SOCIAL TRUST

AND POLARIZATION

THE CASE OF GEORGIA

Imprint

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Introduction

Democratic societies rely fundamentally on social trust—the generalized belief that fellow citizens, including strangers, will act in accordance with shared norms, fulfill obligations, and cooperate for the collective good.[1.] Social trust is not merely a desirable social trait; it is a necessary precondition for the existence of a rule of law state. Under the contractual theory of state origin, articulated by Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, we the people collectively agree upon the social norms in which we wish to live, define the size and power of the state, and establish a legal order. If the aim is to sustain a constitutional democracy grounded in the rule of law—where human rights are protected and all individuals are equal before the law—citizens must trust this foundational agreement among themselves. Without such trust, the idea of a cooperative, law-governed state becomes impossible, as mutual suspicion erodes the willingness to uphold shared rules and principles.

By contrast, polarization—particularly in its entrenched, antagonistic form—erodes the very foundations of social trust. It fosters "us versus them" mentalities, delegitimizes opposing viewpoints, and transforms political disagreements into moral conflicts.[2.] Empirical research demonstrates that perceived societal polarization diminishes interpersonal trust, fuels suspicion toward out-groups, and undermines institutional legitimacy.[3.] The resulting cycle is mutually reinforcing: declining trust intensifies polarization, and heightened polarization further erodes trust, leaving societies more fragmented and less capable of addressing shared challenges.

This dynamic is particularly relevant in the Georgian context. Georgia's democratic development has been shaped by periods of political instability, elite confrontation, and contested institutional authority. In this paper, we will examine the current state of social trust in Georgia at both the interpersonal and institutional levels, drawing on available empirical data and recent political developments. We will explore the roots of polarization that have undermined this trust—ranging from partisan media ecosystems to the personalization of politics—and consider the long-term risks these trends pose to democratic consolidation. Finally, we will discuss the possibility of a better societal model: one in which trust can be rebuilt, citizens can articulate shared goals,

and collective action can be undertaken to achieve them, thereby reinforcing democratic resilience and social cohesion.

1. Current state of social trust in Georgia

According to Freedom House's Freedom in the World Index, Georgia scored 61 out of 100 points in 2020; however, by 2024, this figure had declined to 58. In the same period, the organization's Democracy Score for Georgia fell by four points, reaching 34 in 2024 and placing the country in the category of a transitional or hybrid authoritarian regime[4.] Media freedom has also deteriorated sharply. In the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index, Georgia ranked 60th out of 180 countries in 2020 with a score of 71, but by 2025 had fallen to 114th place with a score of 50,535. These trends indicate a steady erosion of democracy, the rule of law, and media freedom.

Analysts widely attribute this decline to the political trajectory of the ruling Georgian Dream party, which has progressively consolidated power and sought to capture both state and non-state institutions. Such political regression is not without precedent. Following the 2003 Rose Revolution, Georgia emerged as one of the most promising examples of democratic transition in the post-Soviet space. The government of that period implemented wide-ranging reforms aimed at modernizing state institutions, reducing corruption, and transforming the country from a Soviet-style governance model into one aligned with Western democratic standards. However, these reforms did not succeed in depolarizing the judiciary, police, and other key democratic institutions. Over time, the ruling elite's consolidation of power and disregard for institutional pluralism eroded democratic practices, ultimately contributing to their defeat in the 2012 elections.

The Georgian Dream government, which came to power in 2012 promising to correct the authoritarian excesses of its predecessor and to build a democratic and prosperous state, initially positioned itself as a reformist force. Yet, after more than a decade in office, these promises have gone mainly unfulfilled. Instead, the country faces a deepening democratic crisis marked by

[1]Fukuyama, F. (1995). Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity. New York: Free Press.
[2]McCoy, J., & Somer, M. (2019). Toward a Theory of Pernicious Polarization and How It Harms Democracies: Comparative Evidence and Possible Remedies. The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science.

[3] Lee, A. H.-Y. (2022). Social Trust in Polarized Times: How Perceptions of Political Polarization Affect Americans' Trust in Each Other. Political Behavior.
[4]https://freedomhouse.org/country/georgia/freedom-world/2020
[5]https://rsf.org/en/index

institutional capture, declining public trust, and an increasingly restrictive civic space.

