appeared often, such as "patriarchal culture", "women's role as a mother", "gender as alien", "government influence", or "lack of trust".

2. Generate Initial Codes: To manage the volume of qualitative data efficiently and generate a broad overview of potential codes, the artificial intelligence tool AILYZE (AILYZE response to author, April 24, 2025) was employed. Transcripts were processed by the tool to suggest preliminary codes. However, this output served only as a starting point. For example, the tool identified many segments related to traditional gender expectations, suggesting codes like “Women's Primary Role as Caregivers in Society” based on quotes such as “you ask, majority will tell that women's first role is to be a mother, being a wife and a married woman is the most important issue in this culture” (Interview 8). While the codes gave a good overview of the material and a good starting point for finding themes, they did not consider in detail the research question and insights from the analytical framework of this thesis. Therefore, during the manual review, many artificial intelligence-generated codes (AILYZE, AILYZE response to author, April 24, 2025) were refined by broadening or narrowing their scope, merging with similar codes, or occasionally discarding them if they seemed inaccurate or superficial upon closer reading.
3. Search for Themes: This step moved the analysis from the detailed level of codes towards identifying broader patterns of meaning relevant to the research questions. The initial search for themes was guided deductively by the core concepts of the theoretical framework, focusing on themes related to norm contestation (inspired by insights from Wiener 2014) and the factors influencing norm localisation from Acharya (2004: 248-249). For example, codes explicitly capturing resistance, pushback, negative framing, or legislative challenges to GEN or EU influence were grouped under a theme called “Mechanisms and Narratives of Contestation”, which includes codes such as “State-Led Contestation: Institutionalising Anti-Feminist/Anti-LGBT Narratives”. While this initial search was theoretically guided, the process remained open to identifying other patterns emerging inductively from the coded data, which might not fit into the initial deductive categories. For example, codes describing participants' views on the EU's specific role suggested a theme related to perceptions and experiences of EU influence.
4. Reviewing Themes: The fourth phase involved refining potential themes developed in the previous step. The goal was to ensure that the themes accurately captured the meanings visible across the entire dataset, were internally coherent, and were distinct. This step moved the analysis beyond the initial pattern recognition towards constructing a robust thematic structure representative of the data relevant to the research questions. Firstly, all the data extracts for the potential themes were reviewed and critically

evaluated to determine if the theme accurately reflects the meanings within the data. For example, for the potential theme of "Mechanisms and Narratives of Contestation", all coded extracts related to government funding, legislative rollbacks, propaganda and societal backlash were reviewed. If extracts did not fit well, they were recorded, or the theme's scope was reconsidered. Secondly, the potential themes concerning the full dataset were considered. This involved checking if the themes captured the patterns across all participant accounts. Based on these two micro steps, initial themes were merged, split and refined. For example, the initial theme of "Mechanisms and Narratives of Contestation" was found to be too broad, requiring splitting. Accordingly, the theme was split into more specific themes, "State-Led Contestation Strategies", which focuses on government actions like legislative changes and official rhetoric, and "Societal Resistance and Traditionalist Narratives", which focuses more on the pushback attributed to the Church or conservative parts of society.

5. Defining and Naming Themes: This final phase of the analytical process involved refining the themes identified and reviewed in Step 4. The objective was to clearly understand each theme's scope and essence, articulating the specific "story" it tells about the contestation and localisation of GEN and LGBT Norms in Georgia and assigning it a concise and informative name. Each theme from Step 4 was revisited, along with its codes and the supporting data extracts, to ensure a final coherence check. After that, a definition and analytical narrative were written for each theme, synthesising the core ideas captured by the codes within the theme and preparing everything for the final step.
6. Producing the Report: The last step includes selecting quotes and writing the analytical narrative to link the identified themes to the research questions and the theoretical framework, as well as providing an interpretive analysis of their significance. As such, the final themes are directly linked to the operationalisation of the thesis's core theoretical concepts. Therefore, the themes are not simple descriptive summaries but serve as the empirical measure for the different forms of contestation, localisation and their outcomes. For example, the themes "State-led Contestation" and "Societal Pushback" show different forms of norm contestation. The evidence grouped under these themes shows legislative rollbacks and framing of narratives, thereby directly referring to the operational indicators for validity contestation. The final report can be found in the following chapter.

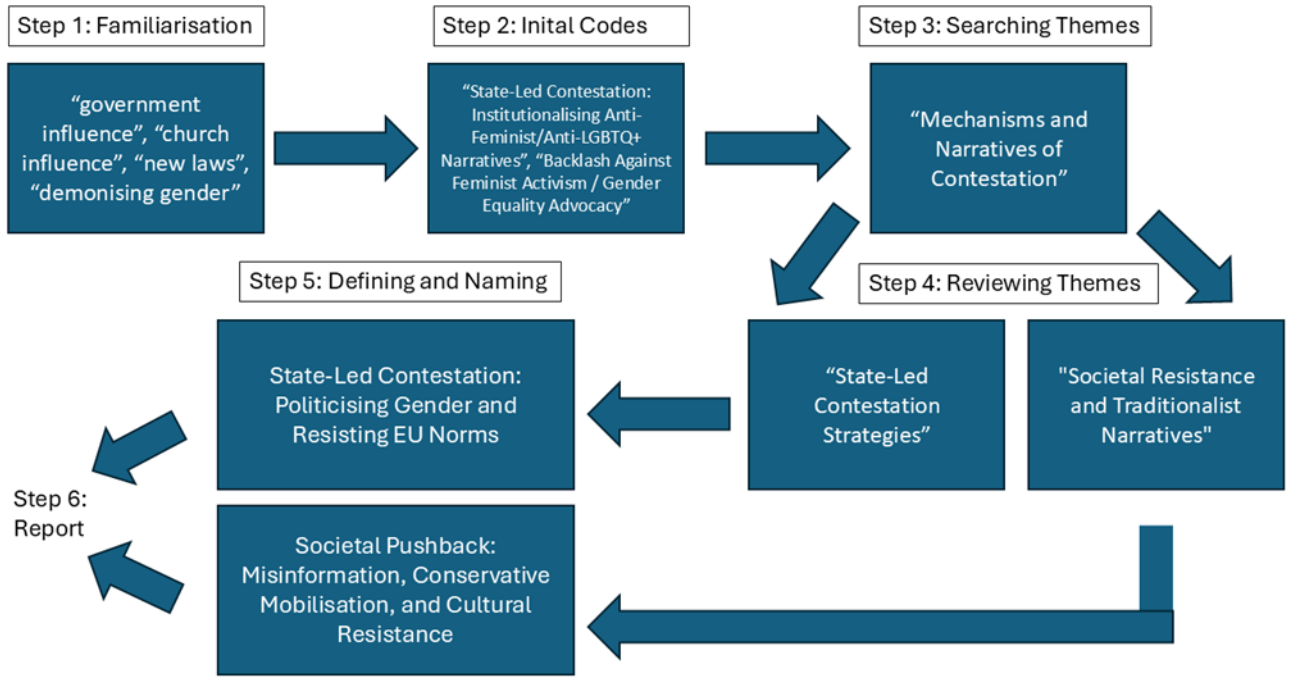

Figure 1: Visualisation of the making of two themes following all six steps outlined above

4.5 Ethical Considerations

Given the involvement of human participants and discussion of potentially sensitive topics, strict ethical standards were applied to the research. Additionally, ethical approval was obtained from the University of Glasgow before data collection, which was granted to conduct this research (see Appendix III).

