MANUFACTURING FEAR:
the Crisis of Democracy, Antigenderism and Response Pathways in Georgia
# CONTENTS

**INTRODUCTION** .............................................................................................................. 3

**CHAPTER 1:**
Unpacking Conceptual Tensions: Anti-gender or Anti-egalitarian?
Anti-Western or Anti-liberal? Anti-imperial or Imperial? Local or Transnational? ......................................................................................................................... 4

**CHAPTER 2:**
Populist Moment: A Crisis of Democracy or a Crisis of Liberalism? ....................... 9

**CHAPTER 3:**
“Uncertain Democracy” in Georgia and its Discontents.............................................. 14

**CHAPTER 4:**
Populist Politics in Georgia: State Actors and Anti-genderism ................................. 18

**CHAPTER 5:**
LGBTQ+ Activism in Georgia and its Survival Strategies ........................................ 23

**CHAPTER 6:**
Feminist Response Pathways to the Crisis of Democracy and the Rise of Anti-genderism ........................................................................................................... 27

  6.1. Reclaiming “the People” ....................................................................................... 27
  6.2. Feminist “Populism:” Embedding an Exclusive or Inclusive Agenda? .............. 28
  6.3. Affect as a Source for Action in Emancipatory Politics? ................................. 29
  6.4. Reclaiming the Agency to Define Agendas ...................................................... 32

**CONCLUSION** ................................................................................................................ 33

**BIBLIOGRAPHY** ............................................................................................................. 34
INTRODUCTION

Fear is a powerful affect that pervades our contemporary world. There is indeed much to fear in the current world - fear of ecological destruction, fear of being unable to find jobs or losing them, fear of war and forced displacement, fear of health insecurity, and fear of violence - all linked to our overall survival. These are legitimate grievances, but they are often overshadowed by the fear of gender equality instigated by far-right movements, states, and actors. In what follows, we explore a set of specific issues that are at the heart of debates on anti-genderism globally and locally. The study foregrounds the crisis of democracy that is central to understanding the rise of anti-genderism and potential feminist response pathways. To understand this phenomenon, it is necessary to contextualize it within the global framework of anti-gender mobilizations that have gained prominence since the 2010s. Both on a global scale and in the Georgian context, anti-genderism is intertwined with several themes, including anti-imperialism, opposition to the global neoliberal economic order, anti-liberalism, anti-egalitarianism, populist invocation of “the people” versus the “elite”, references to national and traditional values, and, last but not least, invocations of democracy and the will of the people. Drawing from extensive scholarship on anti-genderism and 18 in-depth expert interviews conducted in 2023, in this study, we aim to unravel some of these entanglements.

The crisis of democracy is a central theme in debates surrounding the rise of anti-genderism. However, given the diversity of ideological and political contexts, the meaning of the crisis of democracy is highly contested. In this study, we examine the various interpretations of the crisis of democracy and its relation to far-right populism which anchors the Georgian case in these debates. Secondly, we explore the contested concept of populism and its variations in Georgia. While far-right groups have been the primary propagators of anti-genderism they remain on the margins of the political spectrum in Georgia. Yet, their ideology can pose a significant threat when adopted by the government. Therefore, this study shifts its focus to the current government and its engagement with anti-gender politics while exploring the circumstances that make the current populist moment distinct. Additionally, we will analyze the local and global dimensions of anti-genderism and examine how fears have been leveraged by various ruling parties. Finally, this study explores the possible response pathways to challenge anti-genderism and the potential of sowing the seeds of resilient hope among people in times of hopelessness.

The study draws on a desk review of relevant literature and qualitative interviews. We analyzed various materials, including theoretical literature on the crisis of democracy, populism, affect, and interdisciplinary scholarly literature on the rise of anti-genderism. We conducted 18 qualitative expert interviews with feminist and/or queer activists from both Tbilisi and the regions of Georgia who work on various aspects of gender justice, along with a few experts on the crisis of democracy and the current political situation in Georgia. Semi-structured interviews were designed to align with each specialist’s expertise and prompt them to discuss issues relevant to the study. After the interviewing phase, we analyzed the collected data and transcribed the material. For the sake of anonymity, we assigned consecutive numbers to each expert. The qualitative interviews were not the only component of the study. We also made links between the scholarly literature on the subject and the issues that emerged through the thematic analysis of the aforementioned interviews.
CHAPTER 1: 

Unpacking Conceptual Tensions: Anti-gender or Anti-egalitarian? Anti-Western or Anti-liberal? Anti-imperial or Imperial? Local or Transnational?

The literature addressing the crisis of democracy and anti-genderism is saturated with concepts carrying contradictory meanings, a complexity we intend to unravel in this chapter. How can we characterize the recent surge of anti-genderism? Is it plausible to conceptualize it as a component of the anti-egalitarian movement? Can anti-genderism, as an ideology permeating far-right populist politics, be conflated with the latter? Moreover, how do themes of anti-westernism, anti-liberalism, and anti-imperialism intersect and diverge from each other in the rhetoric and discourse of the far-right spectrum?

Over the past decade, a significant body of academic and applied studies has emerged, addressing both far-right and anti-gender mobilizations in Georgia. ‘Far or extreme-right’ stands out as a prevalent focus within this research. However, other studies center around terms such as ‘far-right populism,’ ‘anti-gender’, ‘ultra-nationalism’, ‘anti-Western or pro-Russian discourse’, ‘anti-liberal’, ‘violent extremism’ and even ‘neo-Nazism’ as their primary subjects.1 Despite variations in focus and terminology among these studies, there is often an overlap in the phenomena they examine. We have chosen to use ‘far-right populism’ as an umbrella term to describe the tendency we are interested in. This decision is driven, in part, by our broader focus, extending beyond individual groups, campaigns, or movements. Primarily, we aim to analyze the recent shift in strategies by Georgia’s ruling party.

Is the rise of anti-genderism another wave of conservative backlash to the egalitarian political paradigm, or do we need a different theoretical framework to understand it? Is it specific to the post-Socialist context or can we theorize it as a global trend spanning over the whole spectrum of newer as well as older democracies? Many scholars studying the recent rise of anti-gender mobilization in various contexts argue that it’s neither backlash nor merely a tactic by the Vatican to undermine gender equality, but “it’s a new ideological and political configura-

tion” that is a transnational phenomenon (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Norocel & Paternotte, 2023). While the earlier wave of neoconservatism of the 1980s was linked with market fundamentalism, the new wave of right-wing populism in Europe combines gender conservatism with a critique of neoliberalism, globalization and Western colonialism, and elitism of liberal or progressive politics, making it a potent mobilizing force. However, in the case of Georgia, the connection between the critique of neoliberalism and right-wing populism is fragmentary and underdeveloped. Right-wing populists in Georgia are less concerned about “neoliberalism as a source of suffering and injustice” and are more focused on opposing gender equality policies, which they perceive as an intrusion on national sovereignty by liberal elites.

Scholars studying the anti-gender constituent of the far-right and conservative populist mobilization caution against conflating these trends. They emphasize that despite witnessing unprecedented collusion, termed ‘opportunistic synergy’ (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022) between anti-gender and far-right conservative forces, they are analytically distinct. For instance, not all far-right populists necessarily invoke anti-genderism, even though it has recently become one of the central strategies for the far-right across the globe. Anti-genderism serves as a tool for the mobilization and consolidation of the populist right, effectively exploiting the anxieties, shame, and anger caused by neoliberalism (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). Additionally, it constructs ‘gender ideology’ or ‘gender theory’ as a threat to the nation (Patternote & Kuhar, 2018). Right-wing populism, as a thin-centered ideology, readily adopts arguments (framed in populist terms) put forth by the anti-gender movement. On the one hand, as Graff and Korolczuk (2022) argue, the political effectiveness of anti-genderism is not solely due to the persuasive power of anti-gender arguments but its relationship with right-wing populism. On the other hand, the far-right’s use of anti-genderism, particularly its discourse on children and family, can serve to mask and conceal dangerous narratives that bear a resemblance to fascist ideologies.

The far-right movement is generally characterized by its anti-egalitarian stance. However, the specific aspects of anti-egalitarianism can vary significantly between regions and countries. In Europe, for instance, the far-right movement can mobilize both anti-migrant and anti-gender sentiments. The specific focus of these sentiments can differ based on the political and societal dynamics in each country or region. In Georgia, far-right groups employed both anti-migrant and anti-gender rhetoric in the 2010s. However, the anti-migrant rhetoric is racially and geopolitically defined. While recent liberal populism focuses on Russian migrants, who arrived in Georgia in great numbers after the war in Ukraine, far-right populism excludes Russian migrants from its focus. Hence, it is primarily anti-genderism that takes center stage in the far-right’s anti-egalitarian discourse in Georgia.

Globally and locally, far-right populists depict themselves as courageous defenders of the people against global and local liberal elites, framing “gender ideology” as a form of Western imperialism (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). The cultural-ideological terrain of post-Soviet states and societies, grappling with the legacy of Soviet and post-Soviet nationalisms, as they intersect with a new global political and economic order, is characterized by debates about Westernization, modernity, and tradition. A similar trend has been observed in the postcolonial states and societies wrestling with the legacy of colonialism and anti-colonial nationalism (Lukose, 2010).
The authoritarian regimes and far-right groups have co-opted the decolonial agenda, including anti-imperial feminist critique, for purposes contrary to the objectives of decolonization. This “colonization of decolonization” has resulted in the misuse of decolonization rhetoric to promulgate colonial politics. The Kremlin, for instance, claims to promote an “anti-hegemonic position” and opposes a unipolar world using the language of decolonization.² However, several critical points counter this narrative. First, the struggle for decolonization belongs to oppressed people, not oppressive states (Durdiyeva, 2022). Second, Russia’s actions, particularly in Ukraine, reflect a logic of war and conquest characteristic of coloniality, not decolonization. Third, the decolonial pluriverse cannot be equated to the multipolarity of authoritarian regimes (Krishnan, 2022). Russia’s attempts to label itself as anti-imperial, are particularly ironic given its history as an imperial power, and hence, its anti-westernism and anti-liberalism should not be conflated with decolonization. The misconception that colonial inclinations are exclusive to Western empires is both universalistic and Eurocentric. It universalizes Western imperialism, disregarding other forms of imperialism, and it is Eurocentric by assuming that European imperialism is the only model of imperialism. Additionally, this perspective is essentializing, dividing the world into Western and non-Western categories and assuming that political inclinations derive only from these divisions.