It is evident that both past and ongoing political processes are always reflected in the numbers, impacting public trust in specific institutions or social structures. It should also be noted that a country like Georgia does not often produce regularly updated, impartial research measuring public or institutional trust. While public opinion polls are periodically conducted in Georgia, the majority of them are either biased or manipulative. Thus, the data below will present public trust in institutions from 2020 to 2023, based on public opinion polls conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI).

Favorable Opinion of Selected Georgian Institutions (2020-2023)
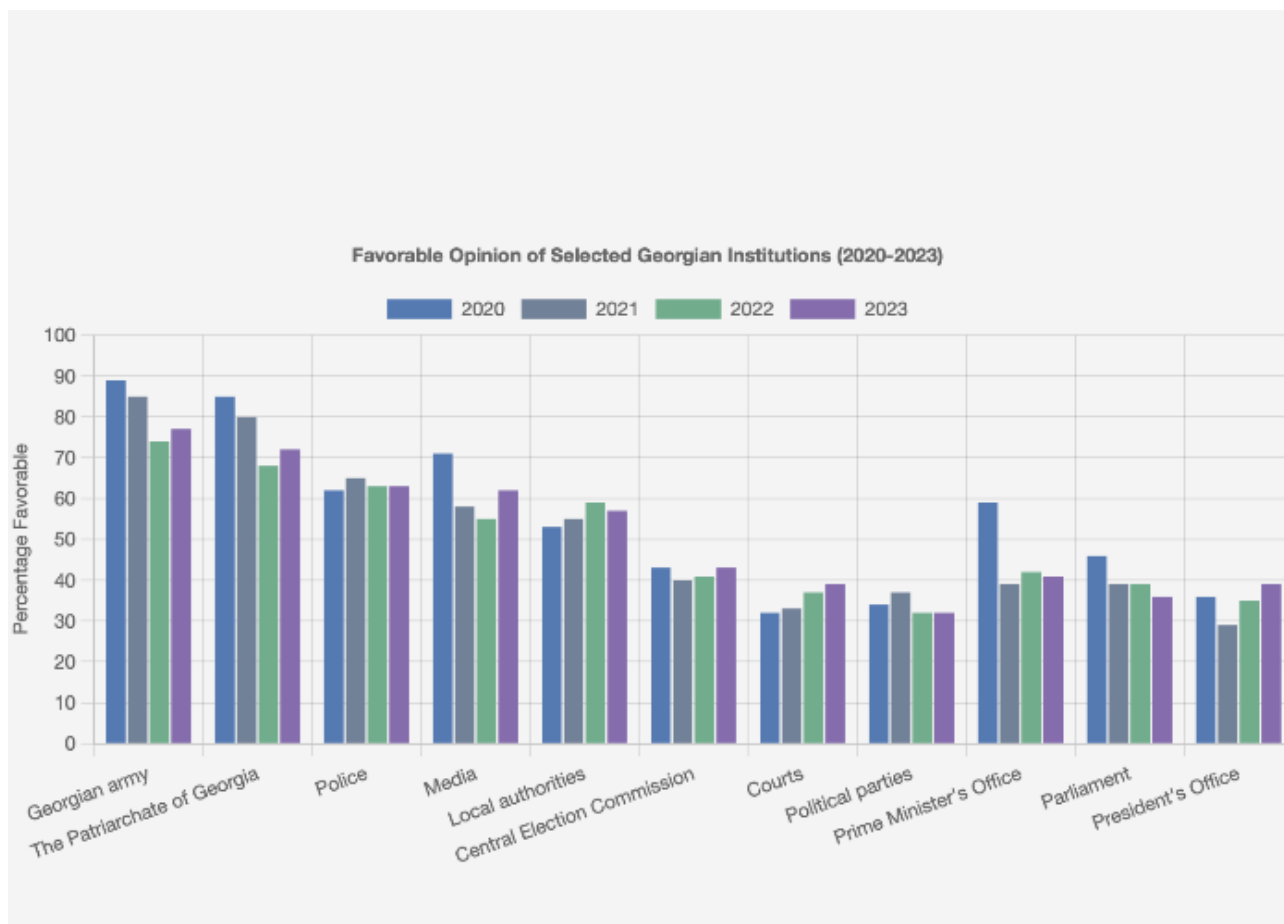
The state of institutional trust in Georgia, as reflected in public opinion data from 2020 to 2023, reveals a troubling decline in confidence across most key institutions, underscoring the broader erosion of social trust and deepening polarization outlined in the paper. The data, drawn from surveys, show that while certain institutions, such as the Georgian army and the Patriarchate of Georgia, maintain relatively high favourability, most democratic institutions—such as the judiciary, parliament, and electoral bodies—face significant distrust. This pattern aligns with the paper's depiction of a polarized society where institutional capture, political regression, and divisive narratives have undermined public faith in governance structures critical to democratic consolidation.