Accordingly, before each interview, participants received a detailed explanation of the research and its objectives, the nature of their participation, data usage, measures to ensure confidentiality and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Informed written consent was obtained from all participants before conducting the interview. Potential risks were considered minimal but could include discomfort when discussing sensitive political and social issues. Participants were reminded that they did not have to answer any question they felt uncomfortable with. All identifying information was removed from the transcripts and research notes to protect participant privacy and confidentiality. Pseudonyms are used to report the findings.

Additionally, measures were taken to ensure that the combinations of details reported do not reveal participants' identities. As acknowledged in the positionality statement, the researcher's background was considered throughout the process. Efforts were made to conduct the

interviews respectfully, at a convenient and safe place for the participant, and to remain reflexive throughout the data collection and analysis process.

4.6 Research Limitations

While the methodology was designed to be robust, the study acknowledges several potential limitations, including generalisability, sample bias, researcher bias, and temporal and access limitations.

As a qualitative case study focused on Georgia with a limited number of participants selected through purposive sampling, the findings are not statistically generalisable to other contexts or populations. However, the study aims for analytical depth rather than broad representativeness, allowing insights into contexts similar to those of other EaP countries. While efforts were made to include diverse perspectives, the sample may overrepresent certain viewpoints, dependent on access and participation willingness. Additionally, despite efforts towards reflexivity, the researcher's background and perspectives could influence data interpretation. To mitigate this issue, an artificial intelligence tool (AILYZE, AILYZE response to author, April 24, 2025) was used to receive a less biased interpretation. Another limitation is Georgia-specific and involves the specific period during which data were collected. Due to the rapidly evolving political situation in Georgia that has upset many people, especially those working on GEN, their answers might be especially negative or harsh, impacting the data. Another difficulty that became obvious throughout the research process involved accessing certain high-level political actors or specific institutional representatives, which might limit the range of perspectives. These limitations are acknowledged, and the findings will be presented with appropriate caution, emphasising the contextual nature of the conclusions drawn.

5. Findings and Analysis: Themes and their Synthesis

5.1 Presentation and Analysis of Themes

Theme 1: "The Weight of Tradition" from Patriarchal Norms and Historical Legacies

The first theme explores the domestic context in which EU-promoted GEN is introduced in Georgia. The interviews consistently highlighted the influence of deeply entrenched patriarchal norms, specific constructions of national identity tied to "tradition", and complex historical legacies, particularly about the Soviet era but also to the Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918-1921) and its starting point of feminist action and movements. Together, these elements constitute the "weight of tradition", referring to a socio-cultural and political background that significantly shapes how GEN are perceived and contested. Theoretically, this theme addresses the factors of normative congruence and identity fit (Acharya 2004: 248), demonstrating the challenges of external norms when meeting with strong local beliefs and patriarchal structures. Understanding this context is therefore important as this "weight of tradition" serves as the foundational explanatory condition for the varied implementation of EU-promoted GEN. This normative incongruence creates a ground for the processes of contestation and localisation, which are detailed in the subsequent themes.

The EU's normative goals, which call for the socialisation and economic recognition of the care economy and the modernisation of labour law for work-life balance (European Commission 2020a: 2, 12-13) contrasts with the reality of the traditional gender roles and patriarchal structures that the interviewees often referred to. Participants frequently described the societal expectations that limit women primarily to domestic and caregiving roles, often viewing these roles as central to female identity. Nino[6], a professor in Georgia, shared her opinion that people in Georgia see women's roles mainly as mothers and wives. Furthermore, she explains how different historical narratives are frequently used to dismiss the need for reform:

> "Some would say that, okay, just because we had King Tamar and just because motherhood is very highly valued in our society, it already means that we have no problems in terms of gender equality."

This directing to a historical exception, a powerful female monarch from the 12th century, is a recurring traditionalist discourse. As Manana, a feminist researcher, notes, this narrative of

[6] All names used are pseudonyms. Each interview was given a name, as seen in Appendix II. The quotations from the interviews were kept as original as possible, adapted to help the readability.

respect often masks an inherent patriarchal structure. She describes a culture of "unseen oppression" where women's value is narrowly defined. In her words:

> "It's a very diffuse view of what our culture is, when you ask Georgians how they see themselves, it's mostly traditions and hospitality, not equality or brotherhood. Generally speaking, the values define who a woman should be. The juxtaposition is mostly activist, more angry women seen next to very modest women. Anger is not an accepted emotion for women. Mostly, women are seen as wives or mothers. That's the values Georgians would see in women."

Her opinion was shared by other interviewees, who emphasised that the patriarchal culture only allows women to be praised for their role as mothers (Natia, NGO), suggesting that even perceived praise is confined within patriarchal limits.

Another woman visible in Georgian culture, which can be interpreted as a stronghold of feminism in Georgia, is the iconic "Mother Georgia" statue in Tbilisi. According to Natia, this statue is interpreted not as a symbol of female power but as a patriarchal tool that traps women in specific nationalistic and reproductive roles. This shows how even seemingly positive symbols of womanhood are used to reinforce a traditionalist and patriarchal discourse. These views, in turn, lead to the cultural normalisation of women performing most of the unpaid care work, contributing to a "double burden" where women are expected to work outside the home while also keeping the primary responsibility within it (Nino, Academia).

The historical context, particularly the Soviet legacy, adds another layer of complexity. While some interviewees pointed to the pre-Soviet roots of feminist thought (Natela, International Organisation), others emphasised the negative impact of the Soviet period. Natia, an activist and NGO member, shared her thoughts and beliefs about this period of Georgia's history and its connection to today's GE efforts. She said:

> "[The] Soviet past hurt many things, not only gender equality, it also hurt the solidarity concept, it hurt citizenship meaning, and also very much practice and teachings, how to be, how to say… and it makes it a hard implementation of, and understanding of rules, laws, new concepts. This experience of totalitarian past did not give enough ground for the citizen to have the ownership of its own rights, and to feel the ownership on its place, the city, the country, and rights, and also body, you know? And this is totalitarian trauma, which takes out the agency from the citizens."

According to her, this superficiality of Soviet equality and the missing agency in laws and regulations contribute to a general discrediting of "equality" concepts or a particular understanding of right that complicates current efforts. This legacy contributes to a specific, non-liberal understanding of "equality" that complicates the framing efforts of pro-norm actors today. When the EU promotes "gender equality," parts of the Georgian audience may interpret this through the cynical filter of past experiences, viewing it as another top-down, artificial

project with little practical meaning. This historical “normative baggage”, meaning individually held, culturally shared background experiences (Wiener 2014: 41), means that even a seemingly straightforward concept like equality is contested from the outset.

