Global Campus Europe

UNIVERSITY OF TARTU

European Master's Programme in Human Rights and Democratisation
A.Y. 2024/2025

Towards a Biopolitical Assessment of Democracy

A Case Study on Population, Protest and War in Georgia

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Word Count Declaration: 21,935

Abstract

Concerns are mounting that democracy is at risk globally. However, the definition of democracy is contested and there is no consensus on how it should be measured. Drawing on the theories of Foucault, Agamben and Mbembe, this thesis reconceptualises democracy through the prism of biopolitics, foregrounding the protection, exception and governance of bodies within national communities and nation-building processes. Using Georgia's recent democratic backsliding as a case study - situated between Russian imperial biopower and wavering European liberal governmentality - the research analyses electoral developments, populist legislation and mass protests following the 2024 parliamentary elections through a biopolitical lens. It contends that Georgia is experiencing an exceptional typology of politics, produced by biopolitical competition, authoritarian populist rhetoric and the spectre of the war in Ukraine, yet not unprecedented in its revolutionary democratic history since independence from the Soviet Union. Ultimately, the thesis proposes that democracy should be evaluated not only through legal norms and institutional practices but through the ways in which it governs life itself.

Keywords: *democracy, democratic subversion, biopolitics, bare life, necropolitics, populism, illiberalism, state of exception, protest, Georgia*

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisors Dr Lauri Mälksoo and Dr Andrey Makarychev at the University of Tartu for their complementary input on this research project. I hope my work deserves your name on it.

I also greatly appreciate the insights I gathered while in Georgia in April 2025 - particularly from Anna Dolidze, Giorgi Beridze and a whole host of others whose perspectives were crucial. At such a pivotal time for Georgia, when human rights defence is an urgent act and not just a remote thesis topic, I can't thank you enough for your time and strength.

From the city of Tallinn, which I left once the sun had finally come out, to our south-facing balcony in Venice, via Tbilisi, home and my family, who see me so clearly from however far away. To all the other people – the 'otters' of Lido, my study buddy in Cambridge and the many chance encounters along the way.

Table of Abbreviations

ABLs	Administrative Boundary Lines
CEC	Central Election Commission
CoE	Council of Europe
DCFTA	Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
EP	European Parliament (EU)
EU	European Union
FARA	Foreign Agents Registration Act
GD	Georgian Dream
GOC	Georgian Orthodox Church
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
ODIHR	Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE)
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PACE	Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (CoE)
UNM	United National Movement
US	United States of America
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
Venice Commission	European Commission for Democracy through Law (CoE)

Freedom is more valuable than life… Fight before it is too late. Fight wherever you are, in the country or abroad, in the village or in the city, in the streets or auditoriums, in public and work spaces. Be brave, take care and strengthen each other.

Mzia Amaghlobeli, detained Georgian journalist in a letter from prison (2025)

"And how can there be a final revolution? There is no final one. The number of revolutions is infinite. The last one - that's for children. Infinity frightens children, and it's essential that children get a good night's sleep."

Yevgeny Ivanovich Zamyatin, *We* (1921)

Table of Contents

Introduction: The Spirit of *Demos*

> The reason there's no microphone or stage is because these people don't want that - no one wants to speak down to others, because we're all equals, and that's how we see it. This is the spirit of *demos*. Maybe a lot of time has passed since ancient civilisation, but I have the feeling that democracies were built like this. Today, we're doing this, just like in Greece, only with a bit of a different form.[1]

2024 was an unprecedented year for elections, as voters in more than sixty countries went to the polls.[2] It was also the nineteenth consecutive year where democracy was assessed to be in decline globally.[3] Derived from the political language of ancient Greece, *demos* (the people) and *kratia* (to rule), 'democracy' essentially denotes rule by the people, but the term has been used in a 'staggering' number of ways.[4] The rhetoric of democracy is indeed used across the entire political spectrum,[5] although concerns are mounting that democracy is at risk.[6] In Georgia, one of the countries where parliamentary elections were held in 2024, the elections were followed by continuous mass protest about the form of democracy. So, what is democracy beyond elections? What is the spirit of *demos*?