The decline in institutional trust can be understood as a consequence of the polarizing strategies outlined in the paper, particularly the ruling Georgian Dream party's consolidation of power and its "us versus them" narrative, which has delegitimized institutions perceived as politicized. The consistently high trust in the army and Patriarchate suggests that institutions seen as detached from political manipulation retain public confidence. At the same time, those entangled in partisan conflicts—such as the parliament, the election commission, and the judiciary—suffer the most. This erosion of trust not only hampers democratic resilience but also contributes to economic instability.

Alongside institutional trust, it is also essential to consider the factor of interpersonal trust. Georgia's level of interpersonal trust is relatively low compared to both our neighbouring countries and, in particular, the member states of the European Union.

The low level of interpersonal trust in Georgia is influenced by both the legacy of the Soviet Union and ongoing political processes. As a post-Soviet country, much of Georgia's population lived under the Soviet regime, where trusting others was often inadvisable due to widespread surveillance and state repression. However, despite gaining independence over 30 years ago, interpersonal trust remains low, which can also be attributed to the fact that both past and current governments have subjected Georgian society to continuous repression, leading people to be wary of trusting other members of society.

It should also be noted that if the government continues to consolidate power and pursue repressive measures, the already low level of interpersonal trust is likely to decrease even further. This is because, over the past two years, the government has adopted laws requiring non-governmental organizations and media outlets to register as foreign agents and has even established a special portal for their surveillance, which will be discussed below.

Now, it is essential to examine the factors that contribute to the levels of institutional and interpersonal trust discussed in this chapter.

Share of people agreeing with the statement "most people can be trusted", 1984 to 2022

2022	
Denmark	74%
Spain	41%
Azerbaijan	26%
Russia	23%
Armenia	18%
Georgia	9%
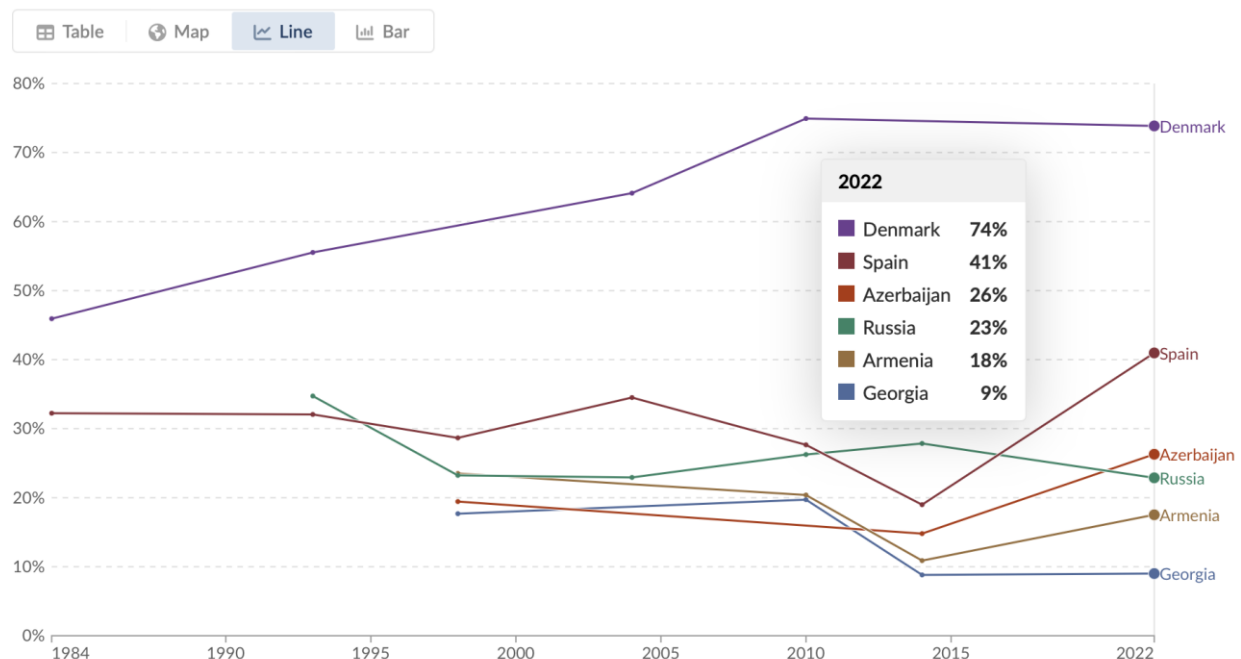
2. Erosion of trust – roots of polarization in Georgia