This affective power of the anti-imperial frame, which generates fears, has played a key role in the mobilization strategies of far-right populists. However, the way this affect is expressed differs across the globe. In Georgia, for instance, the anti-imperial frame is evident in the anti-Western and anti-liberal narratives of the far-right on the one hand, and in the anti-Soviet and anti-Russian narratives of the liberal populism on the other. What is the relationship between anti-gender ideology and anti-Western rhetoric and how are these two concepts interconnected? First and foremost, proponents of anti-gender ideology portray egalitarian ideas concerning gender and sexuality as Western imports that are imposed on local societies (Kuhar & Zobec, 2017). Interestingly, this notion that egalitarian politics represent Western values is embraced by both anti-gender and liberal elites in Georgia. The former invokes this frame to assert that egalitarian politics is imposed and forced upon local or traditional cultures by foreign hostile powers, while the latter uses it as a mark of Western superiority and to refer to the West as a normative reference from which the relevance of egalitarian politics derives (Tskhadadze, 2018; Kovats, 2021). Consequently, both sides create a dichotomy of Western versus traditional values and engage in a battle within this framework. However, emancipatory politics cannot employ the same totalizing and essentializing categories, such as Western and non-Western, since both are politically motivated constructions (Narayan, 1997). On the other hand, as documented by some scholars, anti-gender and far-right actors may strategically present themselves as pro-Western or pro-European and align themselves with far-right or conservative forces in the West, asserting a ‘true European’ identity purportedly sidelined by corrupt elites in Western countries (Mos, 2023; Tskhadadze, 2018). In the case of Georgia, the far-right’s attempts to align themselves with Western far-right forces should be understood in light of the prevalent pro-Western sentiment in Georgian society. Given that anti-westernism is politically less advantageous, anti-gender actors often opt for an anti-liberal narrative.

Nevertheless, critical viewpoints on imperialism and the West are not exclusive to authoritarian right-wing governments, and critiques of liberalism are not confined to right-wing populism. It is incorrect to equate egalitarian critical voices with right-wing populist criticism, as there exists a fundamental difference in intent, content, and objectives. Unlike left-wing politics, which view Western economic and political dominance as neoliberal globalization undermining the development of developing countries, right-wing populism opposes the West on the grounds of cultural values. They emphasize the alleged Western interference in issues related to gender and sexuality. For instance, when discussing issues like sexual education or LGBTQ+ rights, right-wing populists often depict these issues as threats coming from the West (Khomeriki & Kintsurashvili, 2023). This perspective views the world as a battleground of geopolitical powers, with the West as the main enemy, and Russia as an ally defending the Orthodox world. Thus, there is a significant divergence between the left and right in their criticism of the West, and this difference goes beyond mere framing; it relates to the nature of the criticism itself. While the left’s criticism primarily centers around issues of global inequality, neoliberal globalization, and injustice in the distribution of resources, right-wing criticism is framed in moral and cultural terms and, to a certain extent, ignores or even embraces the ideology of the Russian State. Right-wing populists incite the fear of gender equality so that people identify gender as the cause of their feelings of trepidation about the world.

Scholars distinguish the recent rise of ‘anti-genderism’ from earlier waves of anti-feminist backlash, arguing that the new phenomenon of anti-genderism essentially relies on its new construct of ‘gender ideology’ (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018), which is viewed by some as a “symbolic glue” (Kovats & Poin, 2015) that brings together diverse far-right actors, and by others as an “empty signifier” (Mayer & Sauer, 2017). While anti-genderism of the far-right revolves around the idea of gender ideology as undermining the Judeo-Christian foundation, anti-feminism can encompass a broad spectrum of perspectives, including those from both the far-right and progressive left. However, it’s important to note that the framing and nature of opposition to feminism can vary significantly between these groups.

Finally, this study views far-right populism as a phenomenon that has both local and transnational dimensions and acknowledges the existence of an ideological nexus between various global actors including the Vatican, Russian State ideologues and ultraconservative actors, US religious fundamentalists and right-wing politicians from around the globe. Despite national and historical dissimilarities, as well as diversity among anti-gender actors regarding argumentation, motivation, and the level of institutionalization, there is evidence of solid transnational strategic and financial networking (Wittenius, 2022). Moreover, it’s crucial to recognize that the influence of global actors varies across regions. In the context of Georgia, Russian State ideologues, ultraconservative actors, and the Russian Orthodox Church wield significant influence, playing a pivotal role in shaping the political and ideological landscape.

There is a growing body of literature on anti-gender mobilization in Europe, prompting the question of interlinkages and resemblances between these movements. Edenborg (2023) examines Russia’s anti-gender politics in light of similar mobilizations in Europe, employing Maarten Hajer’s concept of discourse coalition to analyze these convergences. Notably, Russian

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thinker Aleksandr Dugin has influenced Catholic anti-gender ideologues (Garbagnoli, 2017, cited in Edenborg, 2023), and Russian ultra-nationalists have affiliations with the World Congress of Families. Interestingly, rather than gender, it’s “traditional values” that have served as a “symbolic glue” for Russian ultranationalists (Wilkinson, 2014, cited in Edenborg, 2023).

Alexander Dugin’s views and his “Neo-Eurasianist” philosophy play a central role in the understanding of current Russian imperialism. These perspectives not only inform the Orthodox Christian narrative but also position Russia as “the spiritual leader to the Orthodox Christian World (Cole, 2020, p.195).” The idea of the “Russian World” is endorsed by the Russian Orthodox Church and disseminated through the promotion of the Russian language. It’s crucial to recognize that the Russian World and Dugin’s philosophy are not merely ideological driving forces; they build upon Russian imperial technologies that historically leveraged Christianity to Russify Christian minorities across the Empire. This sheds light on what may seem contradictory to Cole (2020) and Pushaw (2019, cited in Cole, p.195) - Georgian ultra-conservative nationalists, for whom Georgian Orthodox Christianity epitomizes Georgian-ness, simultaneously promoting a pro-Kremlin agenda. These two positions aren’t necessarily in direct correlation, but they aren’t irreconcilable considering the history of the imperial exploitation of Christianity.
CHAPTER 2:

Populist Moment: A Crisis of Democracy or a Crisis of Liberalism?

The recent transnational wave of right-wing populism, characterized by a common element of anti-genderism, is often examined in the context of the crisis of democracy - a phenomenon that can be seen as both a cause and a consequence of the rise of right-wing populism. Due to ideological differences, a range of perspectives offer varying interpretations of the causes and consequences of this phenomenon differently, revealing the complexity of discussions around the topic. This chapter will delve into these nuanced discussions that try to comprehend the current “populist moment.”

The debate about what democracy is and ought to be is at the core of talks about the crisis of democracy. Is liberal democracy, as proposed by Fukuyama (1992) in his book “The End of History and the Last Man”, the ultimate stage in the development of democracy, representing the ideal form of governance for all societies, or are there alternative forms? Is illiberal democracy, the term often used to describe authoritarian regimes that mimic democratic processes while suppressing individual liberties, the only alternative? Is liberal democracy sufficiently democratic? Are the terms “political democracy” and “democracy” interchangeable, or does democracy encompass more than just its political dimension?

Indirect or representative democracy has been the prevailing form of governance throughout the last century. Some scholars, such as Dahl (1972), characterize it as polyarchy, a system that is neither a dictatorship nor a democracy. Critical scholarship tends to perceive representative democracy as susceptible to oligarchy, as its exclusivity serves the interests of the elite class. As for liberal democracy, it is primarily concerned with restraining political authority over citizens and its democratic foundation revolves around the principle of the political equality of citizens. Ultimately, for liberal democracy, democracy functions as a means to achieve liberty or individual freedom, but it is not the ultimate goal itself (Sorensen, 2008). Historically, liberalism aimed to limit state power by establishing a sphere of civil society that includes private business interests, free from state interference. Another essential element of early liberalism was the advocacy for a market economy based on respect for private property (Sorensen, 2008). Consequently, liberal democracy has historically been about reconciling its two constituents: democracy and liberalism. Mouffe (2018) argues that since the 1980s, as a
consequence of neoliberal hegemony, many aspects of political liberalism have been relegated to a secondary position. Instead, economic liberalism, with its defense of the free market, has taken a central role. This period, marked by the elimination of agonistic tension between liberal and democratic principles and the reduction of democracy to its liberal component, is characterized by Mouffe as “post-democracy.” Some go further and depict this phenomenon as the “colonization of democratic institutions” by corporate power (Keane, 2022), which leaves states powerless in the face of global capital. In response, far-right groups insist on the necessity of a “strong leader.” However, in reality, conflate welfarism with neoliberal authoritarianism or introduce exclusive, chauvinistic welfare elements.