Democracy is the political normative theory which has been privileged in the late modern era, and it bases itself on reason.[7] According to the minimalist approach, democracy simply requires that rulers are selected by competitive elections.[8] Beyond the constitution of government, however, the term represents both the *actuality* of democratic governance, which has never been fully realised, and an *ideal* of political equality.[9] Robert Dahl outlines five procedural criteria which can be actualised while striving for democracy as an *ideal*: equal and effective participation; voting equality; gaining enlightened understanding; exercising final control over

[1] Ilia Ghlonti, co-founder of Facebook group 'Daitove' for sharing information about protests in Georgia's capital Tbilisi, quoted in Tamar Mchedlidze, "How Social Media Has Shaped Georgia's Protests," OC Media, January 14, 2025.
[2] Richard Wike et al., "Global Elections in 2024: What We Learned in a Year of Political Disruption," *Pew Research Center*, December 11, 2024.
[3] Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2025: The Uphill Battle to Safeguard Rights," February 2025, 1.
[4] Robert A. Dahl, *On Democracy* (Yale University Press, 1998), 37.
[5] John Dunn, *Democracy: A History* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2005).
[6] Marina Nord et al., "State of the World 2024: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?," *Democratization* 32, no. 4 (2025): 1–26.
[7] Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 13.
[8] Adam Przeworski, "Minimalist Conception of Democracy: A Defense," in *Democracy's Value*, ed. Ian Shapiro and Casiano Hacker-Cordón (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 12.
[9] Dahl, *On Democracy*, 26–32.

the agenda; and the inclusion of most adults.[10] As such, rights are at the heart of the democratic process and ideal.[11]

In a broader sense still, a *liberal* democracy should act in the interest of all people within its territory, and not only to advance the interests of the majority or a particular group of people. There are many governance systems under which liberal democracy can operate,[12] and human rights are codified into the normative legal frameworks that govern societal interactions in these systems.[13] Social democracies, for example, are grounded in the rights to healthcare, housing, education and social security that are protected by a welfare state, coupled with access to employment opportunities.[14] Constitutional democracies require society to be governed in accordance with a country's democratic constitution,[15] while parliamentary democracies require citizens' needs to be protected by elected representatives in a legislature.[16] The spirit of democracy is a grander notion than this, though: 'for democratic structures to endure - and to be worthy of endurance - they must listen to their citizens' voices, engage their participation, tolerate their protests, protect their freedoms, and respond to their needs.'[17]

The fall of the Soviet Union ushered in an era wherein the promotion of democracy as an ideal has become the concern of a broad spectrum of actors in global politics, both political and academic.[18] With a sharp increase in constitutionally democratic states emerging in the last decades of the 20th century, the eventual transition to global democracy seemed closer than ever before. However, Fareed Zakaria made the important distinction in 1997 that while the Western conception of democracy grew out of constitutional liberalism, new democratically elected regimes 'routinely [ignore] constitutional limits on their power and [deprive] their

[10] Ibid, 38.
[11] Ibid, 48.
[12] Thandiwe Matthews, "To be Equal and Free: The Nexus Between Human Rights and Democracy," *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, 2019.
[13] Milja Kurki, "Human Rights and Democracy Promotion: Reflections on the Contestation In, and the Politico-Economic Dynamics Of, Rights Promotion," *Third World Quarterly* 32, no. 9 (2011): 1573–87.
[14] Gosta Esping-Andersen and Kees van Kersbergen, "Contemporary Research on Social Democracy," *Annual Review of Sociology* 18, no. 1 (1992): 187–208.
[15] James Tully, "The Unfreedom of the Moderns in Comparison to Their Ideals of Constitutional Democracy," *The Modern Law Review* 65, no. 2 (2008): 204–28.
[16] David P. Baron, Daniel Diermeier, and Pohan Fong, "A Dynamic Theory of Parliamentary Democracy," *Economic Theory* 49, no. 3 (2011): 703–38.
[17] Larry Diamond, "Democratic Rollback: The Resurgence of the Predatory State," *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 2 (2008): 39.
[18] Gerardo L. Munck, *Measuring Democracy: a Bridge between Scholarship and Politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 1.