Polarization, as defined in political science and social psychology, refers to the process by which societies or groups diverge into opposing factions with increasingly extreme and irreconcilable positions, diminishing the space for compromise or moderate viewpoints6It manifests at both elite (e.g., politicians, media) and mass (public) levels, driven by factors such as economic disparities, identity politics, and media fragmentation. Ideological polarization involves a shift toward extreme policy preferences, often measured through surveys or voting patterns. In contrast, affective polarization reflects growing emotional hostility, such as distrust or contempt, toward opposing groups. This dual nature—ideological and affective—creates a feedback loop in which misperceptions of opponents' views deepen divisions, reducing empathy and fostering a "us versus them" dynamic.[7.]

The impact of polarization on democracies is a topic of debate, with scholars identifying both potential benefits and significant risks. Moderate polarization sometimes can enhance democratic vitality by clarifying political choices, increasing voter turnout, and strengthening party accountability.[8.] However, excessive polarization—particularly affective and structural forms—poses serious threats. It erodes trust in institutions, stifles compromise, and risks democratic backsliding by fostering gridlock or even violence.[9.] Negative partisanship, where opposition is driven by hatred rather than policy disagreement, undermines pluralism and civic engagement. While polarization may galvanize participation, its extreme forms often lead to instability, making it a double-edged sword for democratic societies.

To vividly conceptualize a polarized society, we can describe it as one marked by deep-seated divisions across social, political, and cultural domains, where opposing groups—whether defined by ideology, ethnicity, or other identities—view each other with distrust and hostility. Such societies exhibit ideological extremism, a decline in moderate voices, intense partisan animosity, and fragmented information ecosystems, such as social media, that reinforce biases. Eroded social trust hinders

cooperation, leading to reduced cross-group dialogue and heightened tensions driven by polarization. In contexts like Georgia, these dynamics manifest as fractured civic life, where competing factions struggle to find common ground, exacerbating social and political instability.

As previously noted, academic sources identify the primary structure of polarization as the division of society into two camps: us versus them. In the context of Georgia, this theoretical foundation of polarization is particularly evident, as Bidzina Ivanishvili, the founder of the Georgian Dream party, explicitly stated before coming to power that "the middle must be eradicated." The slogan "the middle must be eradicated" translates, in academic terms, into a clear us vs. them narrative. It is worth noting that this political messaging contributed to the Georgian Dream party's success in the 2012 parliamentary elections. Bidzina Ivanishvili managed to unite nearly all opposition parties around himself, presenting voters with a binary choice: us (Georgian Dream) versus them (the ruling United National Movement). However, the issue is that since coming to power, the Georgian Dream party has consistently sought to maintain and further deepen the "us vs. them" narrative. This is evident in every election and across all social and economic issues.

One might wonder why the ruling party pursues such a strategy and whether this form of polarization is detrimental to the country and society. By fostering deep polarization within society, dividing it into two opposing camps, and combating anyone who falls outside these camps, the ruling party achieves two objectives. On the one hand, it seeks to ensure the absolute and continuous mobilization of its supporters. On the other hand, it aims to suppress any societal or political unification against it at its very foundation.