The narrow conception of democracy was formulated by Joseph Schumpeter (1976), who viewed democracy as a mere mechanism for choosing political leadership. However, for Dahl (1985), electoral democracy is not a sufficient condition for the functioning of democracy. Instead, government responsiveness to the demands of its citizens, who are considered political equals, is viewed as a key characteristic of democracy. This, in turn, requires the availability of institutional conditions, such as free and fair elections, freedom of expression, association autonomy, and insurance of citizens’ democratic participation (Dahl, 1985), which are considered expressions of political democracy or liberal democracy (Sorensen, 2008). Mainstream indexes that measure democracies primarily rely on the definition of democracy synonymous with political democracy, which includes dimensions such as competition, participation, and civil liberties. In contrast, the relatively comprehensive conception of democracy suggested by Held (2006) implies not only political but also social and economic realms. This view suggests that deregulation policies and corporate capitalism embraced under economic liberalism, create economic disparities and widen gaps between the rich and poor, as a result, hinder the transformation of formal equal rights into substantial equal rights. Thus, economic inequality is a form of social injustice and irreconcilable with democracy not only because of the maldistribution of material resources but also because it excludes the possibility of political equality and thus causes maldistribution of political power as well (Fraser, 2003). Similarly, B.R. Ambedkar, the drafter of the Indian constitution, cautioned that unbridled capitalism would plague democracy with a ‘life of contradictions’ generated by the conflict between the struggle for good government based on political equality and a society ruined by huge social and material inequalities (Keane, 2022). This debate about the relationship between capitalism and democracy and the view that economic inequality is a significant obstacle to democracy has been persistent and remains a central issue in current discussions about the crisis of democracy.

Another characteristic of the current liberal democracies, which is derivative of the previous argument about the incompatibility of democracy and current global corporate capitalism, is the managerialization of the political realm (Mouffe, 2018). The globalization of financial capitalism and oligarchization of the local political landscape shape state policies in crucial socioeconomic realms, and as a result, the spaces where citizens can influence political and economic decisions shrink. The globalization of financial capitalism, coupled with a certain form of liberal democracy, in which economic liberalism gains a central role, doesn’t allow politics to be reimagined at a local level. The political order is already imagined and politics becomes a domain of experts who manage or monitor the management of the established order. At the local level, oligarchization of local politics, which results in the conflation of political and
economic classes, hinders people’s participation in democratic decision-making and the possibility of influencing policies crucial for their welfare.

Both left and right-wing actors responded to the managerialization of politics or the era of “post-politics” by positioning themselves as anti-establishment or anti-elite and criticizing liberal democracy for serving and securing elite interests against the people’s interests. However, there is a fundamental difference in what they mean by the “elite” and “the people” and what solutions they propose. The left emphasizes the importance of “popular sovereignty”, while the right focuses on “national sovereignty.” The right populism often tends to co-opt and misuse terms such as decolonization and sovereignty that express the egalitarian solution to the plight of the oppressed peoples and use them for anti-egalitarian and authoritarian objectives. In our view, the apparent similarities between various ideological actors using these terms need to be further explored. Since these concepts are not just a mere “metaphor” (Tuck & Yang, 2012) and have embedded implications depending on the ideological positionality, we will explore the principal differences that these terms carry when used by far-right and left actors.

If left critiques of current liberal democracies primarily frame the problem in socio-economic terms, focusing on economic disparity, social injustice, and socio-economic grievances of the “people,” right-wing populism is driven by chauvinistic nationalist ideology and presents arguments in moralizing terms, primarily revolving around issues of identity, values and national sovereignty (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). The paradigmatic difference between left and right-wing populism in their critique of current liberal democracies is the question of equality. The left emphasizes the need to expand equality to crucial spheres such as the economy, making it all-encompassing for all sections of society (Mouffe, 2018). On the other hand, right-wing populism questions the very idea of equality. It excludes certain sections of society from the homogenous nationalist imaginary of the people and views liberalism as a threat to “natural” hierarchies. And these are not just implications of their rhetoric, over recent years especially, the Georgian far right has started an explicit campaign to undermine the idea of equality as justice and to argue for ‘right’ hierarchies as the true meaning of justice.4

In the view of right-wing authoritarian regimes, “the people” is a homogenous entity represented by the strongman (Cole, 2020). However, even as a homogenous entity, the people are excluded from political decision-making. For instance, none of the reforms implemented in Russia during the heyday of directed democracy was initiated by pressure from below (Krastev, 2006). The authoritarian regime’s strategy is to maintain the illusion of political representation by replacing it with nationalist cultural representation and appealing to issues of identity and values. Thus, right-wing populism in Russian colors is both anti-liberal and anti-populist in terms of politics, as it fears people’s participation, portraying them as infantile and easily manipulated by foreign powers. According to this imaginary, opposing the strongman equals opposing the people. Broadly, right-wing populists define people in exclusive terms and leave out numerous categories and non-dominant sections of society. On the other hand, some feminist and left critics view “people” as a broad category and insist that democracy should encompass the heterogeneity of people and their interests, which they juxtapose with the interests of

4 See, for example: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u_WNDayK7T0
a handful of oligarchs (Mouffe 2018; Graff, 2022). Thus, while right-wing populist criticism is
directed to restrict democracy, feminist critique and left populism claim to aim at pushing it
in the direction of more inclusive and socially just policies. However, there are some feminist
and left responses to right-wing populism that employ tactics similar to nationalist exclusivity
and homogeneity and leave out certain disputed issues in society, such as trans issues and sex
work (Rekhviasvili, 2022). In Chapter 6, we’ll further expatiate this phenomenon.

It is in the post-democratic context of economic inequalities and erosion of popular sover-
eignty, that the crisis of liberal democracy should be placed. From a left-wing standpoint, the
crisis of democracy is linked to the reduction of ‘liberal democracy’ to its liberal component,
fostering economic liberalism and a “post-democratic” context that gives rise to the “populist
moment” (Mouffe, 2018). On the other hand, scholars from a liberal spectrum argue that it is
liberalism rather than democracy that has been in crisis and under attack. The cause of anti-lib-
eral politics, according to Fukuyama (2022), consists in the pushing of liberalism to extremes,
both by the right manifested in neoliberalism and by the left manifested in “identity politics”.
This perspective views the crisis of liberalism as a result rather than a cause. Meanwhile, right-
wing populism often co-opts democracy and targets liberalism, leading to a crisis affecting
both democracy and liberalism. Although the current “reverse wave” of democratization is not
exceptional, and at least three waves of democratization and subsequent reverse waves are
usually distinguished (Huntington, 1991), each reverse wave is unique and anti-genderism has
been one of the characteristics of the recent wave.

The crisis of democracy has also been associated with the conundrum of sovereignty, which
has been conceptualized and framed differently by the left and right. From a left perspective,
the crisis of democracy signifies the erosion of popular sovereignty and the lack of people’s
power to influence politics (Mouffe, 2018). These critics seek to retrieve democracy by bring-
ing back the demos into politics. Secondly, when “sovereignty” is used as a category revolving
around the state, it could denote a critique of global economic governance and focus on issues
like food sovereignty and popular democracy (Amin, 2017). Further, a “sovereignty”-centered
perspective opposes global political governance, projecting a particular model of democracy
as the sole model without alternatives. For instance, it is not just liberal democracy but the
American model of democracy that is considered a winning model to aspire to, according to
Huntington (1991). On the other hand, multilateral/ intergovernmental institutions have the
capability to support citizens against abuses of power by authoritarian states. The right-wing
emphasis on “sovereignty,” which revolves around the state, is often used by authoritarian
regimes to monopolize power and restrict the influence of supranational institutions. Local
elites opposing Putin’s government are viewed as the “offshore aristocracy” whom they aim
to replace with a “nationally-minded” elite. Thus, the “Nationalization of the elite” is a key
element of the sovereign state according to the Kremlin’s ideologues (Krastev, 2006). Right-
wing claims for “national sovereignty”, in contrast to “popular sovereignty,” are exclusive and
reserved only for those deemed as true nationals (Mouffe, 2018). Therefore, right-wing popul-
ism defines “elite” as both local anti-government and foreign actors. The concept of “sover-
eign democracy,” the master narrative of the Kremlin’s ideologues, reflects Russia’s ambition
to present an “alternative” and gain some ideological attraction in the Global South. Over
time, the concept of “sovereign democracy” has proven attractive not only to the Global South
due to its apparent association with anti-imperial sovereignty but also to some conservative
European political actors. Interestingly, the Kremlin’s conceptualization of “sovereign democracy” is far from popular sovereignty as it opposes both “populist pressure from below” and “international pressure from above” (Krastev, 2006, p.114).

It is against the backdrop of the crisis of democracy, that the “populist moment” reaches its climax, which is characterized by the manifold (a) resistances against “elites” and (b) attempts to (re)claim people. For Mouffe (2018), populism is a result of the “post-democratic” era of global governance in which the dogma of neoliberal globalization is prevalent and politics is reduced to the mere management of public affairs. At this juncture, populism opens the possibility for people to become new subjects of collective action “capable of reconfiguring a social order experienced as unjust” (Mouffe, 2018, p.13). Similarly, Kovats (2021) frames the right-wing anti-gender mobilization as a “resistance against existing material and symbolic East-West inequalities in Europe”. The populist moment, according to Mouffe, denotes a “return of political”, a phenomenon characterized by contradictory manifestations. On the one hand, it can result in authoritarian solutions that restrict liberal-democratic institutions, while on the other, it can lead to the promulgation of solutions that enhance and amplify democracy.
The status of democracy in Georgia, as described by respondents, has been a fluctuating and hybrid phenomenon, marked by shifting dynamics between “incompetent authoritarianism” and “hybrid authoritarianism,” “neoliberal authoritarianism,” and “conservative turn.” The present chapter delves into some aspects of democracy in Georgia within the broader discussion on the crisis of democracy and anti-genderism. Our respondents underscored two pivotal questions concerning Georgian democracy that contribute to the prevailing crisis. Firstly, how did the interplay between democracy and economic inequality unfold in Georgia? Secondly, given the backdrop of growing authoritarianism globally, how can the fact that Georgian democracy has been greatly shaped by and dependent on outside assistance be approached from an anti-imperial feminist standpoint?