This theme illustrates the challenging domestic context for EU-promoted GEN in Georgia, highlighting significant normative incongruence. The deeply rooted patriarchal norms surrounding family roles, decision-making power, and economic ownership create a substantial misfit with norms promoting substantive GE. The existing cultural model, where women are expected to perform most of the unpaid care work, as described by the interviewees, represents a clear example of low normative congruence. The cultural normalisation of the gendered division of labour and the perception of women as primarily mothers and wives directly conflict with the premises underlying many EU gender policies. Especially noted can be the impact on WEE, which is constrained due to the factors above and not mainly due to legal issues. This misfit creates the conditions for future validity contestation, where deeply held local beliefs challenge the righteousness of the EU's vision of gender relations.

This lack of congruence forms a primary basis for resistance, making it difficult for EU-promoted norms to be adopted. For local actors opposing the norms, this misfit can fuel strategies of rejection, as will be explored in later themes. For pro-norm CSOs, however, this gap necessitates active localisation efforts to make the norms understandable and eventually acceptable within specific segments of society. While the existence of historical feminist roots might seem like a facilitating factor for normative congruence, the narratives suggest these roots are either not widely known, are overshadowed by more recent history, or are perhaps even contested themselves. The Soviet legacy's rhetoric of equality, contrasted against patriarchal realities, may contribute to distrust or specific interpretations of “equality” that differ from the EU's ideas. The feeling that rights can be easily “taken away,” possibly influenced by historical experiences stemming from the Soviet Union, might also impact how both proponents and opponents engage with current norm promotion efforts. Moreover, the traditional discourse around Queen Tamar is a form of resistance, where historical exceptions mask contemporary systemic inequality.

To summarise, the “Weight of Tradition” described by participants represents a strong basis for the contestation of EU-promoted GEN and which makes localisation more difficult. It underscores a limitation of Europeanisation models: While such models can account for high normative misfit by predicting low implementation or rejection, they often fail to explain the

more complex outcomes of norm localisation and hybridity that emerge from this process. Against this background of fundamental misfit, active contestation by domestic actors becomes highly likely. Furthermore, it establishes why pro-norm actors cannot promote EU norms "as is" but must engage in active localisation strategies like framing and grafting to bridge this gap, further analysed in Theme 4.

Theme 2: State-Led Contestation by Politicising Gender and Resisting EU Norms

While Theme 1 detailed the strong traditional context, this theme focuses on a dynamic factor: the active and escalating state-led contestation of EU-promoted GEN. The interview data reveal a pattern where state actors, including the ruling party, employ different strategies to contest these norms. The contestation is hereby not simple but entails both objection and legislative rejection, which result in limited or no implementation. It also contains more subtle forms of reinterpretation and instrumentalisation that lead to modified outcomes different from what the EU intended. Therefore, it goes beyond passive non-compliance and constitutes deliberate norm contestation and reshaping, as Wiener (2014) described, which involves rhetorical framing and legislative action, what the literature calls "reactive contestation". These state-led actions significantly shape the political opportunity structure for norm localisation and directly impact the work and agency of other domestic actors who advocate for GE, making challenges to normative congruence and identity fit bigger. This theme is divided into two subthemes that explore the different elements of the state-led contestation.

Subtheme 2.1: Rhetorical Contestation and Counter-Narratives

As established, the EU's normative framework is built on principles of equality, non-discrimination, and integrating GEN and LGBT rights as fundamental European values. The interview findings show the Georgian government engaging in rhetorical contestation of this framework by constructing counter-narratives.

As Mariam, an activist working at an NGO, explains, the governmental framing is not a subtle process but a direct strategy of vilification. The government, she notes, actively tries to "demonise anything related to feminism and gender equality as something foreign and threatening the traditional norms or Georgianness". This tactic of framing links progressive norms to external forces, thereby creating doubts about their legitimacy within the national

context. Adding to this, Tamar identified a particularly working narrative used by the government, which she describes as follows:

> "[T]hey are just brainwashed, and they are scared that the European Union is imposing decadence or some distorted values. And, officially in Georgia, Russia is considered to be an occupier, right? [W]hat Russia propaganda decided [is], to bring into the discourse against this. Okay, if I'm an occupier, physically, territorially, then the EU, the West, is a moral occupier. And I am trying, as a defender of true Christian values, to defend myself, like Georgia and other similar countries, from the West's moral occupation. […] And, you know, Russia's propagandistic narratives are working quite well. If we look at the governmental channels, pro-governmental media, such as Imedi TV or Rustavi 1 or even the public broadcaster for the last few months, all of them transformed into Russian propagandistic channels."

This "moral occupier" framing is a powerful tool of identity politics. It directly ties any progress on GEN to a perceived threat to national identity and sovereignty by creating a narrative that these norms are incompatible with Georgian traditions. This demonisation goes so far as to the very term "gender" being "demonised" (Eka, International Organisation), making appropriate discussion difficult. On the contrary, the government defends "some family values" (Manana, Academia) and tradition, creating a polarised discourse where GENs are portrayed as standing opposite national values and norms.

What becomes clear is how state actors engage in rhetorical contestation to counter norm adaptation, representing validity contestation. By framing GEN and LGBT rights as "foreign", "alien", "threatening", or part of an "imposed ideology", state narratives actively construct these norms as illegitimate within the Georgian context. This strategy targets Acharya's (2004: 248) identity fit by purposely manufacturing a stronger misfit between EU-promoted norms and perceived national values or identity. The "moral occupier" framing is an interesting example of using identity politics to resist external normative pressure. This rhetorical contestation serves several purposes: it delegitimises both the norms and their domestic supporters. Furthermore, it leads to mobilisation of specific part of the population and justifies policy inactivity or rollback. The demonisation of the term "gender" itself aims to block any fruitful discussion completely and instead polarise public opinion, making senseful engagement difficult.

The interviews also highlighted two observable phases. The first phase, from 2014 to 2019, is characterised by reforms driven by clear EU incentives, when CSOs saw the Georgian government as wanting to implement actual change towards EU membership. However, the 2019 "Gavrilov's Night" protests were the turning point, introducing a new, second phase from

2019 to 2024. This phase is still ongoing, marked by the Georgian government's escalating contestation of liberal norms and gestures towards the EU and the whole "West".

Subtheme 2.2: Legislative and Policy Rollback

The EU's agenda explicitly promotes "advancing equal participation and leadership" for women (European Commission 2020a: 2) and ensuring non-discrimination. However, participants pointed to concrete legislative actions by the state that directly contest and reverse progress on GEN. One key example frequently referred to was the abolition of mandatory gender quotas for political party lists.

Natela, who works for an international organisation involved in women's political participation, recounts how the ruling party justified this move by claiming "gender equality has been reached in Georgia, so we don't need the temporary measures anymore". This action was seen by many participants as a significant setback, undermining efforts to increase women's political representation (Tamar, Academia). Another significant legislative action highlighted was the removal of gender-related terminology from legal frameworks, which some described as "horrible" (Ketevan, Academia) and as something that "will negatively affect gender equality in the country" (Ana, Governmental Organisation). Participants also discussed the restrictive Anti-LGBT law, which directly contradicts the principles of non-discrimination in previous legal frameworks such as the Anti-Discrimination law. These actions were seen as part of a broader "turn towards more conservative ideology" involving taking "back a lot of achievements that we [Georgia] had in 2010s" (Nino, Academia).