In the context of Georgia, polarization is not merely an assessment but a significant socio-political issue, as evidenced by the fact that in June 2022, the European Commission granted Georgia a European perspective as part of its EU membership application process, following Georgia's application on March 3, 2022. On June 17, 2022, the Commission outlined twelve priorities for Georgia to address to achieve EU candidate status, as endorsed by the European Council on June 23, 2022. A key priority was tackling political polarization, addressing the deep divisions between the ruling Georgian Dream

[6] McCoy, J., Rahman, T., & Somer, M. (2018). Polarization and the global crisis of democracy: Common patterns, dynamics, and pernicious consequences for democratic polities. American Behavioral Scientist, 62(1).
[7]Levendusky, M. (2013). *How Partisan Media Polarize America*. University of Chicago Press.
[8]Levendusky, M., & Malhotra, N. (2016). Does media coverage of partisan polarization affect political

attitudes? *Political Communication*.
[9] McCoy, J., Rahman, T., & Somer, M. (2018). Polarization and the global crisis of democracy: Common patterns, dynamics, and pernicious consequences for democratic polities. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62(1).

party and opposition groups to foster political stability and advance EU integration.[10]

To make the theoretical discussion more accessible, it is crucial to examine specific issues below that illustrate the ruling party's efforts to deepen societal polarization, which in turn undermines public trust in both institutions and among individuals.

3. Polarization around party politics

As previously noted, even before coming to power, the ruling party made significant efforts to reshape the political landscape in a way that would create a public perception that there is the ruling party (Georgian Dream) and all other parties are essentially the same, viewed as enemies. The ruling party continues to recognize the former ruling party, the United National Movement, as the main opposition, treating it as a political adversary and grouping all other new parties under its umbrella, labeling them as the "collective United National Movement." Whenever an individual or a new party emerges on the political scene, the ruling party, with the help of its satellite media, attempts to associate this new individual or party with the United National Movement to demonstrate to its supporters that the status quo of "us versus them" remains unchanged, and that there are only two choices: the ruling party (Georgian Dream) and everyone else, who are lumped together under the collective United National Movement.

The pre-election banner reads: "No to the Nats (United National Movement)! No to evil! No to betrayal!"

The given pre-election banner was created for the 2021 local self-government elections, where nearly 50 parties

participated. However, the ruling party singled out the most popular parties, depicted their leaders on the banner, and presented them to the public as the "collective United National Movement," symbolizing traitors and evil.

It is particularly noteworthy that this banner also features Giorgi Gakharia, who was the Prime Minister of Georgian Dream until February 18, 2021, and was the number one candidate on Georgian Dream's parliamentary list in the 2020 elections. However, as soon as he resigned and participated in the 2021 local self-government elections against Georgian Dream, the ruling party immediately labeled him as a member of the "collective United National Movement.

4. Polarization around identity and values

Beyond political polarization, the ruling party consistently attempts to divide society into two camps based on values and identity issues. A prime example of this is the events surrounding the LGBT community. Specifically, as we know, May 17 is the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia. On May 17, 2013, the LGBT community in Georgia, along with their supporters, planned to hold a Pride march. However, they were attacked by a counter-protest, brutally beaten, and, regrettably, to this day, no perpetrators have been held accountable for the violence.

On May 17, 2013, a man attacked a minibus carrying members of the LGBT community.

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[10]https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/12%20Priorities.pdf

May 17, 2024: Tbilisi Mayor, Speaker of Parliament, and Prime Minister at the Day of Family Purity

Following this, the LGBT community has attempted to hold gatherings every year on May 17. However, in 2014, the Georgian Patriarchate (which supports Georgian Dream) declared May 17 as the "Day of Family Purity." Since then, every year, the Orthodox congregation takes to the streets to celebrate this day, with high-ranking officials from the ruling party also participating. Thus, in coordination with the Patriarchate, the authorities effectively co-opted the day when the LGBT community could publicly address their needs and concerns.

This example clearly demonstrates that the ruling party, which consistently engages in anti-LGBT propaganda, has sent a message to the LGBT community that they do not exist in the eyes of the government and that the fight against homophobia is not an important issue. On the other hand, it has consolidated society and its supporters against the LGBT community, effectively erasing May 17 as the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia from the public agenda.

5. Polarization around the European Union and civil society

Article 78 of the Georgian Constitution outlines the country's foreign policy, which is directed toward integration into the European Union and NATO. Concurrently, numerous surveys indicate that up to 80 percent of Georgia's population consistently supports membership in the EU and NATO.[11] However, it is clear that neither the EU nor NATO would accept a state into their alliance that does not uphold the rule of law and human rights. Consequently, for the ruling party, which is in the process of consolidating power, this public demand—

reinforced by the Constitution—conflicts with its political objectives. This explains the series of repressive laws adopted by the authorities in recent years, aimed at undermining civil society and the media on one hand, while minimizing Georgia's chances of EU integration on the other.