citizens of basic rights and freedoms.'[19] While the notion of a state 'in transition' suggests the eventual actualisation of democracy, the majority of states actually fall somewhere in between substantive, rights-based liberal democracy and blatant authoritarianism. An illiberal democracy in Zakaria's conception could settle permanently in this 'transition' phase.[20]

As such, democratisation is increasingly not understood as a linear process. As Gerardo Munck highlights, the extensive literature on hybrid regimes seeks to exploit a key insight: 'a considerable number of countries…are best characterized with intermediate categories.'[21] There is no shortage of definitions for a state in the middle, including but not limited to: illiberal democracy (Zakaria 1997), competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way 2002), semi-authoritarianism (Ottaway 2003), electoral authoritarianism (Schedler 2006), authoritarian constitutionalism (Ginsberg and Simpser 2013), autocratic legalism (Scheppele 2018) and one-party dominant system. Levitsky and Ziblatt's 2018 theory of democratic subversion rejects the idea that an 'illiberal democracy', or an electoral democracy which does not account for minority interests, is indeed a democracy at all.

According to Levitsky and Ziblatt's 'How Democracies Die', the prevailing route to competitive authoritarianism since the end of the Cold War has been through insidious democratic subversion.[22] Attempts to subvert democracy are often 'legal', in the sense that they are manufactured through elections and accepted by the courts, or even portrayed as efforts to improve democratic processes (optimising the judiciary or combatting corruption, for example). In short, democratic backsliding, or the 'state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy', begins at the ballot box.[23] Based on Juan Linz's 'The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes', the authors develop four main indicators to detect elected autocrats: rejection of or weak commitment to the democratic rules of the game; denial of the legitimacy of political opponents; toleration or encouragement of violence; and readiness to curtail the civil liberties of opponents, including the media.[24]

[19] Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 6 (1997): 22.
[20] Ibid, 24.
[21] Munck, *Measuring Democracy*, 38.
[22] Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (London: Penguin, 2018).
[23] Nancy Bermeo, "On Democratic Backsliding," *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (2016): 5.
[24] Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 19-20.

Levitsky and Ziblatt were not convinced of a global trend in 2018, but cases of democratic backsliding have been multiplying across the globe in recent years.[25]

Even with a minimalist approach, Adam Przeworski identified a 'crisis of democracy' in 2019.[26] As he goes on to clarify, the 'crisis' of democracy is a crisis of representation: the danger which new populist leaders and parties pose is not that they are anti-democratic, but that they are anti-liberal.[27] In 2025, illiberal tendencies must be contextualised within a global rise of populist political narratives.[28] Contrary to the liberal political assumption that democracy is based on reason, it is important to note that populist narratives are not based on rationality, but a normative tension between the corruption of 'democratic' narratives about the 'will of the people' and the established systems of the 'corrupt elite'.[29] Populism is at once 'a symptom of a malfunctioning liberal democracy'[30] and a 'biting critique of the democratic limitations within liberal democracies.'[31] Zakaria wrote in 1997 that 'the greatest danger that illiberal democracy poses, other than to its own people, is that it will discredit liberal democracy itself.'[32] Populism has turned out to be exactly what his warning was about.

All this to say, there is no one way of 'doing' democracy or measuring it. However, with liberal democracy at risk globally, one must return to the questions underpinning the democratic school of thought: why is liberal democracy not prevailing as predicted? Are the metrics used to measure democracy sufficient? Are democratic institutions enough to protect not just the spirit of *demos*, but the very people they should represent?