Georgian democracy was formidably challenged in its cradle when the majority rights clashed with the claims of minority communities (Jones, 2015). In the early 1990s, the democratization process in Georgia, mirroring trends of many Soviet republics, grappled with ethnic heterogeneity and the “unwillingness of the dominant nationality to allow equal rights to ethnic minorities” (Huntington 1991, p15). Subsequently, the 1990s are characterized as a period of “directed democracy”, a political regime liberating elites from the responsibilities of governance, allowing them to pursue their own interests (Krastev, 2006). This, in turn, facilitated the concentration of the nation’s wealth in the hands of a selected few, creating a scenario where elite groups in Georgia actively interfered in the democratic process to safeguard their financial interests. Initially, the old elites, nomenklatura, akin to the Latin American military’s influence, held significant influence in post-Soviet Georgia, a pattern observed in many post-Soviet countries, where these established elites retained substantial influence.

After the Rose Revolution, the new United National Movement (UNM) government embarked on a fundamental economic transformation, implementing one of the most comprehensive packages of neoliberal economic reforms that incorporated many core elements of the Washington Consensus (Gugushvili, 2016). While these reforms spurred overall economic growth, they did not address the core challenges of the Georgian economy including unemployment, subsistence farming, poverty, or the deficit in trade balance (Gugushvili, 2016). On the contrary, for example, the privatization of healthcare and high prices for medication tripled the number of households facing catastrophic health expenditures (Gugushvili, 2016). Consequently, the deregulation policies and “authoritarian neoliberalism” sustained economic ineq-
curities while reducing opportunities for poor and rural Georgians to participate economically and politically (Jones, 2015) and weakened the democratic process. These reforms amplified the friction between economic inequality and sustainable democracy. The gendered consequences of the post-Soviet economic order are understudied. The dismantling of the welfare state shifted the responsibility for care and well-being from the state to families, intensifying women’s unpaid and poorly compensated work. More than half of women are economically inactive, while those who are active, are compelled to participate in the increasingly precarious labor market, both locally and abroad.

Georgia is characterized as a hybrid regime, meaning that while some institutional aspects of democracy exist, the disproportionate power of the ruling party and the absence of power-sharing is masked by the existence of satellite parties. This characteristic places it in proximity to the concept of “managed Democracy” (Kakachia & Samkharadze, 2022), which denotes a system, where ruling parties manipulate democratic institutions to maintain a monopoly on power (Krastev, 2006). The Georgian Dream (GD) government mirrors some aspects of managed democracy, employing manipulation of democratic institutions and processes to advance the interests of those in power, even if it entails undermining the existing liberal constitutional framework. This manipulation may involve using legislatures and legal mechanisms, as well as public servants and employment in the public sector, in ways that may appear consistent with the rule of law but are ultimately used to consolidate and perpetuate the ruling party’s control, sometimes at the expense of democratic principles.

The interviewed experts unanimously regard Georgia as a democracy, albeit one with significant flaws. However, some experts view the current state of democracy in Georgia as a regression, describing it as “a state capture,” where all government institutions are monopolized by oligarchs. Others do not perceive it as a backsliding but rather as a continuation and variation of anti-democratic tendencies that have long been present in post-Soviet Georgia. One of the experts6, drawing from Samir Amin’s conceptual framework, characterizes Georgian Democracy as a low-intensity democracy. However, several factors hinder the functioning of what the above-mentioned expert refers to as “thin” or “low-intensity democracy.” Foremost among these is the lack of pre-election conditions that ensure free and equitable influence of all parties on the electoral process. In Georgia, elections are not only influenced by direct threats from ruling parties but are also affected by indirect structural factors, such as unemployment. This is because, during elections, a section of voters, employed in the public sector, fear losing their jobs if a different party takes power, which could lead to the replacement of the existing workforce with a new labor reserve, typically, supporters of the new ruling party. Thus, the expert7 emphasizes the strong relationship between poverty and democracy. The relationship between inequality, material poverty, and democracy is a subject of fierce debate in the scholarship. Held (2006) also reckons that material poverty makes democracy difficult. In such conditions, freedom, first of all, means freedom from hunger, disease, and poverty (Sørensen, 2008).

6 Interview. Respondent N. 2. 18.08.2023
7 Interview. Respondent N. 2. 18.08.2023
Historically liberalism viewed democracy as a potential avenue for the dangerous misuse of power by a majority that may infringe upon the rights of minorities, positioning itself as a tool to control and counteract this influence. However, like any political idea, liberalism carries contradictory connotations. It can signify not only the defense of oppressed minorities against the dominant majority but also the defense of minority political and economic elites against the interests of the oppressed majority. This tension is also notable in Georgia, where economic and political power often coincide, with political elites often originating from an economic elite background. As noted by experts,\textsuperscript{8,9} at the constitutional level in Georgia, a neoliberal development model is protected, safeguarding the interests of the economic elites. For example, the constitution virtually bans the implementation of progressive taxation, which would be in the interest of the broader segments of the population. The respondent views this as a restriction of democracy by economic liberalism. This, according to him,\textsuperscript{10} exemplifies how liberal democracy doesn’t imply the arbitrary dominance of the majority, but, instead, the dominance of the privileged minority. Furthermore, the respondent adds that liberalism’s strong emphasis on private property can facilitate the possibility of the emergence of an oligarchy. Meanwhile, far-right populist criticism of liberal democracy tends to focus solely on cultural and civilizational aspects, often serving the purpose of upholding the power of the economic and political elites it claims to oppose.

One defining aspect of post-Soviet Georgian democracy is its reliance on international support. This has fostered the project of mimicking democracy, wherein the mimicker implicitly acknowledges the superiority of the model being imitated. While the promotion of democracy from the outside might seem contradictory and could be criticized as undemocratic foreign interference, it’s crucial to distinguish between “international situation” and “international promotion.” On the one hand, countries don’t build democracies in isolation from the world, given the increasing interdependence of political systems globally, which may elevate “rising expectations of the people” (Huntington, 1991). However, as argued by an interviewed expert,\textsuperscript{11} the mere presence of a favorable international situation may not work like a snowball effect and not suffice for democratic development without corresponding favorable internal conditions. On the other hand, international interference can impact popular sovereignty and, by imposing a model to be supported, it can bridle the debate on the kind of democracy a nation aspires to and why. This raises the further question: “What kind of democracy and the political system do the Western countries support?” Typically, Western support is inclined towards regimes that are (1) pro-Western oriented, (2) liberal on economic policies, including openness to the world market, and (3) demonstrate respect for private property (Huntington, 1991). Similarly, an expert,\textsuperscript{12} interviewed for this study, illuminates biases in international support, citing the example of the democratization process led by the United National Movement (UNM), which primarily focused on economic deregulation and some aspects of institutional reforms. The expert argues that international donors are aligned with this approach, demonstrating little interest in extending democratization efforts to encompass social and economic

\textsuperscript{8} Interview. Respondent N. 2. 18.08.2023
\textsuperscript{9} Interview. Respondent N. 1. 16.08.2023
\textsuperscript{10} Interview. Respondent N. 2. 18.08.2023
\textsuperscript{11} Interview. Respondent N. 2. 18.08.2023
\textsuperscript{12} Interview. Respondent N. 3. 16.08.2023
spheres, as well as issues related to decentralization and inclusive spaces. Notably, according to the expert, during the Rose Revolution era, some aspects of institutional reforms and economic deregulation were prioritized as a component of state-building rather than forming part of a comprehensive democratization effort. At the same time, despite the international promotion of democracy, it is crucial not to overlook the agency of local actors who, amidst the existing challenges, navigate and shape the future of their countries.

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned limitations, an expert argues that, in the context of Georgia, external influence is often seen as the only means to balance power and tether the authoritarian tendencies of a ruling party. There are growing concerns among Georgian civil society activists that since the reappointment of Gharibashvili as prime minister in 2021, the influence of the West and Western institutions has waned despite once being considered the primary means of exerting control over the democratization processes in Georgia. An expert emphasizes that while power was once predominantly global during colonial and later Soviet times, it has become increasingly localized. This shift makes it increasingly challenging for activists to counter and prevent the ruling party’s monopolization of power. Another expert acknowledges that Western influence implied a certain hierarchy, where local civil society activists and organizations, lacking significant grassroots support themselves, relied on Western support to exert influence on the processes, making Western power the primary means of top-down influence on the government. With the West losing its normative power (largely as a result of far-right rhetoric, recently also adopted by the government) and weakening its financial leverages (largely as a result of the government’s bargaining in the current complex geopolitical situation) experts fear that this strategy has become less effective. The current government appears less concerned about the opinions of Brussels and Washington and presents itself as independent from international “pressure” and advocates for “sovereignty,” a discursive tactic reminiscent of Putin’s ideologues. However, instances such as the Namokhvani Movement reveal that the government is not actually committed to popular sovereignty, as they consistently seek to stifle the voices and interests of the people in favor of big capital. The ruling power deploys “sovereignty” discourse to protect its own authority and eliminate forces that might compel adherence to democratic values, hindering the disregard of people’s demands. This situation is described by an expert as powerlessness, as activists believed they had a lever of international pressure to influence the ruling party, but that leverage is gradually wearing out. However, considering that, in general, being lectured by the West was the price that the post-Soviet elite paid for using the resources of the West to preserve its power (Krastev, 2006), and the Georgian Dream is still dependent on these resources, it may be hoped that an overt authoritarian rupture will be a less viable course for the Georgian government.

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13 Interview. Respondent N. 3. 16.08.2023
14 Interview. Respondent N. 3. 16.08.2023
15 Interview. Respondent N. 3. 16.08.2023
16 Interview. Respondent N. 13. 6.09.2023
CHAPTER 4: 
Populist Politics in Georgia: State Actors and Anti-genderism

In this chapter, our objective is to examine the anti-genderism exhibited by the present ruling party and identify key populist elements as perceived by the experts we interviewed. We delve into several questions: Is populism a new phenomenon in Georgia? What sets Georgian populism apart? How has anti-genderism unfolded in recent years? What are the distinctive features of the current and past political regimes that hold significance in the study of anti-genderism? How have fears been leveraged by various ruling parties?