In March 2023, Georgian Dream introduced a draft law, "On Foreign Agents," which required non-governmental organizations and media outlets that received more than 20% of their funding from foreign sources to register as foreign agents. Amid widespread protests, Georgian Dream withdrew the bill and publicly promised not to reintroduce similar legislation[12]. However, in April 2024, the ruling party reintroduced and passed a similar law, designating NGOs and media receiving foreign funding as foreign agents[13]. Furthermore, in 2025, the government adopted an even stricter second law, imposing up to five years of criminal liability for civil society organizations failing to register as agents[14].

March 2023 Protesters squared off with riot police and were blasted with water cannons.

In November 2024, the Prime Minister of the ruling party announced that Georgia would temporarily halt its European Union integration process, triggering massive protests that continue uninterrupted to this day. During these pro-European demonstrations, police arrested and inhumanely treated hundreds of citizens, with over 60 activists detained under criminal charges, who are considered political prisoners according to local and international assessments[15].

[11]https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31673774.html
[12]https://expathub.ge/georgias-foreign-agent-law-implications-and-controversy-explained/
[13]https://civil.ge/archives/589823

[14]https://jam-news.net/georgian-parliament-approves-repressive-laws/
[15]https://gdi.ge/en/news/rezhimis-politikuri-patimrebi-saqartveloshi-andro-chichinadz

May 2024, protest rally against the "Foreign Agents" law, vol 2

As a result, Georgia's relationship with the European Union has been so severely damaged that the EU is considering the possibility of terminating the visa-free regime for Georgian citizens if the government refuses to abandon its authoritarian practices[16.]

The authorities responsible for these processes continue to polarize society, presenting the dire reality as if the European Union is demanding Georgia surrender its sovereignty and promote LGBT propaganda, and that the strained foreign relations stem from rejecting these demands. The government's satellite media persistently engages in anti-European propaganda to shift public sentiment, aiming to make the EU an unacceptable entity for the majority of the population. Additionally, the laws adopted by the authorities have pushed civil society to a critical state, as non-governmental organizations and media face severe financial difficulties, and the government continuously conducts hate campaigns against them, undermining public trust in these entities.

With this and other examples, we have a deeply polarized society in Georgia. A society that no longer trusts democratic institutions and no longer trusts each other. It is also important to recognize that polarization has a specific cost, which manifests itself in both severe social crises and economic instability. If the Georgian people do not trust the country's institutions, why would investors and international financial institutions do so? This is evidenced by the fact that the share of foreign investment in Georgia has been decreasing annually. According to the data from the National Statistics Office of Georgia, in 2024, foreign direct investments decreased by 18.6 percent compared to the previous year[17.] Additionally, international aid received in the form of grants has also significantly reduced[18.]

6. Strategies to rebuild social trust in Georgia

Addressing any public challenge is inherently tricky, particularly when confronting a societal problem characterized by multisectoral dimensions that intersect across political, economic, and cultural spheres. Nonetheless, we propose a set of ideas for mitigating polarization while simultaneously enhancing social trust. These measures are not a panacea, nor is their flawless execution straightforward. However, if the objective is to cultivate a society anchored in trust—one enriched by improved experiences of coexistence and cooperation— these steps must be pursued with determination.

Polarization, driven by elite manipulation and institutional capture, has further eroded public confidence in democratic processes, as evidenced by declining freedom indices and heightened societal divisions. By engaging key stakeholders in targeted reforms, Georgia can begin to bridge these divides, thereby fostering a more resilient democratic framework that aligns with its constitutional commitments to European integration.

What political parties should do: Political parties, including the dominant Georgian Dream and fragmented opposition forces, bear primary responsibility for transcending zero-sum rivalries and the "us versus them" framing that has dominated since the 2012 elections and intensified through the 2024 parliamentary contests. They should pivot toward issue-oriented platforms, fostering inter-party consensus on national priorities such as judicial independence and economic equity, while lowering barriers to entry for emerging parties through electoral threshold reductions and transparent campaign financing. Intraparty democratization, including open primaries and accountability mechanisms, would enhance representation and curb oligarchic influences, as highlighted in EU conditionality reports. By publicly committing to de-escalate inflammatory rhetoric— particularly around identity issues and EU integration— parties can model cooperative behaviour, encouraging voter participation based on policy rather than animosity, and ultimately rebuilding institutional legitimacy amid ongoing democratic backsliding.