1.1 How do We Measure Democracy?

Reflecting scholarly interest and the political weight granted to democracy, there are many ways of measuring democracy beyond the minimalist approach. One can approach it from the

[25] Thomas Carothers and Brendan Hartnett, "Misunderstanding Democratic Backsliding," *Journal of Democracy* 35, no. 3 (2024): 24–37.
[26] Adam Przeworski, *Crises of Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).
[27] Adam Przeworski, "Who Decides What Is Democratic?," *Journal of Democracy* 35, no. 3 (2024): 5–16.
[28] Daniel F. Wajner et al., "The Effects of Global Populism: Assessing the Populist Impact on International Affairs," *International Affairs* 100, no. 5 (2024): 1819.
[29] Cas Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (September 2004): 544.
[30] Cas Mudde, "Populism in Europe: An Illiberal Democratic Response to Undemocratic Liberalism," *Government and Opposition* 56, no. 4 (2021): 589.
[31] Margaret Canovan, "Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy," *Political Studies* 47, no. 1 (1999): 2-16, quoted in Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," 561.
[32] Zakaria, "Rise of Illiberal Democracy," 42.

starting point of institutions, participation, quantitative data, top-down implementation by elites and various ideological perspectives. In response to Dahl's definitive work on democracy, Munck identifies a conceptual question, the answer to which summarily dictates the way in which one may decide to assess democracy: 'how far does the democratic political process extend beyond the formation of government?'[33] This thesis fundamentally makes the case that it extends to all power relations.

For Foucault, government 'refers to a continuum, which extends from political government right through to forms of self-regulation.'[34] He propounds an analysis of a liberal 'art of government', or *governmentality*, traced from a period starting in ancient Greece through to modern neoliberalism.[35] By this definition, the political realm is by no means limited to the government of a state - rather, by his conception, the democratic political process would extend to relations between selves, and between selves and domination.[36] Taking this broad critical interpretation of government into account, democracy can be assessed as an interdisciplinary normative project, which not only represents, but plays out at the level of the people.

1.1.1 Why do We Measure Democracy?

The way in which democracy is measured matters. The measures used in the study of politics affect the 'way we describe the world and the causal propositions we consider to be valid.'[37] Quantitative data about politics, and the analyses of these data, are 'part of domestic and cross-national political processes themselves' and thus greatly impact political epistemologies.[38] As Munck details, a political leader might 'rely on data on the lack of political freedom in a country to which he is ideologically opposed in order to support a course of action, while ignoring similarly negative data on countries with which he feels an ideological affinity.'[39] There are relativised numerical evaluations of democratic success (such as Freedom House or V-Dem indicators), although Munck warns against basing assessments of democracy solely on data.[40]

[33] Munck, *Measuring Democracy*, 121.
[34] Thomas Lemke, "Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique," *Rethinking Marxism* 14, no. 3 (2002): 59.
[35] Michel Foucault, "Governmentality," in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, ed. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 87–104.
[36] Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 16–49.
[37] Munck, *Measuring Democracy*, 121.
[38] Ibid, 143.
[39] Ibid, 9.
[40] Ibid, 8–12.

This is not to say that a procedural definition of democracy has no place. As Munck outlines, a minimalist approach is clearly rooted in theory and definitive in identifying which countries are *not* democratic.[41] However, minimalist measures of democracy may misrepresent undemocratic states as democratic.[42] As Levitsky and Ziblatt emphasise, institutions are the location of democratic subversion - and as illiberalism and populism undermine the spirit of democracy from within, façade democracies prove harder to measure than the blatant autocracies of old.[43] It is hard to argue with Munck's argument that the 'study of democracy should not be addressed in isolation and cut off from a consideration of other political values', for which he proposes human development and the rule of law.[44] For this thesis, critical theory is an indispensable part of democracy assessments - not just for how and why we measure democratic standards, but towards an analysis of the ethics of democracy itself.