Populism has been a recurring phenomenon in Georgian politics ever since its independence (Cole, 2020). Politics in the independent republic of Georgia, since its re-establishment in 1991, has been characterized by “nationalism, populism, religiosity, and conservatism” (Jones, 2015), leading to irreconcilable polarization and civil war. The first president, Gamsakhurdia, perceived politics as a zero-sum game of good versus evil and labeled his opponents as “enemies of the nation” (Jones, 2018). This rhetoric, which demonizes opponents and mobilizes the population, persisted later on through UNM and GD governments. After the Rose Revolution in the 2000s, liberal populism gained prominence, only to be succeeded by the eclectic ideology of the Georgian Dream in 2012. After Garibashvili was reappointed prime minister in 2021, the Georgian Dream, which had previously adhered to a liberal framework, unsettled it with a shift towards conservatism; however, populist elements coexisted with liberal ones present in GD’s rhetoric from the very start. Therefore, Georgia’s recent embrace of conservative populist patterns is not entirely novel. Neither is it confined to the local context but aligns with the global trend of expanding right-wing populism. This argument raises further questions: if populism isn’t new to Georgia, what constitutes the specifics of the recent developments?

Although scholars on populism classify it as either right- or left-wing, one expert we interviewed introduced the term “liberal populism” in reference to the Saakashvili government. This reveals “a cyclical pattern of shifting between liberal and conservative forms of populism” in post-Soviet Georgia, both of which have posed threats to democracy. One distinctive element of GD’s conservative populism, as opposed to UNM’s liberal populism, is its explicit discursive reliance on anti-gender frames invoked by the far-right groups in Central and Western Europe, as well as the Kremlin’s ideologues and officials. Anti-genderism has been present

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17 Interview. Respondent N. 1. 16.08.2023
18 Interview. Respondent N. 1. 16.08.2023
in both parties through satellite parties and other non-state actors to a different extent. Under both the UNM and GD, far-right groups and satellite parties frequently operated to exploit issues opposing egalitarian values for different purposes. Consequently, many respondents hesitate to differentiate between the current government and far-right groups, viewing them as interconnected and not independent actors. These groups either voiced radical agendas that the ruling party couldn’t openly support, or they played the role of opposition, positioning themselves as adversaries against which the ruling party presented itself as a progressive force.

The use of satellite parties is a common element for both the UNM and GD governments, described by one expert as a strategy of the “outsourcing of right-wing populist rhetoric.” For instance, during the UNM rule, the “Christian-Democratic Movement” acted as a satellite party with the objective of generating homophobic and anti-egalitarian demands within the public sphere. The UNM, used this strategy for negative mobilization, to create a “backward” threat against which it would appear as a progressive force. Meanwhile, GD used it to mobilize supporters around this fear. Before public homophobia became prominent, the satellite party initiated the “homophobic demand” of including a constitutional clarification that defined marriage as a union between a man and a woman. The Christian-Democratic Movement leader Giorgi Targamadze campaigned actively across various regions of Georgia. Later, during GD rule, its satellite party, Alliance of Patriots actively campaigned for the same amendment before the 2016 general elections. In 2017, the Georgian Dream, now in power, accepted it as a constitutional amendment. Initially, during the early stages of its rule, GD supported anti-egalitarian populist groups without directly adopting their rhetoric. Gradually, GD has increasingly adopted a “family-centered” and broadly anti-gender discourse in its own rhetoric. This has been particularly true since the reappointment of Gharibashvili as prime minister and especially, since the March 2023 protests against the anti-agent law. However, in recent years, it has reclaimed some elements of populism that were previously outsourced because it requires populism to maintain its grip on power by creating an emotionally charged collective identity among the population and also because, according to an expert, it no longer has the luxury of sharing potential electoral support with satellite parties.

The awareness that far-right parties are not independent actors, coupled with the observation of the instability of far-right actors in Georgia - often going into relative oblivion after short periods of prominence and being replaced by other far-right populist actors - leads experts to perceive it more as a campaign, instead of a full-fledged movement. Another expert suggests that far-right sentiments are primarily generated from the top down, making them less dangerous. Consequently, some experts insist that the primary target of resistance efforts
should be the government rather than focusing solely on more marginal far-right groups. One of the experts contends that “if it were not for the government’s tacit or explicit support, far-right discourse in politics would not have gained traction, and its popularity is sustained by the state.”\cite{Interview. Respondent N. 16. 21.09.2023} Another expert adds that non-state far-right groups “can’t accumulate enough resources to pose real danger”\cite{Interview. Respondent N. 12. 28.08.2023} without the permission of the ruling party. Thus, some experts feel more threatened by the government, given its institutional power, including the ability to change laws and disseminate populist narratives.

Populism, as a political strategy, requires the identification of an adversary and the claim of speaking in the name of “the people.” In the case of the Saakashvili government, as per one expert,\cite{Interview. Respondent N. 2. 18.08.2023} corruption was one of the primary adversaries of liberal populism. Corrupt officials were blamed for societal grievances, and the UNM’s narrative asserted that once corruption was eradicated, the prosperity it promised would follow. Another identified adversary was individuals perceived as “unable to keep up with modernization efforts, and seen as hindering societal progress that modernization could bring.”\cite{Interview. Respondent N. 2. 18.08.2023} Finally, anti-imperial rhetoric against the Soviet Union and Russia has been a hallmark of the liberal populism of the Saakashvili era, echoing Gamsakhurdia’s anti-imperial populism. However, the UNM period contained a notable contradiction, as the government sold critical natural resources and property to Russian oligarchs despite its anti-Russian and pro-Western stance. This led to the perception that the UNM embraced populism to garner mass support for its neoliberal development agenda. On the other hand, GD, according to the expert, lacks a far-reaching revolutionary development agenda and therefore does not rely on mass support. Instead, GD employs populism primarily to “maintain and intensify polarization as a means of sustaining its grip on power.”\cite{Interview. Respondent N. 3. 21.08.2023} In the earlier days of GD rule, the primary adversary was the previous government of the UNM. However, as this threat wore out over time, partly also due to overexploitation by GD, they found themselves in need of a new master narrative. For this reason, they turned more heavily and explicitly to relying on construing a new adversary embodied by LGBTQ+ rights defenders and “liberal elites” more generally.

The main “adversary” has metamorphosed over time in Georgian politics, shifting from ethnic minorities in the early 1990s to the LGBTQ+ community in the 2010s. The geopolitical framing of the issues transforms “internal enemies” into an “international threat.” As a result, micro and macro threats are interwoven, enabling various powers to exploit the matter. This convergence allows anti-EU actors to challenge the EU by framing it as a threat to traditional Georgian values, spreading the narrative that EU integration necessitates the legalization of gay marriage (Cole, 2020). Consequently, local actors advocating for LGBTQ+ rights are perceived as instruments in the grasp of Western Imperialism against traditional Georgian values. Meanwhile, international actors, including donors and EU entities, are portrayed as the masterminds behind a project seen as a threat to Georgia’s “national sovereignty.” Therefore, the definition of “the people” for right-wing populists in Georgia is exclusionary, echoing discursive frames used by the Kremlin’s ideologues (Krastev, 2006), which demonized the “off-
shore aristocracy” and initiated the project of “nationalization of the elite.” A parallel can be drawn with GD’s recent policy on the replacement of the former cultural elite, where there seems to be an attempt to replace the UNM’s project of “liberalization of the elite” with GD’s “nationalization of the elite.” Notably, in the case of Russia, discursive framing preceded the project of “nationalization of the elite,” which, in turn, was part of Putin’s consolidation of power (Krastev, 2006).

Another element that distinguishes GD from the previous UNM government, as identified by experts, is its eclecticism, which is shifting towards homogeneity over time, especially since the beginning of the war in Ukraine. Prior to 2021, the Georgian Dream maintained an eclectic composition, encompassing diverse voices ranging from liberal to conservative and far-right. This allowed the party to attract ideologically heterogeneous constituents, although its overarching framework, as the expert32 insists, was still liberal. However, not all respondents agree with this evaluation of GD’s political trajectory. Some argue that GD consistently followed the same political path from 2012 but adeptly concealed it during its initial term in office. Other experts argue that a distinction should be drawn between GD’s early and later years. As one expert concludes, “It was relatively straightforward to delineate the character of the UNM’s governance, elucidating the essence of GD’s rule proves to be a more challenging task.”33 One of the reasons for this challenge lies in the prevalence of informality within its governance structure. Under GD’s rule, the locus of power often eludes easy identification, frequently extending beyond formal institutional boundaries.