These legislative and policy rollbacks represent direct, institutionalised forms of state-led reactive contestation. The state moves beyond discursive contestation to actively dismantle existing frameworks aligned with EU norms and to create new barriers. The abolition of gender quotas and the removal of the term "gender" directly challenge the substance of GEN promoted by the EU and signal a rejection of these norms by the state. This is a special form of decoupling since the rhetoric towards the EU stayed the same while removing the substance of required normative policies. These actions demonstrate the state prioritising political considerations over being aligned with EU expectations, even at the potential cost of hindering the EU integration process.

This theme highlights the limitations of EU conditionality for candidate countries when domestic political compliance costs are high, something the Europeanisation literature also finds. Additionally, it shows that legislative changes can be reversed quickly despite a

rhetorically declared goal of joining the EU. The contradictory legislation regarding LGBT rights further highlights a strategy of selective compliance or symbolic politics, as the Anti-Discrimination law only stayed effective as long as it served the interests of the political elites, e.g. to receive visa-free access to the EU. Similarly, the contradiction between ratifying the IC while removing the term "gender" from the legislation showcases how a law's formal adoption seeks external legitimacy while removing all the actual content from a policy, an instrumentalisation further explored in the next subtheme.

Theme 3: Societal Pushback due to Misinformation and Cultural Resistance

Beyond direct state actions, the interviews highlighted societal pushback against EU-promoted GEN, fuelled by the mobilisation of conservative voices and the strong influence of misinformation. This theme looks at the societal aspects of norm contestation, exploring how the GOC helps spread conservative narratives. This includes propaganda and misinformation to shape public perception and establish cultural resistance. This societal contestation is linked to the challenges identified in Theme 1. It is often supported by the state-led narratives discussed in Theme 2, which in turn creates a problematic environment for the localisation of GEN by undermining the efforts of local advocacy actors, as discussed in Theme 4.

The EU's GEN promotion relies on the logic of persuasion and dialogue. This is confronted by the narratives promoted by conservative actors in an information environment filled with misinformation. Accordingly, interviewees highlighted the role of propaganda and misinformation in shaping public attitudes and creating societal pushback. Participants described campaigns, linked to state actors or external influences like Russia, deliberately spreading misinformation about GEN, LGBT rights, and the EU.

Ketevan, a professor for many years, identifies the GOC as a powerful force shaping public discourse and spreading conservative views on gender and sexuality:

> "[U]nfortunately, they've [the GOC] been spreading this discourse, very traditional discourse where male is a dominant and the woman has to be following whatever their husband or partner or father or uncle says. And I think they are doing a good job of spreading this, this type of discourse in the society."

Her view is shared by Manana (Academia), who bluntly states, "Georgian church is very anti-gender equality, anti-LGBT." The GOC's influence extends into active political mobilisation. The Church has shown on several occasions that it can mobilise people to follow the GOC's directions, such as for demonstrations against the Anti-Discrimination law, which the GOC

framed as a law supporting the LGBT community (Tamar, Academia). This mobilisation often involves leveraging its imagined role as a guardian of tradition. Participants also mentioned the role of other traditionalist or far-right groups exploiting gender and LGBT issues, often linking them to anti-Western narratives, in particular Russian propaganda (Manana, NGO).

Beyond organised campaigns, the EU's GEN face a broader, more diffuse cultural resistance and public backlash. This was sometimes linked to the persistence of traditional gender roles and norms discussed in Theme 1, leading to difficulty in discussing certain aspects of equality and often manifesting as a public backlash against those who advocate for change. Ketevan (Academia) describes this kind of reaction from her own experience in the following way:

> "[W]hen the local feminist activists started screaming about gender equality, it created a huge backlash from traditional communities, from those people who are traditional. There are still people who say that gender doesn't exist, but it also put gender equality on the agenda. Before that, we didn't talk about it at all, and I think it's not just about gender equality, but about everything in general. Whenever you start talking about something, whenever you start speaking up for something, there always will be a backlash. There always will be a group of society, of people, whoever, who will, contradict with this one."

As the quote shows, gender and GE have become polarising in Georgia (Nino, Academia). This resistance was sometimes linked to generational divides, with older generations perceived as more hostile to changes framed as "foreign". The connection of "gender" with LGBT issues, often driven by political manipulation, was also seen as fuelling broader public fear and resistance.

The evidence highlights the significant role of powerful societal actors, particularly the GOC, in mobilising contestation against GEN. By using its institutional authority and imagined role as protector of tradition and national values, the GOC engages in direct validity contestation. The institution spreads narratives that frame GE and LGBT rights as threats, reinforcing normative incongruence and identity misfit. While some interviewees pointed to potential fragmentation or declining trust, the Church remains a key actor in the network of societal resistance. The activities often align narratives also promoted by state actors (Theme 2), promoting misinformation and propaganda.

These campaigns are a form of discursive contestation that frames EU norms as dangerous, and foreign, thereby promoting public resistance and delegitimising the GEN validity. The significant resource inequality between state actors and CSOs further increased the challenges for the local agency, as CSOs and activists struggle to compete with well-funded propaganda networks. The deliberate targeting of specific populations and the use of new media

demonstrate the strategic nature of these campaigns. This weaponisation of information creates a highly polluted information environment, making evidence-based discussion difficult and contributing significantly to the polarisation surrounding gender issues in Georgia.

What follows from the misinformation is public backlash, demonstrating popular resistance to imagined challenges to established norms and values. The polarisation and avoidance surrounding discussions make constructive dialogue difficult and hinder localisation processes. This resistance hinders the localisation process at a foundational level, making it difficult for pro-norm actors even to begin a conversation or a "proactive contestation" to find common ground. It creates a structural constraint that limits the scope of acceptable change. It creates the need for pro-norm actors to engage in careful and strategic framing and pruning of GEN to avoid triggering any form of public backlash. This cultural resistance forms a significant barrier to the effectiveness and scope of the local agency for GEN.

Theme 4: Local Actors' Strategies for GEN Localisation and Adaptation

Considering the traditional norms discussed in Theme 1 and the significant state-led and societal contestation discussed in Themes 2 and 3, this theme shifts the focus to the local agency of domestic actors, primarily CSOs, activists, and experts, who actively promote GEN in Georgia. It looks at these actors' strategies to navigate the ever more challenging environment and adapt norms to the local contest, thereby localising the norms and building resilience. This theme highlights the practical ways domestic actors attempt to close the gap between the EU-promoted GEN and the local situation, demonstrating the local agency's important role in shaping the outcomes of norm diffusion, even without state support.

Subtheme 4.1: Localising the Norm by Framing and Adaptation Strategies

Given the deep normative incongruence and active contestation, a direct promotion of EU-promoted GEN is likely to fail. The interview findings show that pro-norm actors are aware of this and have developed fitting strategies in response. A key strategy participants highlight involves efforts to adapt and frame GEN in ways that resonate locally. As Natia, a long-serving NGO activist, puts it, the most effective strategies are flexible and tailored ones, emphasising that one must "take local expertise, learn the context and then develop the strategy". This adaptation often involves careful discursive work and marks the importance of basing initiatives on local knowledge.