1.1.2 Measuring Democracy at the Level of the *Demos*

Where 'citizens are the most distinctive element in democracies', the democratic state has as its first task the legal definition of its population.[45] There has been a steep increase in citizenship rights since ancient Greece, but limits remain on who gets to participate as a political equal in a democracy (those whose capacity for participation is limited include prisoners, stateless individuals, refugees, children and so on). The *demos* are immediately bifurcated into people (defined by their biological existence) and People (defined by their political existence). Even among citizens, liberal political theorists still 'view bodies as naturally given entities', or pre-political, to legitimise the exclusion of 'women, racialized Others, sexual minorities, or people with disabilities' from the political realm.[46] Those excluded from political communities may enjoy some human rights, but they ultimately remain the most vulnerable to persecution and expulsion.[47] Foucault, by contrast, does not imagine the population as a legal or political entity but an 'independent biological corpus', created through its own processes and phenomena.[48] With a critical approach, what Gundula Ludwig terms

[41] Ibid, 132.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Deisy Del Real and Cecilia Menjívar, "The Tools of Autocracy Worldwide: Authoritarian Networks, the Façade of Democracy, and Neo-Repression," *American Behavioral Scientist* 68, no. 12 (2024): 1561.
[44] Munck, *Measuring Democracy*, 143.
[45] Philippe C. Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl, "What Democracy Is... And Is Not," *Journal of Democracy* 2, no. 3 (1991): 77.
[46] Gundula Ludwig, "Body Politics and Democracy," *Constellations* 28, no. 4 (2020): 537.
[47] Kate Nash, "Democratic Human Rights," in *Interpreting Human Rights: Social Science Perspectives*, ed. Rhiannon Morgan and Bryan Turner (London: Routledge, 2009), 89.
[48] Thomas Lemke, *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction* (New York University Press, 2011), 36.

'body-blindness' can be avoided to better understand the phenomena which apply to certain bodies more than others.[49]

As Stephen Jones aptly puts it, 'measuring democracy by the frequency of elections, or by market reforms and political contestation, is like painting by numbers. Democracy is not a technical exercise, but a living experience.'[50] An assessment which operates at the level of the *demos* could take into account the varied experiences of: hierarchies of citizenship; nation-building and divided societies; bordering and breakaway regions; access to healthcare, education and welfare state protections; belief and spiritual practices; and marginalised bodies. Axel Honneth theorises a 'democratic form of life', whereby democracy 'does not merely signify free and equal participation in political will-formation', but 'means that individuals can participate equally at every central point in the mediation between the individual and society, such that each functionally differentiated sphere reflects the general structure of democratic participation.'[51]

This thesis aims to use biopolitical theory, as articulated by Michel Foucault and others, to develop the idea of a 'democratic form of life', or democracy as a 'living experience'. It reads the state of democracy and participation through their human manifestations, including but not limited to: inclusion and exclusion in institutions and the population; voice, visibility and agency in politics; discourse and narrative control; normalisation and surveillance; and the corporeal organisation of mass protest. Biopolitics can elucidate facets of power relations which Western political thinking (with its focus on legal norms, values, ideologies, political elites and institutions) may omit.[52] In fact, one can build a much richer conception of liberal democracy, particularly avoiding body-blindness and the ethical limitations of democracy as such, with the inclusion of biopolitical thinking.

[49] Ludwig, "Body Politics and Democracy," 550.
[50] Stephen F. Jones, *Georgia: A Political History since Independence* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 107.
[51] Axel Honneth, *The Idea of Socialism: Towards a Renewal* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 92.
[52] Roberto Farneti, "The Immunitary Turn in Current Talk on Biopolitics: On Roberto Esposito's Bíos," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 37, no. 8 (2011): 956.