The commitment to neoliberalism remains constant in the ruling parties’ politics. As one expert34 puts it, “Their [GD’s] conservatism is neoliberal and serves neoliberalism.” The rise of neoliberalism in Georgia coincides with the escalation of inequality (GINI index). Some experts perceive the rise of the far-right as a response to entrenched socio-economic inequalities. Due to its neoliberal framework, GD’s populism doesn’t have the strong material foundation for its “family-oriented” discourse as is the case with Orban’s welfare populism, which centered around family and family assistance. How can we explain this? An expert35 believes that GD refrains from actively using welfare rhetoric because “they do not want to open Pandora’s box of expectations and commitments associated with welfare policies.” Conversely, another expert argues that under Gharibashvili’s leadership, GD has adopted a paternalistic approach and expanded the number of individuals dependent on social assistance programs, which in turn, “fosters a system of loyalty and dependence because healthcare and social assistance programs are not automated and are determined on an individual basis.”36

In times of extreme material insecurity and precarious employment in a “risk society,” when established institutions cannot maintain even the appearance of a capacity to meet crucial needs, populations experience the world through frameworks of fear (Ramadan & Shantz, 2018). Material fears are channeled into social phobias, such as those against migrants and LGBTQ+ individuals. The manufacture of fear and the channeling of socio-economic fears into

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32 Interview. Respondent N. 2. 18.08.2023
33 Interview. Respondent N. 3. 21.08.2023
34 Interview. Respondent N. 1. 16.08.2023
35 Interview. Respondent N. 2. 18.08.2023
36 Interview. Respondent N. 3. 21.08.2023
social phobias have become noteworthy features of twenty-first-century political strategies. Georgian conservative populism taps into fears like terrorism, war, and LGBTQ+ rights. Therefore, one of the experts questions the very idea of viewing homophobia in Georgia as given and emphasizes the need to trace its construction. In his words, “Political demands are generated in a similar fashion to the way businesses generate demand for their product.”\textsuperscript{37} Another expert notes that GD’s target audience can be described as “globalization losers,” referring to “individuals who struggled to adapt to democratization and rapid globalization.”\textsuperscript{38} However, this label shifts the blame of oppression to the oppressed groups themselves, because those labeled as “globalization losers” often suffer from structural inequalities that result from the policies of post-Soviet governments. Instead of addressing these inequalities and offering equal opportunities, new governments, like GD, divert their attention to the past - a central theme in GD’s propaganda - with little focus on the future. Thus, governments often encourage conflicts based on culture and identity in an effort to deflect attention away from the real causes of socio-economic deprivation. Meanwhile, for the people of Georgia entrenched in post-Soviet inequality and deprivation, identity is all they have to hold on to.

An expert notes that “Governments act like businesses to create certain anti-LGBTQ and anti-gender “demands” in society, which polarizes the public and projects the state as a neutral arbiter and mediator.”\textsuperscript{39} In doing so, they effectively conceal the fact that all ruling parties have played a significant role in fostering homophobia, albeit for different purposes. Thus, the artificially created anti-LGBTQ+ demand allows the state to capitalize on the issue and overlook socially and economically pertinent issues. Ultra-conservative populist discourse shifts the anger from the political and economic elites and diverts it to the powerless people. As the expert puts it, “This discourse moves the anger from capitalism to the most vulnerable groups of the society.”\textsuperscript{40} Instead of addressing structural factors that contribute to people’s feelings of alienation and anxiety, the ruling party capitalizes on the ideological efforts of the far-right, who target specific communities and attribute our misfortunes to them.

The government’s recent embrace of anti-genderism represents a shift in approach from “managed homophobia” to “overt homophobia.” However, opinions among experts are divided about its impact. Some view this “overt homophobia” as short-lived, as it did not have the anticipated impact on Georgian society. An expert noted that society is becoming less interested in this subject, and homophobia is no longer as influential among a growing segment of the population.\textsuperscript{41} This, according to another expert, might lead to the decline of the wave of political speculations since it is less effective for political parties to exploit the fears they relied on for an extended period. On the other hand, anti-genderism, and in particular, homophobia that has saturated the government’s rhetoric in recent years, has negatively altered the daily lives of activists in peripheral regions, who observe that as a consequence of mainstreamed hate speech, individuals are less hesitant to resort to physical assault.\textsuperscript{42} \textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{37} Interview. Respondent N. 2. 18.08.2023
\textsuperscript{38} Interview. Respondent N. 4. 23.08.2023
\textsuperscript{39} Interview. Respondent N. 2. 18.08.2023
\textsuperscript{40} Interview. Respondent N. 1. 16.08.2023
\textsuperscript{41} Interview. Respondent N. 16. 21.09.2023
\textsuperscript{42} Interview. Respondent N. 6. 9.09.2023
\textsuperscript{43} Interview. Respondent N. 9. 1.09.2023
CHAPTER 5:

LGBTQ+ Activism in Georgia and its Survival Strategies

Before embarking on an exploration of future feminist response pathways, we delve into the intricate and polarized survival strategies used by activists working on LGBTQ+ rights in Georgia - an issue that has been a central focus of anti-genderism of far-right populists. In the initial years of the Georgian Dream (GD) rule, the inclusion of a section addressing LGBTQ+ rights in the human rights action plan sparked hope for some interviewed activists. This sense of optimism was supported by the mention of “sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression” in the Law of Georgia on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination, adopted in 2014, which provided a platform for advocacy. However, following the reappointment of Irakli Gharibashvili as prime minister, and particularly since the March 2023 protests, a stark shift occurred, and in 2023, these issues were excluded from the action plan. The prime minister launched a homophobic campaign, which was echoed by other high-profile party members such as Irakli Kobakhidze and Mamuka Mdinadze. This marked an unprecedented moment in recent years, with politicians in such prominent positions openly endorsing and engaging in a campaign against LGBTQ+ rights.

The survival strategies employed by activists working on LGBTQ+ issues diverge, leading to the distinction between two main groups in various areas. There are six key issues highlighting differences among their approaches:

1. **Visibility**: The first group embraces politics of visibility as its main instrument, considering it a crucial tool for altering public opinions regarding the LGBTQ+ community.\(^44\) This group is primarily focused on the concept of visibility, viewing it as the only viable path to becoming a political player and bringing urgent social change. An activist from this group expresses the sentiment that she doesn’t “want to wait for another 50 years to see progress.”\(^45\) They acknowledge that, in the short term, visibility politics may lead to increased threats and hate crimes, but simultaneously these risks are viewed as a necessary aspect of achieving desired goals for LGBTQ+ rights. The second group consists of organizations and individuals that emphasize intersectional and multifaceted strategies, such as research, community activism, and service provision. In 2018, the second group refrained from participating in Pride events, expressing their lamentation that they did not possess enough influence to effectively counter the prevailing mainstream strategies considered universal. Their decision was perceived by their opponents as a form of betrayal, cowardice, or shame. Moreover, activists recall that intellectuals and opposition politicians quoted Churchill to shame them, stating that if you don’t fight for your freedom, you don’t deserve it.\(^46\) However, one of the interviewed activists does not feel ashamed of her fear and considers it a legitimate emotion.\(^47\) She emphasizes that beyond fear, the decision not to embrace visibility politics or Pride events as a mandatory strategy is a political one and shouldn’t be labeled as “hysteria

\(^{44}\) Interview. Respondent N. 18. 9.09.2023

\(^{45}\) Interview. Respondent N. 18. 9.09.2023

\(^{46}\) Interview. Respondent N. 7. 14.09.2023

\(^{47}\) Interview. Respondent N. 7.2. 14.09.2023
or fear.” Another activist argues that the “‘everydayness’ of LGBTQ+ existence is the most important political battleground, and the failure to address it and “recognize its political dimension could be a limitation of certain activist approaches.”

The annual cycle of perpetual crisis surrounding Pride events is referred to by some respondents as a deadlock, preventing them from exploring other possibilities, as they believe it leaves little room for imagination regarding alternative scenarios and strategies.

2. Political Parties: The first group of activists working on LGBTQ+ rights see homophobic attitudes within society as the primary challenge hindering the realization of LGBTQ+ rights. They view engagement with political parties to influence their policies as a significant strategy for addressing widespread homophobia in society. For instance, one organization entered into a memorandum with several opposition parties. As an activist explains it: “This process involved advocating for the memorandum with progressive members of the party, ultimately convincing the party to sign an agreement stating they would not use homophobic hate speech.” Unfortunately, shortly afterward, violent events erupted on July 5th, 2021, when a mob took to the streets of Tbilisi, chasing and assaulting LGBTQ+ individuals. The second group primarily identifies the problem as political homophobia, perceiving LGBTQ+ issues as historically being exploited for political gain in post-Soviet Georgia. Therefore, they are reluctant to see the solution in close collaboration with any political party, viewing them as the main manufacturers of homophobic fears. However, when it comes to advocating for LGBTQ+ rights, both groups have experience engaging with responsible government officials and collaborating with them to bring about change.

3. Individual vs. Community-oriented Strategies: There is a difference between individual and community-oriented strategies among activists working on the LGBTQ+ issues in Georgia. Some tend to favor more individual-oriented strategies, freedom of free speech and expression, and individual autonomy even at the cost of breaking social and familial ties, emphasizing the significance of taking risks and “staying committed to one’s beliefs, even if it means losing some people along the way.” In contrast, others argue that this strategy doesn’t take into account the intersectionality of oppression that the LGBTQ+ community experiences, coming from backgrounds marked by different oppressions. An interviewed activist argues that the individualist path may provide a sense of pride and some relief through activities like rave culture, but can leave socially disadvantaged individuals trapped in their social status and economic circumstances. In her words, “leaving family often means struggling to make ends meet, renting a place to live, and taking on service and precarious jobs.” This situation creates a vicious circle, trapping individuals in a deadlock where they are often unable to access education to improve their circumstances. Ultimately, emigrating to Western European countries and seeking shelter becomes their only option. Secondly,
according to an interviewed activist, the individualist approach does not leave room for persuasion or intergenerational dialogue, particularly given the differences in perspectives between generations, and “prioritizes individual autonomy.”55 Thus, the second group claims to prioritize a strategy that focuses on building bridges with society through dialogue and persuasion rather than risking the rupture of relationships - which is especially emphasized by the activists working outside Tbilisi, arguing that it’s more difficult to isolate oneself in a small rural community. This group views the queer community as an integral part of the wider society and prioritizes engagement and understanding as a means to advance their cause.

4. Individual Discrimination vs. Structural Oppression: There are globally acknowledged strategies addressing the violation of individual rights and cases of discrimination, which are predominantly addressed by local organizations too. However, some activists complain that donors tend to support predominantly agendas that mainly revolve around discrimination because their success is relatively easy to measure.56,57,58 Overall, activists point out that it’s impossible to achieve holistic emancipation without addressing structural oppression, which can be more complex and harder to measure. For instance, activists working outside Tbilisi note that their work often involves non-formal educational activities and conversations aimed at bridging the gap in understanding among their fellow citizens.59,60 The activities organized for this purpose, in their words, “may, at first glance, seem unrelated to LGBTQ+ activism,”61 yet, they believe, it contributes to the struggle against structural oppression. Similarly, certain issues addressing socio-economic injustice, which can be one of the foundational layers of intersectional oppression, are often overlooked in the mainstream agenda embraced by donor organizations.