One key strategy is framing reforms regarding Georgia's widely popular European aspirations. For example, some actors might strategically use EU or Western values as leverage for local advocacy, arguing for reforms based on Georgia's European aspirations and using Western values to negotiate more effectively with the Georgian government (Manana). This tactic links the specific, sometimes controversial, gender norm to the larger, less controversial goal of EU integration, thereby increasing its local legitimacy. Another powerful strategy is grafting, where activists counter the "foreign imposition" narrative by connecting EU norms to Georgia's history, perhaps by referencing Georgia's history of feminist activism (Tamar). Adaptation also involves choosing language carefully or focusing initially on less controversial aspects of GE, while not forgetting broader issues in the long run.

Perhaps the most unique example of successful localisation comes from Eka, an expert at an international organisation, who described the adaptation of the Swedish "Papa Schools" model to encourage involved fatherhood. This model was adapted to the local context by focusing on what the Georgian fathers needed: practical lessons, including first aid courses, and study visits to reproductive health clinics, as Georgians believe what doctors are telling more than other authority figures. Additionally, to limit the dropout rates, the organisers decided to go to places where men feel comfortable and where they would be able to bond with the other participants, which turned out to be a place to have Khinkali, a traditional Georgian dumpling:

> "[I]n terms of socialisation, when the training started, there was a very high dropout rate, but then our partners, they realised that they needed more bonding between people, so they were taking these fathers to a very masculine place, Khinkali, to have a Khinkali, and to bond with each other as men. Moreover, when they were stronger as a group, the dropout rate was also quite low."

This is a real-life example of localisation through grafting and pruning. The core norm, involved fatherhood, was kept. However, it was grafted onto local cultural practices, Khinkali, and pruned to include locally relevant needs, making it a successful hybrid. As such, it also highlights an important aspect of the implementation outcome: the EU-promoted norm is adopted, but its practice is now fundamentally different from the original This results in a unique, localised version of "involved fatherhood" intertwined with traditional Georgian masculine socialising.

The insights demonstrate localisation strategies local actors employ and how they exercise their agency. Recognising the normative incongruence (Theme 1) and anticipating contestation (Themes 2 and 3), these actors actively engage in norm localisation by interpreting and reframing external norms to increase their local acceptance and legitimacy. When activists use

Georgia's EU aspirations as leverage, they are framing by constructing a connection between the EU's GEN promotion and the widely accepted local goal of European integration to increase the norms' legitimacy. The emphasis on tailored strategies and local expertise highlights a bottom-up element within the norm diffusion process, pushing back against purely top-down models often associated with Europeanisation. Framing GEN in terms of EU alignment aims to enhance the legitimacy of the norms by linking them to widely desired geopolitical goals and giving CSOs power over negotiations. Alternatively, attempts to link GEN to local history or values aim to improve identity fit and normative congruence. When they reference Georgia's history of feminist activism, they are using the specific localisation mechanism of grafting by attaching the new, contested norm of GE to a pre-existing and authentic local history to make it more familiar and resonant. These adaptation efforts are important for achieving the goals of norms being adapted but also carry the risk of weakening the norms or more superficial adoption.

Subtheme 4.2: Building Resilience and Alliances by Promoting Intersectionality and Inclusion

Participants described different strategies local actors use to support their work. Building alliances and seeking external support appears as a useful tool to resist political pressure. Maia, who has extensive experience in international organisations, stressed the need to "work with everybody, [to] build bridges". This involves creating solidarity among different CSOs, including linking feminist struggles with broader human rights, especially since these other groups struggle with similar issues (Natia, NGO). External support, particularly from the EU, was frequently cited as important for survival, concluding that "if EU and other stakeholders and supporters stop supporting this gender equality agenda, then it will be very difficult to continue working on it" (Maia, International Organisation). Referencing Georgia's history of feminist activism was also implicitly a source of inspiration and legitimacy for contemporary activists facing backlash.

This subtheme highlights local actors' strategies to increase their capacity and agency in a complex situation. Alliance-building, both domestically among CSOs and internationally with donors and partners, is a key resilience strategy against political and societal contestation by presenting a more unified front. The EU presents itself as a strong external supporter, once again highlighting their interconnectedness with CSOs. However, the reliance on EU funding reveals a paradox of the Europeanisation-localisation dynamic: while the EU acts as a top-

down norm diffuser, it also functions as a bottom-up enabler of local agency. The EU's financial support provides the resources that empower the CSOs on the front lines of localising.

Alliance-building relates to promoting intersectionality, as it is an advanced localisation strategy that uses reframing. As the actors adapt EU norms and deepen and enrich them by making them relevant to a wider audience and building broader alliances, they display a high level of local agency. As such, it directly addresses Acharya's (2004: 248) factor of increasing the power and credibility of the local actors to be more successful in localising the norms they find appealing. However, there are issues when trying to fully implement intersectionality, as often LGBT issues are separated from other GE issues for pragmatic or organisational reasons. Intersectionality, therefore, faces significant challenges, particularly given the intense contestation surrounding LGBT rights, as will be discussed in the following Theme 5.

Theme 5: LGBT Norms Between Heightened Contestation and Struggles for Inclusion

While previous themes explored the general context and dynamics of GEN contestation and localisation, this theme explores the particularly intense and often distinct struggles surrounding LGBT rights in Georgia. The EU's normative framework is clear in its promotion of protection against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity as a fundamental European value. The interview data reveal that LGBT issues serve as a distinct example of intense contestation, often instrumentalised in political discourse and met with strong societal and institutional resistance, as already discussed above. This link highlights the strongest normative incongruence between EU-promoted values of non-discrimination and inclusion and deeply ingrained local traditionalist and religious viewpoints. Analysing this specific link is important for understanding the limits of GEN diffusion and the immediate challenges local agencies face in this sphere. Moreover, it once again emphasises the practical difficulties of implementing intersectional approaches to GE in a polarised environment. Therefore, this theme examines the specific forms of contestation targeting LGBT rights and the ongoing struggles for inclusion and recognition.

The data shows that LGBT issues are undergoing significantly more intense contestation than some other aspects of GE discussed so far. Opponents of GE have successfully and strategically linked the very concept of "gender" to LGBT issues, making it a "scary thing" due to its use by conservatives and populists (Nino, Academia). As described in Theme 2, the framing leads to homophobia from political leaders, which in turn creates distrust in members of the LGBT

community but also in anything Western, as LGBT is often linked with "Western decadence". This culminates in contestation expressed through political actions, such as the political instrumentalisation of LGBT issues as discussed before; however, not only for the governing party, but "queer issues were very much instrumentalised also from opposition parties" (Natia, NGO). According to Mariam (NGO), this framing has led to a political and social environment that creates significant barriers as the Georgian society remains homophobic, with attitudes potentially worsening due to governmental propaganda and misinformation. This intense contestation has a direct chilling effect on the local agency, forcing even non-LGBT CSOs to engage in strategic pruning of their advocacy, as Mariam explains:

> "Many CSOs [don't] elaborate on [LGBT] when they talk about the gender equality issues, because they think, they are afraid that this is the line of work they will be associated with, and they try to defend themselves, you know? Something that creates these impressions that you work on the LGBTQI issues. So, some organisations, they are not inclusive of those, of this work."