1.2 The Living Experience of Democracy: Foucault's *Biopolitics* and Beyond

Biopolitics deals with the population as a political problem.[53] Under biopower, the population is the both the key object of regulation and control, on the one hand, and incentivisation and optimisation on the other.[54] Michel Foucault first used the term in his lecture series *Society Must be Defended* to denote a technology of power which takes control of life.[55] In his lecture series *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault identified older forms of power (sovereign, pastoral and disciplinary) and drew a distinction between them and the more recent, co-existing technology of biopower.[56] While sovereign power is characterised by the right to take life or let live (showing restraint despite wielding the power to kill), biopower is the power to 'make live and let die'.[57]

Originally used to describe liberalism in Western democracies, the emergence of biopower is traced 'not at the level of political theory, but rather at the level of the mechanisms, techniques, and technologies of power'[58] - and these are technologies to achieve 'the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations.'[59] According to Foucault, life management practices under neoliberalism aim to optimise the health, productivity and reproductive capacities of the population, but the very existence of diffused self-regulation processes highlights the underlying political docility of populations in liberal paradigms, or the 'dark underside of modern democracy.'[60] As such, biopower is 'at once central for democratic theory and the cause of a permanent unease for it.'[61] Biopolitical analysis has thus provided a fruitful lens to track the networks of power through which states both discipline and take care of their populations in both democracies and autocracies.

Foucault contributed to the post-structuralist school of thought. Janice Bially Mattern deems this 'fourth face' of power in international relations theory (after the realist, liberal

[53] Michel Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 245.
[54] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: The Will to Knowledge*, trans. Robert Hurley, (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 136.
[55] Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 247.
[56] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
[57] Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 241.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Foucault, *Will to Knowledge*, 140.
[60] Sergei Prozorov, *Democratic Biopolitics: Popular Sovereignty and the Power of Life* (Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 3.
[61] Ibid, 23.

institutionalist and Gramscian waves), in which 'power is expressed through the discourses that create social meaning.'[62] Bially Mattern highlights that not only does Foucault's theory 'directly dispute the empirical, methodological, and normative boundaries…upon which the discipline was founded', but the contestation between the four faces she outlines helped 'transform international relations into a pluralistic and broad field of study.'[63] It is with this in mind that this research treats biopolitics as a broad epistemic category - despite accusations that Foucault's original biopolitical theory has been diffused in its various applications.[64] This is what Oliver Richmond deems crucial about Foucault: the 'degree of latitude his work opened up in methodological and epistemological terms.'[65]

As such, this thesis takes biopolitics to refer to 'all of the conditions in which human beings as a collective interact, the ways in which individuals are an outcome of discourses and practices, and the ways in which resistances are structured.'[66] Foucault emphasised that democracies and non-democracies (fascist and socialist) rely on the same governance rationale over the vital processes of populations, despite their ideological and socioeconomic divergence at the macro-level.[67] Andrey Makarychev adds that biopolitical regulation occurs under both democracy and autocracy, making biopolitics an 'indispensable element of the emerging debate on illiberal democracy and post-liberal international order.'[68] Not only do diffuse biopolitical apparatuses themselves facilitate the shift away from liberal democracy, but their systematic usage can hollow out the term democracy itself. As such, people can be 'subjects of the democratic process who are, at the same time, subjected to biopolitical rationalities.'[69]

There are many applications of biopolitics which work to prove exclusions from and limitations to democratic logics. Giorgio Agamben focussed on the mechanisms of exclusion which constitute illiberal biopolitics: what Foucault read as diffuse systems of incitement become

[62] Janice Bially Mattern, "The Concept of Power and the (Un)Discipline of International Relations," in *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations*, ed. Duncan Snidal and Christian Reus-Smit (Oxford University Press, 2008), 693.
[63] Ibid, 694.
[64] Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose, "Biopower Today," *BioSocieties* 1, no. 2 (2006): 195–217.
[65] Oliver P. Richmond, "Foucault and the Paradox of Peace-As-Governance versus Everyday Agency," *International Political Sociology* 4, no. 2 (2010): 200.
[66] Angélica Guerra-Barón, "Biopower and International Relations," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*, 2017, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.80.
[67] Sergei Prozorov and Simona Rentea, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Biopolitics* (London: Routledge, 2016), 97.
[68] Andrey Makarychev and Alexandra Yatsyk, *Critical Biopolitics of the Post-Soviet: From Populations to Nations* (United Kingdom: Lexington Books, 2019), 159.
[69] Prozorov, *Democratic Biopolitics*, 5.