5. The Government and International Society: The repeated failure of the government to defend and protect activists is a source of disappointment for one group of activists. Conversely, the second group of LGBTQ+ organizations view these government failures as expected and a culmination of the trends observed over the past 15 years. Does it mean that the first group has high expectations for the government? Not, really. The belief that the government would act reasonably in critical situations is rooted in the assumption that the ruling party still cares about the opinions of the international community, the EU, and Western governments. An interviewed activist expresses the belief that “raiding a closed event [Pride, 2023] would be an extreme action,” and she and others thought that the government would try to prevent such “actions to avoid provoking the West or causing international displeasure.”62 The involvement of several ambassadors and international representatives in talks with the government served as a source of assurance for the first group and
added an element of accountability to the negotiations. The second group problematizes the heavy reliance on foreign support in this issue and emphasizes the need to strengthen themselves from below. On the other hand, in the past three years, especially under Prime Minister Gharibashvili’s leadership and following the onset of the war in Ukraine, the government has shown increasing disobedience to EU and Western government recommendations. However, in the case of the current Georgian government, its disregard for Western recommendations does not stem from a desire to implement anti-establishment economic policies and involve people in democratic decision-making at all levels. Instead, it arises from the ambition to consolidate its power and, according to many, its entanglements with the Kremlin.

6. Disagreements: These groups struggle to see eye-to-eye on how to deal with the disagreements illustrated above. Some believe that the problem should be solved by rebuilding connections and communication channels between groups with differing viewpoints, allowing them to collaborate once again on shared issues.63 Others argue that the focus should not be on eliminating disagreements but rather on changing the ways these disagreements are expressed.64 They contend that disagreements are a natural part of political life and should be expected, and there is no need to eradicate them entirely. This perspective highlights the significance of constructive dialogue and the role of respectful disagreement in shaping political discourse. In any case, the shared understanding among them may be that, whether having disagreements or not, amidst the constant threat from external forces, activists need to feel safe in their disagreements. This entails recognizing power asymmetries and avoiding the imposition of one group’s views on another. Moreover, this transcends the perception of disagreement as a battlefield where only one must emerge as the winner and the other as the loser. Instead, this cultivates disagreements that remain political and do not attack personal dignity.

63 Interview. Respondent N. 18. 9.09.2023
64 Interview. Respondent N. 7.2. 14.09.2023
CHAPTER 6:

Feminist Response Pathways to the Crisis of Democracy and the Rise of Anti-genderism

As we face multiple crises in our region, the question arises of how feminist politics can be carried out in the shadow of wars, rising anti-genderism, and authoritarianism. What existing alternatives are offered by feminist movements? What are the challenges that hinder feminist collaboration within the movement? How can feminists address the fear manufactured by anti-egalitarian forces? Can emotions, including, negative ones such as fear, become a resource for a new kind of egalitarian collective action? Can feminists reclaim “the people” claimed by the populist actors? Can feminists regain agency to shape agendas rather than accept those imposed by international donors? As gender becomes a focal point for redefining the political landscape, feminism can emerge as a major political actor, but this requires rethinking and carving new pathways (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). This chapter draws from the existing feminist scholarship on response pathways and expert interviews conducted within this study.

6.1. Reclaiming “the People”

In the current populist moment, which is an expression of the crisis of democracy amid neoliberal globalization, right-wing populists position themselves as champions of “the people.” They offer a simplified platform for collective action, framing complex socio-economic crises in cultural terms. Despite claiming to represent a broad category of “the people”, the collective identity they construct is exclusive and homogenous, often defined in chauvinistic terms. This prompts the question: Can it be countered by particularism - speaking from the standpoint of a specific oppressed group? Alternatively, should feminists aim to reclaim the notion of “the people” and broaden its meaning by encompassing diverse marginalized segments? The decolonial approach proposes that the solution lies not in universalism or particularism but in pluriversalism. Pluriversalism acknowledges and embraces the inherent heterogeneity of humankind and seeks to foster an inclusive framework. As anti-colonial author, Amy Césaire (2000) notes, “I’m not going to confine myself to some narrow particularism. But nor do I intend to lose myself in a disembodied universalism. There are two ways to lose oneself: through walled-in segregation in the particular, or through dissolution into the ‘universal’. My idea of the universal is that of a universal rich with all that is particular, rich with all particulars, the deepening and coexistence of all particulars.” The idea of decolonial pluriversalism aims to
create a world where many worlds coexist. This involves horizontal and democratic connections and dialogues among diverse sections of society. By acknowledging the heterogeneity of people, the concept is enriched and deepened, which allows feminists to replace chauvinistic alternatives with inclusive alternatives.

Similarly, in the context of countering right-wing populism, feminist scholars (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022) advocate reclaiming the role of “the people” for women and other minority groups. Moreover, if we acknowledge “the people” as subjects of political change, then, from a feminist point of view, it becomes crucial to define people as a broad, heterogeneous category. Feminist scholars emphasize the significance of positionality, arguing that an individual’s social position marked by various oppressive structures, shapes their experiences, interests, and perspectives on the world. Politics therefore will not be able to transform unjust power structures unless it is inclusive of the voices, epistemologies, and experiences of oppressed peoples who have been historically marginalized and who, based on their social positionality, possess a unique insight into social reality.

6.2. Feminist “Populism:” Embedding an Exclusive or Inclusive Agenda?

In the Populist Moment, Mouffe (2018) suggests that right-wing populism could be countered only by left-wing populism. Similarly, Polish feminist authors Graff and Korolczuk propose a feminist conceptualization of “populism,” using the example of the Polish Feminist Movement directed against anti-abortion laws. This raises the question of whether populism can be rethought and used for feminist purposes. Populism is often perceived as an undesirable form of politics that challenges established designs of “a rational community” (Laclau, 2005). Laclau (2005) and Mouffe (2018) argue that in order to understand populism, it needs to be rescued from its marginalized status in scholarly discourse, which is derivative of its denigrated position due to ethical condemnation and pathologization. Populism has been conceptualized both broadly and narrowly, mainly, in terms of ideologies or as a less developed so-called “thin-centered ideology” (Mudde, 2004). Our analysis aligns with Laclau’s (2005) definition of populism, which views it not as a distinct ideology comparable to liberalism, conservatism, communism, or socialism, but as a strategy or political culture that can adopt various ideological forms (Worsley as cited in Laclau, 2005, p.14). Similarly, Cole (2020), as well as Brubaker (2017), regard populism more as a discourse than an ideology, resulting in the absence of universally shared essential content. This could explain its ambiguity and diverse global manifestations, suggesting that populism is a gradable phenomenon in which the degree and presence of populist characteristics fluctuate depending on the context (Arcimaviciene, 2018:92 cited in Cole 2020, p.188).

We are interested in a thorough exploration of any relevant concept, particularly, those characterized by ambiguous meanings and diverse manifestations. We propose neither to accept or discard the concept but intend to delve into its constituent elements beyond its popular understanding, scrutinize it, and identify valuable aspects for feminists. For feminists, populism represents a challenge to the notion that feminism is exclusively for elites, asserting its relevance to the concerns of ordinary women. According to Graff and Korolczuk (2022), feminist populism could imply (1) claiming the role of “the people” for women and other minority
groups, (2) harnessing the emotional power of solidarity and hope as the basis for collective action and (3) delinking from disembodied expertise. To achieve this, they argue, feminism needs to **delink from neoliberalism and address women-specific grievances** related to late capitalism, such as the crisis of care, labor migration, and the care deficit caused by migration. Thus, feminist populism draws a lot from the idea of “feminism for 99 percent” and rejects both economic and cultural reductionism (Arruzza et al., 2019; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022).

However, there are some feminist responses to right-wing populism that employ tactics similar to nationalist exclusivity and homogeneity, leaving out certain disputed issues in society, such as trans issues and sex work (Rekhviashvili, 2022). This exclusionary approach, referred to by Rekhviashvili as “anti-gender feminism,” understands populism as majoritarianism. Although feminists in Hungry critically rethought previously mainstream strategies that excluded the concerns of the majority of women and expanded the feminist agenda to encompass the grievances of the majority, they simultaneously ended up excluding certain sections of society and issues considered loathed in society. Moreover, addressing trans issues was viewed as a form of Western imperialism. The problem here is that Hungarian feminists’ attempt to reclaim “the people” fails to be feminist, leftist, or decolonial when they exclude certain oppressed sections of society. Despite their attempts to challenge the mainstream feminist agenda, considered elite, they respond with the same universalistic strategy used by the right wing and not a pluriversalistic or left-feminist strategy of including diverse worlds and peoples. Alternatively, there is an example of recent feminist movements in Poland redefining the populist category of “the people” in feminist terms. Instead of emphasizing homogeneity and the need for national sovereignty, they “**embrace plurality, intersectionality, and global solidarity**” (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022).

### 6.3. Affect as a Source for Action in Emancipatory Politics?

Fear is a concept heavily laden with meaning within “malestream” conceptions, limiting our ability to think beyond these established paradigms. It has been framed as a sub political and pathological phenomenon, often instrumentalized for antidemocratic purposes, which has been viewed as its inherent consequence (Silberzahn, 2021). In this paradigm, fear is depicted as a tool of power for the perpetuation of domination (Massumi, 1993). This perspective, rooted in the viewpoint of the dominant, portrays those experiencing fear as passive, powerless, and susceptible to manipulation. While these studies acknowledge the role of these affects, they use them as analytical tools to deconstruct logic and power mechanisms without fundamentally altering the dominant conception. As argued by Silberzahn (2021), their perspective on fear doesn’t substantially differ in terms of described consequences. Our approach is to explore fear and insecurity through the queer feminist lens, which embraces affected agencies and advocates for the rehabilitation of the role of “negative” feelings and affects in emancipatory politics (Butler, 2006; Ahmed, 2018).