This tactic effectively isolates LGBT activists and prevents the formation of broader pro-norm coalitions. It creates what the academic Ketevan calls a "climate of fear for advocates".

Georgia's contradictory legislation illustrates this contestation. On the one hand, Georgia adopted the comprehensive Anti-Discrimination law in 2014, a direct requirement for securing the highly valued EU visa liberalisation package. On the other hand, the state has more recently promoted anti-LGBT legislation that directly contradicts the basis of the Anti-Discrimination law. As the academic Tamar points out, "You cannot have both Anti-Discrimination law and the law against LGBTQ propaganda because these two ones are contradictory". This paradox is a typical case of decoupling, demonstrating that the Georgian state is willing to adopt an EU norm when the external incentive is high and transactional. However, it simultaneously engages in validity contestation through new, contradictory legislation to appease domestic political interests.

A clear example of a failed attempt at localisation was the push for a Tbilisi Pride march, an initiative heavily supported by international actors. Nino (Academia) describes this as a "paradigmatic example of imported or introduced notions" that did not align with local realities. She explains that many local queer community organisations were "very vocally against this pride," feeling they were being used as pawns in a geopolitical game between the Georgian government and international bodies. This top-down promotion, which did not account for the local context or the community's strategic priorities, ultimately generated societal backlash and was seen by some as counterproductive to the cause. It shows how lacking

local ownership and failing to adapt to the needs of local circumstances can lead to counterproductive outcomes.

Despite this overwhelmingly hostile environment, the local agency is not entirely suppressed, and there are signs of struggle for inclusion and shifting dynamics. As noted, some participants strongly voiced their opinion that LGBT rights must be included in the broader GE discussions. As Manana (Academia) explained, the emergence of independent "queer groups that would have more agency and independence" was noted, as well as generational differences, with data suggesting young women are significantly more pro-LGBT than young men or older generations, and a large majority of youth reportedly oppose violence against LGBT people. Furthermore, signs of emerging solidarity with the LGBT community were mentioned, particularly within recent protest movements, although this was seen as gradual and perhaps not fully embraced (Tamar, Academia).

The interviewees show how LGBT issues represent high contestation in Georgia. The LGBT domain is the clearest example of validity contestation in this study. The political instrumentalisation of LGBT rights, framing them as foreign and threatening is a key strategy used by state and societal actors to mobilise resistance against LGBT inclusion and against broader liberal or EU-aligned reforms. This instrumentalisation makes it impossible to have discussions and bring forward policy progress. Furthermore, the legislative contradictions demonstrate a clear challenge to the localisation of non-discrimination norms. While Georgia may have adopted an Anti-Discrimination law, the introduction of the Anti-LGBT law signifies a rejection of the underlying principles, hinting at the limits of formal norm adoption without genuine political will or societal acceptance.

This intense contestation has a negative effect on the local agency. The fear among CSOs highlight the limitations of the local agency for those working in or belonging to the LGBT community. The risks associated with advocacy are high, limiting the capacity for open promotion and norm adoption. However, the data also points towards internal complexities and potential shifts. The strong arguments for inclusion made by some participants highlight the ongoing debate about intersectionality within the Georgian GE movement itself (linking to Theme 4.2). The emergence of independent LGBT groups and signs of solidarity indicate growing resilience and agency within the community and its allies.

Generational shifts suggest potential future changes in attitudes. Nonetheless, the local agency shows resilience, even under extreme pressure. The formation of independent groups and the

push for intersectional solidarity represent a form of counter-contestation from below. These actors are refusing to be silenced and engage in proactive contestation to create an alternative, inclusive meaning for what it means to be Georgian.

Theme 6: Perceptions and Impacts of EU Influence

The final theme addresses the role of the EU as the primary external actor promoting GEN in Georgia. It explores the changing and differentiated nature of the EU's influence as seen and experienced by local actors. It thereby interrogates how the EU acts as an enabler for some actors and aspects of GEN. Understanding this ambiguity is important to understanding the dynamics between external pressures and the domestic situation in shaping GEN in Georgia. It relates directly to the factor of legitimacy enhancement by looking at how cooperation with the EU is interpreted.

Despite the significant contestation detailed previously, participants mostly acknowledged the EU's significant role in putting and keeping GE on the agenda in Georgia. The EU was described as "one of the major supporters of the gender equality agenda" (Nana, International Organisation) and a vital source of funding and support for civil society: “EU, it's important for NGO and civil society that EU was a supporter for Georgian people and local NGOs” (Ana, Governmental Organisation).

This support from the EU is financial and provides powerful political leverage. The most frequently cited example of this was the 2014 Anti-Discrimination law. As the academic Tamar explains, its adoption was a direct consequence of EU conditionality: “the most important legislation was, of course, Anti-Discrimination law adopted in 2014 as part of the visa liberalisation negotiation package with the EU”. This link to the EU's agenda is a crucial tool for activists. Additionally, interviewees mentioned that despite initial resistance towards the Anti-Discrimination law because it was seen as an external imposition, it became a powerful tool for activists. They localised the law through strategic framing and successfully reframed it as a Georgian law, using it to build local legitimacy.

The EU's strategies were sometimes criticised as being top-down or lacking sufficient understanding of the local context. Natia, a long-time NGO activist who has worked on many donor-funded projects, offers a critique of the top-down approach:

> "[T]his narrow approach, top-down approach could not bring the sustainable and long-last changes. This strategy maybe lacked some context analysis, and peculiarities of the countries itself, which should have been filled with the knowledge and experience and wisdom inside the country."

This critique suggests that top-down strategies can lead to superficial compliance, where laws are passed to satisfy donors but lack genuine domestic ownership. Furthermore, she describes the adoption of gender quotas as being "very, very questionable," something done merely for the "EU integration process" rather than out of deep commitment. The ultimate proof of the EU's limited influence is the recent legislative rollback, demonstrating that domestic political calculations can override even the most substantial candidate status incentive.

On the one hand, these findings clearly show that the EU operates through mechanisms central to Europeanisation literature and as an enabler of local agency. The EU's role aligns with several key conditions for successful norm localisation, as Acharya (2004: 248-249) identified. The visa liberalisation process highlights the power of conditionality by offering credible benefits in return for specific legislative alignment. Using EU standards as leverage by activists demonstrates how external frameworks can empower domestic actors in their negotiations with the state. The provision of funding and support furthermore showcases the EU's role in capacity-building for civil society, directly enabling the local agency by providing resources and potentially enhancing the influence of pro-norm actors. When EU norms are seen as aligning with local values or aspirations, it potentially enhances the legitimacy and identity fit of those norms. This, in turn, supports their promotion, at least among specific audiences. In these respects, the EU acts as enabler for creating the political and material conditions under which local actors can more effectively engage in the work of localisation.

On the other hand, the limitations of EU influence lead to the processes of contestation and localisation. The persistent framing of EU norms as "foreign" directly challenges the legitimacy and identity fit of the EU-promoted norms, a strategy of validity contestation. Critiques of top-down approaches that lack local context point to shortcomings in EU strategies that hinder effective localisation and can even provoke a backlash. Instances of superficial compliance suggest that conditionality might achieve formal adoption but fails to secure deep internalisation or overcome domestic political resistance, especially when powerful state actors actively contest the norms (Theme 2). The recent democractic backsliding in Georgia, despite its candidate status, demonstrates that even significant EU incentives can be overridden by domestic political calculations and determined state-led contestation. This underscores that EU influence is constantly contested by domestic actors, captured by this theme.