What institutions should do: State institutions, plagued by capture and low public trust, must undertake systemic reforms to affirm their independence and accountability, beginning with judiciary overhauls in line with the Venice Commission's recommendations, including merit-based appointments and anti-corruption safeguards. Electoral

[16]https://civil.ge/archives/692834
[17]https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/191/foreign-direct-investments

[18]https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/ბიუჯეტი-2025-როგორ-დახარჯავს-მთავრობა-თქვენს-ფულს/33259314.html

bodies should ensure transparency by inviting robust international observation, reversing politicized amendments, and implementing equitable enforcement of laws to prevent misuse of administrative resources. Broader institutional efforts, such as depoliticizing law enforcement and enhancing public information access, are critical to delivering concrete benefits and aligning with EU conditionality, thereby restoring confidence amid the de facto halt in accession processes and fostering resilience against further erosion.

What the media should do: In a context where media fragmentation has amplified partisan narratives and anti-Western propaganda, independent outlets must prioritize objective, fact-based journalism to restore credibility. This involves rigorous adherence to ethical standards, such as distinguishing between news and opinion, diversifying sources to represent multiple viewpoints, and actively combating disinformation through collaborative fact-checking initiatives. Furthermore, media organizations should invest in public engagement formats, including inclusive debates and community forums, to encourage cross-group dialogue and media literacy education, drawing on successful models from polarized environments elsewhere.

What NGOs should do: non-governmental organizations, facing heightened repression under the expanded "foreign agents" laws enacted in 2024/2025, should persist in advocating for human rights and democratic reforms by documenting violations, challenging restrictive measures through legal avenues, and mobilizing international support to safeguard civic space. They must facilitate cross-sectoral dialogues on EU priorities, conduct nationwide consultations to amplify the voices of underrepresented groups, and diversify funding sources to withstand smear campaigns and financial constraints. By extending outreach to rural areas and partnering with local communities, NGOs can counter elite-driven narratives, enhance public trust in civil society, and contribute to depolarization through evidence-based advocacy.

What general society should do: The broader populace, leveraging Georgia's inherent social capital, as manifested in protest movements and community networks, must actively participate in grassroots efforts to address shared grievances, such as inequality and regional disparities. This entails organizing inclusive local dialogues on socioeconomic challenges, advocating for marginalized groups, including ethnic minorities and the LGBTQ+ community, to counteract culture-war divisions, and demanding greater transparency from leaders through petitions and civic monitoring. Society can further bolster trust by promoting educational initiatives on tolerance and critical thinking, shifting from partisan loyalty to collective problem-solving, and supporting equitable access to resources—actions that mitigate urban-rural cleavages and foster empathy in a polarized landscape.

Conclusion

The erosion of social trust in Georgia, driven by deepening political polarization, poses a significant threat to the country's democratic consolidation and social cohesion. The ruling Georgian Dream party's strategies, including institutional capture, divisive "us versus them" narratives, and repressive measures like the "foreign agents" laws, have systematically undermined trust in democratic institutions and interpersonal relations. This polarization, rooted in elite manipulation and amplified by fragmented media ecosystems, has led to declining public confidence in key institutions such as the judiciary and parliament, as evidenced by data from 2020 to 2023, alongside a persistently low level of interpersonal trust shaped by historical legacies and ongoing political repression. The resulting societal fragmentation not only hampers Georgia's democratic resilience but also contributes to economic instability, as evidenced by decreasing foreign investments and international aid, signaling a broader crisis of confidence.

Rebuilding social trust requires a multifaceted approach that involves political parties, institutions, the media, NGOs, and society at large. By prioritizing issue-based politics, institutional reforms, objective journalism, resilient civic advocacy, and grassroots engagement, Georgia can mitigate polarization and foster a cooperative societal model aligned with its constitutional commitment to European integration. These efforts, although challenging, are essential to restoring trust, enabling collective action, and ensuring a stable and democratic future. Without decisive action to bridge divides and rebuild trust, Georgia risks further democratic backsliding and the entrenchment of societal divisions, thereby undermining its aspirations for a cohesive and prosperous society.

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