The current socio-economic and political reality, as discussed by interviewed experts, is frequently referred to as a catalyst for “hopelessness,” a perceived hindrance to political
The feelings of fear, insecurity, and hopelessness are manufactured, serving as fertile ground for reactionary politics and manipulation. However, the narrative of fear as an instrument in the hands of authoritarian rulers or reactionary actors obscures the ambivalent ways in which fear shapes political agency. The reproduction of the “fatalistic tale of the fear-authoritarian nexus” closes the discussion and doesn’t allow us to think about whether there are ways to deal with fear “in politically fruitful ways once it is there” (Silberzahn, 2021). Similarly, Chantal Mouffe (2018) problematizes the exclusion of affect from politics and sees it as the one central feature of the current post-political condition. According to her, right-wing populists are currently the only force that mobilizes and channels affects into politics.

On the one hand, in the previous chapters, we demonstrated how certain fears such as homophobia are politically manufactured by the dominant political elite. On the other hand, we aim to explore the possibilities of how the “dominated could act upon this fear” (Silberzahn, 2021). How can fear become a resource of egalitarian collective agency? A growing body of feminist scholarship has contested pathologizing accounts of affects and views emotions as ambivalent, neither inherently good nor evil. Affects can be mobilized for both egalitarian and non-egalitarian causes. For instance, the feelings of fear and despair are integral to certain forms of egalitarian activism too, such as climate activism, which has to grapple daily with “the end of the world” (Silberzahn, 2021). There are some paradigmatic differences between the queer feminist conception of affects and the malestream and far-right understanding of it:

First and foremost, the mainstream take on affects relies on the assumptions of the intrinsic antagonism of emotions and reason and the related impossibility of amelioration of one by the other. Many feminist scholars have challenged these assumptions and have maintained that emotions both are amenable to reason and play an important, not necessarily negative, role in cognition (Nussbaum, 2001). Following the antagonistic view of reason and emotion, feminist insistence on the importance of emotions is perceived as a desertion of reason by some. This mistake is made by both the mainstream critics and some feminists themselves. For instance, in the case of the Polish Women’s Movement described by Graff and Korolczuk (2022), they employed affect in defense of social equality and social justice. They disengaged from the use of disembodied language typical of experts and instead mobilized collective affect, employing terms like “dignity,” “torture” and “cruelty” as opposed to “choice”. According to Graff and Korolczuk (2022), such a detour from human rights language is important because the language of gender expertise often uncomfortably aligns with neoliberal governance. The diversification of frames through which grievances are expressed, expanding the scope of “connective action,” is a valuable takeaway from the movement. However, in forsaking liberal discursive frames, some of them boycotted scholars and perpetuated an antagonism between scholarship and activism. According to the dominant logic that separates reason and emotions, as well as scholarship and activism, these terms are mutually exclusive and hierarchized in terms of value. Decolonial feminist pluriversalism doesn’t merely involve inverting the hierarchy without challenging dualism. Instead, it aims to transcend such oppositions and hierarchy. By insisting on the inclusion of emotions, it doesn’t discard reason, as that would align

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65 Interview. Respondent N. 2. 18.08.2023
66 Interview. Respondent N. 4. 23.08.2023
with the “master’s” logic. Instead, it is oriented towards encompassing the various dimensions of human engagement with the world.

Secondly, the feminist approach challenges the malestream gendered hierarchy, which considers affects as political only when they serve as instruments of the rational political class, relegating affective responses and affects themselves to the sub-political and biological realm. This prevailing approach depicts individuals experiencing fear as powerless and easily manipulated. Consequently, when far-right populists manufacture and exploit fear, it is seen merely as an instrument of manipulation with no inherent value. This perspective devalues affects as “irrational,” evident in their use of tropes such as “hysterical” and “angry women” against activists fighting for egalitarian causes (Silberzahn, 2021). Interestingly, those respondents opposing feminists turn to affects themselves and often subscribe to this prevalent understanding of affect as a mere instrument of manipulation. As one interviewed expert puts it, “I don’t see people as tools but as agents, awakened and capable of making public political demands.” The feminist perspective directs attention to affect precisely to trace the political agency of oppressed people, not to manipulate them. Furthermore, feminist scholarship takes this inquiry further and asks questions such as: Do we lose our agency under the conditions of anxiety and fear? Can we find sources for emancipatory collective action in conditions of anxiety and fear? These questions both acknowledge the uses of fear for reactionary politics and recognize the ambivalence of fear in politics. This, in turn, contributes to a better understanding of political agency by identifying emancipatory paths for affects that are often considered tools of manipulation in the hands of dominant political powers.

Some interviewed activists, echoing queer feminist perspectives on affect, critique strategies that downplay or dismiss the emotion of “fear,” asserting that fear is a genuine and significant feeling that should not be overlooked. This perspective emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and addressing fears and concerns individuals may experience, especially within the context of LGBTQ+ activism where fear of discrimination, violence, or social rejection is a reality. By recognizing fear as a valid emotion, these activists advocate for more empathetic approaches to advocacy and support within the community. Fear can be both a tool for control and a source of resistance. From the expert’s perspective, fear should be transformed into a form of resistance. While malestream theoretical frameworks often perceive fear as pathology, feminists task themselves with rethinking and crafting alternative ways of understanding what fearful and angry bodies can do.

Similar to feminist scholarship that views fear and despair as sources of interconnectedness rather than tools of manipulation (Silberzahn, 2021), an interviewed expert regards “fear” as having the potential to serve as a foundation for unity among oppressed individuals and communities. In her perspective, both the LGBTQ+ community’s fear of discrimination and violence and the general population’s fears such as job loss, climate disasters, and infrastructural collapses, can foster a sense of shared vulnerability and concern. The expert’s statement,

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67 Interview. Respondent N. 10. 19.08.2023
68 Interview. Respondent N. 2. 18.08.2023
69 Interview. Respondent N. 10. 19.08.2023
“united in fear we only have each other,” underscores the idea that in the face of fear and adversity, solidarity and mutual support can be powerful forces for change.

Another interviewed expert emphasizes the need to sow the seeds of resilient hope among the people: “We need to nurture a resilient hope that acknowledges the current challenges while also recognizing the glimmer of possibility on the horizon - a destination worth striving towards.” This resonates with the feminist call for harnessing the emotional power of solidarity and hope through connective action, pluriversality, and global solidarities.

6.4. Reclaiming the Agency to Define Agendas

Feminist knowledge and practice in Georgia largely draw from the international body of knowledge, which is produced predominantly with disregard for local contexts of epistemologies. This knowledge shapes mainstream gender practices globally and locally, subsequently informing the local feminist agenda. Activist groups and NGOs, dependent on international funds, navigate through an agenda already envisaged. However, this criticism does not see the solution in narrow particularism but emphasizes the need to integrate both global and local knowledge and practices.

Interviewed feminist activists note that issues not aligning with the mainstream view of feminist activism are often overlooked. Similarly, Muslim women, a religious minority in Georgia, express dissatisfaction as they struggle for the recognition of their activism as feminist. Dominant feminist narratives often perceive them as aligned with oppressive religion. Consequently, they decided to organize reading clubs on issues of gender and Islam to acquire knowledge. This effort helped them find their footing and embrace their complex identities. Furthermore, feminist activists criticize the mainstream framework that views activism as a battle that must be either won or lost. They also critique the preference for tactics that advocate for quick, dramatic actions over persistent, sustained, but often invisible efforts. Existing practices of gender mainstreaming eviscerate gender of its original political content and intent. This provides political actors, who promote a conservative shift in Georgian politics, with a space to comfortably whitewash their politics with technocratized gender empowerment, sidelining gender justice as a political goal. Lastly, activists voice concerns about funding policies that overlook the need for local feminists to have spaces and opportunities to imagine their own paths, rather than merely implementing agendas developed without their engagement.

70 Interview. Respondent N. 10. 19.08.2023
71 Interview. Respondent N. 2. 18.08.2023
72 Interview. Respondent N. 6. 9.09.2023
73 Interview. Respondent N. 12. 28.08.2023
74 Interview. Respondent N. 16. 21.09.2023
75 Interview. Respondent N. 6. 9.09.2023
76 Interview. Respondent N. 9. 1.09.2023
CONCLUSION

Feminist knowledge and practice in Georgia face challenges within a complex web of various powers. Firstly, it contends with the looming shadow of the post-Soviet Russian empire, which has co-opted anti-imperial feminist critique. This poses an existential threat to the survival of the Georgian state, and it also undermines the prospects of gender justice in Georgia by fostering an anti-gender climate in the region. Secondly, the local power being a champion of neoliberal governance and, at the same time, positioning itself as a guardian of conservative family values, forecloses advancement of egalitarian politics of equality and social justice. Thirdly, the feminist agenda in Georgia navigates through the gender mainstreaming framework of international institutions and funding organizations while searching for opportunities to craft an alternative vision for change.

If democracy is the rule of “the people” or the people’s real participation in governance, then the question of how “the people” is defined becomes fundamental. Thus, our major task has been to delve into the definitions and claims of the people by various ideologies. Right-wing populists define people in exclusive terms and leave out numerous categories and non-dominant sections of society. Instead of this chauvinistic alternative, feminists propose an inclusive alternative by defining people as a heterogenous collective. The feminist approach presses on the inclusivity of the voices, epistemologies, and experiences of oppressed peoples who have historically been marginalized. The study, on the one hand, investigates the ways fear is manufactured and instrumentalized by populist political actors, how material fears are channeled into social phobias. On the other hand, it explores fear and insecurity as sources for collective action, challenging the fatalistic narrative that portrays those experiencing fear as passive, powerless, and manipulated. Instead, it seeks to understand the potential for social change and resistance that may inhere in bodies experiencing fear, insecurity, anger, and despair.
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