5.2 Synthesis of Findings

This chapter answers the research questions by summarising the empirical findings detailed above. The analysis shows that to understand the outcomes observed in Georgia, the local agency with its internal politics and strategies have to be investigated. For all three norm areas researched in this thesis, different patterns become clear. As expected, LGBT norms face the strongest contestation, validity contestation, which does not allow for legislative advancements, and which limits the opportunities for CSOs. Norms related to GBV and WEE are much less contested, applicatory contestation, which results in the observed outcomes of hybrid localisation. CSOs have managed to adapt and integrate norms into the domestic context. One outstanding example for this is the adaptation of the "Papa Schools".

The primary research question of this thesis asks: *What explains the selective and hybrid localisation of European Union-promoted gender equality norms in Georgia?*

The central argument of this thesis is that the observed variation in norm implementation can be explained by the processes of contestation and localisation by local agents, whose actions are driven by their interests and values. The domestic context of the different actors of the local agency creates stronger influences than incentives offered by the EU. As such, the thesis challenges the external incentive model with its rationalist approach and highlights the limits of coercion- and socialisation-based Europeanisation models. These models approach issues differently, by looking at the perspective from the EU and limiting the power of local actors.

Accordingly, the interviews revealed two distinct phases where this dynamic became apparent. In Phase 1 (approximately 2014-2019), the government engaged in selective adoption, often driven by clear EU incentives like visa liberalisation. However, in Phase 2 (2019-2024), this shifted to democratic backsliding and government-funded resistance, a counter-intuitive development given that it occurred when the most powerful incentive discussed in Europeanisation literature, EU candidacy, was granted.

The "Weight of Tradition" (Theme 1) establishes the context for this dynamic. The normative incongruence between the EU's GEN and Georgia's social and political landscape makes contestation possible and makes it harder to localise newly introduced norms. As many GEN in Georgia are rooted in traditional and patriarchal structures, pro-norm actors need to develop strategies to introduce adapted norms. For anti-norm actors, the domestic situation creates a perfect ground for validity contestation. As the Themes 2 and 3 show, the ruling party together with the GOC instrumentalise the normative gap by framing GEN and especially LGBT rights

as threatening to both Georgian identity and sovereignty. The strategy behind this could be the consolidation of power by creating polarised narratives and spread misinformation to influence the public opinion. That is the reason why, in the second phase after 2019, despite receiving the EU candidate status, democratic and GE backsliding followed. The government saw it more useful for the consolidation of their power to turn towards more conservative ideas. While publicly still presenting themselves as pro-EU, their actions show a different picture.

This context directly informs the answers to the thesis's sub-questions. The first sub-question asked: *How do different domestic actors in Georgia strategically contest, interpret, and adapt EU-promoted gender equality norms?* The analysis shows that the domestic actor's position relative to state power highly influences how they contest or localise EU-promoted GEN.

As the Georgian government and the GOC are the closes to state power, they can contest promoted norms the most. Accordingly, by contesting the validity of many GEN, they create an environment that is difficult for other actors to be active in. They interpret EU-promoted norms as a form of "moral occupation" and presenting them as a threat to Georgian traditions. They are successful in doing so as they hold both the structural power and the monetary power to conduct such intense contestation. The government can legislate new laws and, as is the case in many patronal and corrupt systems, can directly influence the judiciary and executive. As the government is supported by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, they also potentially possess enough money to fund any actions. The GOC supports this by using its central status for many Georgians who trust the church and their teachings. As such, together, they have the possibility to influence people both officially and in private.

CSOs lack the wide-ranging power and lack credibility for some portions of the society. They engage in applicatory contestation to create localisation of norms that is appealing to most people. To do so, they build bridges between different societal issues and rely on external legitimacy, provided by the EU. They use framing and grafting to build normative congruence with already existing norms. An example can be the reference to strong women in Georgia's past or the strong feminism during the Democratic Republic of Georgia. Additionally, they keep certain norms on the public agenda despite opposition from state actors. However, they also try to avoid certain topics or utilise the strategy of pruning where they leave out the most controversial topic to remain socially accepted.

The topic that shows this dynamic the best is related to LGBT rights in Theme 5. Due to the strong validity contestation from state and religious actors, it has become increasingly difficult

for CSOs to localise LGBT norms. The Georgian government and the GOC have contested this issue in depth which leads to a near-total rejection in the policy sphere. While CSOs are able to link norms related to GBV and WEE with European integration, the same cannot be said about LGBT norms. Ultimately, it becomes clear that different domestic actors contest and localise EU-promoted GEN differently. While the strong contestation from state and religious actors has led to a rejection of any norm related to LGBT, CSOs were able to localise hybrid forms of norms related to GBV and WEE.

This leads to the second sub-question: *What are the specific localisation outcomes for these norms?* Linked to the insights from the previous sub-question, the localisation outcomes are selective and hybrid which go beyond full adoption or rejection. This is linked to the intensity and type of contestation each norm faces, also considering the power and abilities of the domestic actors in influencing the outcome.

On the one hand, norms concerning LGBT rights are facing state-led validity contestation, resulting in outcomes of legislative resistance and decoupling. The Georgian government introduced the Anti-Discrimination law under the strong EU incentive for visa liberalisation. While this was celebrated as a milestone for advancing GE in Georgia and is still useful for many activists, the government has rolled back some of the most important changes introduced there. By introducing the Anti-LGBT law, it becomes clear that the government is not interested in non-discrimination of LGBT people. The decoupling from this specific aspect of a norm shows the prioritisation of anti-LGBT rhetoric over EU membership. This legislative resistance can be seen as a localisation outcome by rejecting the norm completely.

On the other hand, norms related to GBV and WEE are a domain where CSOs can be more active than state actors. The focus here relies on contesting the application of the norms, creating important space for CSOs to implement hybrid forms of what the EU promotes. To increase involved fatherhood, CSOs have used internationally recognised models, such as the "Papa Schools", and have grafted them onto Georgian cultural practices. This hybrid localisation can also be seen in the adoption of main issues of the IC. While CSOs regularly put the consent-based definition of rape back to the public agenda, the state does not show interest in acting on this issue. Nonetheless, CSOs were the ones in the past who brought GE issues on the public agenda first. Ultimately, combined with the results from the previous sub-question, the hybrid localisation or full rejection represents the political situation and the

interests of different local actors. Where the validity of a norm is challenged, rejection is more likely, but where the application is debated, usually a hybrid norm is created.

6. Conclusion

This thesis was designed to understand a central puzzle: the selective and hybrid implementation of EU-promoted GEN in Georgia between 2014 and 2024. The research sought to understand why a country with strong popular support for European integration recently demonstrated significant democratic backsliding and legislative rollback regarding GEN, particularly when the EU's leverage was theoretically at its peak after granting the EU candidate status.

The answer to the main research question lies in the agent-driven domestic processes of norm contestation and localisation, however, without disregarding the EU's influence. The observed outcomes can be best explained by analysing the agency of domestic actors, who, according to their relative power and position, localise or contest norms. Europeanisation literature alone can not explain the often puzzling hybrid implementation of EU-promoted norms as it neglects the impact of local actors.

The findings show that the EU's normative power, despite its self-understanding as a normative power, is limited and dependent on the domestic landscape. This means for the case of Georgia that receiving the candidate status did not support the EU's norm diffusion. It rather led to, as the findings show, stronger contestation from state and religious actors who instrumentalised narratives framing GEN as a threat to national identity. Officially the government remains pro-EU but domestically they lead legislative decoupling by introducing laws that contradict previous legislation introduced to receive EU rewards. For CSOs this means a difficult environment to localise norms. The EU acts as an enable for CSOs by providing financial and material assistance, which at the same time proves to be a weak spot for governmental actors. They can target CSOs for receiving financial support from abroad and thereby undermine their legitimacy even further. The Foreign Agents law showcases this clearly.

The thesis makes several several contributions to the academic literature. Firstly, it analyses and criticises EU-centric Europeanisation models. By looking at a "more likely" case for Europeanisation, the research shows the limits of the theory. Instead, it emphasis the role that the local agency plays. External incentives and conditionality only work when a country and its actors are interested in implementing promoted norms. When political forces instrumentalise GE for their own political survival, the EU has limited influence. As such, this thesis shows the importance of the integration of "inside-out" perspectives into Europeanisation literature.

Second, the research contributes to the "third wave" of the literature on norms by providing an empirical example of norm contestation and localisation in the EaP. It further shows different forms of validity and applicatory contestation and links an actor's domestic possibilities to their structural power. While validity contestation appears to be a tool for those who are more powerful and influential within a society, applicatory contestation remains a tool for those who want to introduce normative change. Accordingly, within the specific context of EaP countries, one must look at the domestic institutional and actor setup to understand who holds the power to do what.

As a single-country qualitative case study, this thesis aimed to be analytically deep which can lead to limitations. The data collection was conducted during a politically difficult time in Georgia, especially for those interviewed. As such, their expressed emotions and statements might be different than those in more politically stable times. By relying on interviewees from civil society, academia, and international organisations, the perspectives of government officials were neglected. Their perspectives would have further refined the findings.

Accordingly, these limitations and reflections open avenues for future research on this topic. A comparative study in other conservative EU candidate countries like Moldova and Serbia could be used to test if the discussed findings in Georgia hold true there. This would help determine if the Georgian case of state-led contestation from the government and the GOC is a unique phenomenon or a broader pattern. Furthermore, to further enrich the findings, an ethnographic study could investigate how ordinary citizens experience and react to GEN promoted by the EU. This would be especially useful if it was conducted outside the capital. Finally, a longitudinal study going beyond this thesis' scope would be useful. By tracking the Georgian case after the October 2024 parliamentary elections, it would become apparent how the election's results shape the strategies of governmental actors and the CSOs. This would clarify whether the observed outcomes are a temporal strategy used to win the election or if it is a long-term strategy to consolidate power for an extended period.

Ultimately, this thesis comes to a conclusion: to understand the reaction to GEN in Georgia, one must look at the local conditions and domestic actors active in norm localisation and contestation. The future of GEN in Georgia will depend on exactly those actors: the Georgian government, the GOC and CSOs.

Appendix I: Interview Guide

1. Start of the Interview

First of all, thank you for your time and agreeing to participate in my research on EU-diffused gender equality norms and their contestation and localisation in Georgia. During the interview, I would kindly ask you to think of the environment and situation before the parliamentary election in October 2024.

Could you introduce yourself to me and tell me, what is your connection to the topic of gender equality in Georgia?

2. Understanding Local Context

- In the Georgian context, what does equality of men and women mean?

- How does your organisation engage with local communities to promote gender equality norms?

- What factors shape how Georgians think about gender equality?

- Who are the voices on gender equality in Georgia, so who shapes the debate?

- In your understanding, what does the EU promote when it comes to gender equality?

- The EU's gender equality agenda often includes support for sexual and gender diversity. In your view, how do these issues, like LGBT rights, fit into the broader conversation about gender equality in Georgia?

3. Local Interpretation of Gender Equality Norms

- Two gender equality norms the EU promotes in Georgia are related to gender-based violence and women's economic empowerment. How are these norms implemented in Georgia, as the EU intended or differently?

- How have the EU's ideas about gender equality been turned into local conversations, laws, and everyday actions here in Georgia?

- Can you give examples of where Georgia has adopted 1:1 of what the EU expected?

- Do you see the EU's gender equality ideas being blended with local practices, or are they changed a lot to match the local environment? Please tell me more.

- Can you recall any event or legislative initiative that increased the population's acceptance of gender equality?

- In your experience, how have debates around sexual and gender diversity influenced efforts to promote gender equality in Georgia? Do these discussions help clarify and advance the overall agenda, or do they sometimes create challenges?

4. Factors Influencing Gender Equality change

- Some people say that using the EU's gender equality ideas can make local organizations and institutions stronger and more trustworthy. Do you agree with this? Why or why not?

- What are the common local beliefs and values about gender roles and equality in Georgia?

- How effective are local groups (such as NGOs, community leaders, political parties, or churches) in shaping or challenging the way EU gender equality ideas are used in Georgia?

- How does Georgian culture or traditions affect the way people understand gender equality?

- How do you assess the changes made? Do they have a practical effect/actual impact in the sense that they change Georgian's perception of gender equality or mostly on paper (like laws or policies)?

5. Role of the EU and Outside Actors

- Has the idea of joining or getting closer to the EU affected how gender equality ideas are accepted in Georgia? In what way?

- Besides the EU, are there other outside influences, like global gender movements or ideas from neighbouring countries, that affect how people think about gender equality in Georgia? How do these outside ideas mix with local traditions?

6. Ending the Interview

- Thinking about how the EU affects gender equality/reforms in Georgia, is there anything else you think is important to know/understand that did not come up in our conversation?

Appendix II: List of Interviews

Interview No.	Sector	Date	Pseudonym
Interview 1	Academia	12.02.2025	Nino
Interview 2	NGO	13.02.2025	Mariam
Interview 3	Academia	28.02.2025	Tamar
Interview 4	IO	05.03.2025	Maia
Interview 5	IO	11.03.2025	Nana
Interview 6	Academia	13.03.2025	Ketevan
Interview 7	IO	13.03.2025	Natela
Interview 8	Academia	17.03.2025	Manana
Interview 9	NGO	18.03.2025	Natia
Interview 10	IO	18.03.2025	Eka
Interview 11	GO	04.04.2025	Ana
Interview 12	NGO	16.04.2025	Salome

Appendix III: Ethical Approval

Application Details

Undergraduate Student Research Ethics Application ☐ Postgraduate Student Research Ethics Application ☒

Application Number: PGT/SPS/2024/229/IMCEERES

Applicant's Name: Frederik Urban

Project Title: Norm Contestation and Localisation of Gender Equality Norms in Georgia

Application Status: Fully Approved

Date of Review: 28/08/2024

Start Date of Approval 28/08/2024 End Date of Approval 31/08/2025

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