instruments of totalisation.[70] Bodies under Agamben's paradigm of *bare life* (based on the figure of *homo sacer* in ancient Roman law) are politically constituted by being denied full participation in the political realm (*bios*), or subjected to sovereign power without being protected by it.[71] 'Bare life' (*zoē*) is life thus included through exclusion, and these biopolitical mechanisms primarily serve to supplement and strengthen sovereign power. Foucault's liberal paradigm envisages resistance potential within diffuse networks of biopower, where Agamben does not. Lemke finds that, by focussing on law and the sovereign power to render 'bare', Agamben 'banishes central aspects' of Foucault's biopolitics.[72] However, reading Foucault's biopolitics and Agamben's sovereign exception in conjunction can address the governance of biological life as a 'form of power that considerably differs from legal-constitutional understandings of politics',[73] while still acknowledging the highly asymmetric nature of power relations.

Even more critical is Achille Mbembe's theory of *necropolitics*, in which he emphasises Foucault's lack of a theoretical contribution on how biopower is put to work in systems of violence and domination. Mbembe criticises any history of modern democracy which focuses solely on that which is internal to Western societies.[74] This critical paradigm is grounded in the subjection of the individual human body to the conditions of potential death, especially in the context of colonies, plantations, apartheid states and penal colonies. He develops the notion of necropolitics, or 'the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die.'[75] For Mbembe, the colonial world exists not as the external antithesis of democracy but as its internal double, or 'nocturnal face'.[76] In this paradigm, contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death can create 'new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*.'[77] Mbembe's framework is instructive, not least in globalising the genealogy of democracy, but also in reiterating the paradoxes and ethical limitations of democracy *per se*.

[70] Daniele Monticelli, "Wholeness and Its Remainders: Theoretical Procedures of Totalization and Detotalization in Semiotics, Philosophy and Politics," PhD diss., (University of Tartu, 2008), 20.
[71] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford University Press, 1998), 18.
[72] Lemke, *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction*, 60.
[73] Jef Huysmans, "The Jargon of Exception–on Schmitt, Agamben and the Absence of Political Society," *International Political Sociology* 2, no. 2 (2008): 178.
[74] Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Duke University Press, 2019), 22.
[75] Mbembe, "Necropolitics," (2003): 11.
[76] Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (2019), 27.
[77] Mbembe, "Necropolitics," (2003): 40.

Conversely, in *Democratic Biopolitics*, Sergei Prozorov aims to inquire how biopolitics can positively transform democracy. He argues that democracy itself becomes:[78]

> viable only by its biopolitical conversion, in the absence of which it is resigned at best to hovering above lived experience as a regulating structure and at worst to abandoning this domain to non-democratic governmental rationalities, of which contemporary neoliberalism is a good example. *While biopolitics without democracy is lethal, democracy without biopolitics is lifeless.* [emphasis added]

A renewed interest in a democratic biopolitics has since emerged in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID lockdowns, which exposed the latent tension between the biological security of the population and the exercise of democratic rights, sparked a debate which returned biopolitics to its roots in Foucault's genealogy of liberalism in health-making practices.[79] Karsten Schubert's response to Agamben and Slavoj Žižek's debate on the ethics of repression and freedom as exerted in times of emergency stipulates that a democratic biopolitics is the only responsible alternative to 'populist biopolitics'.[80] While it is idealistic to subscribe to these positive syntheses of democracy and biopower, the debate *firstly* demonstrates that biopolitics is highly embedded in and applicable to democracy studies. *Secondly*, it makes clear that biopolitics is something that one should at least be cognizant of when defining democracy in the context of rising populist political narratives.

Ultimately, this thesis contends that biopolitics is the *vital* element that assessments of democracy are lacking. While a thick conception of democracy may consider the voice of the *demos* and the vibrancy of the public sphere, a biopolitical approach works to identify the diffuse power networks which produce visibility, vulnerability and viability within populations.

1.3 Georgia in Crisis: Exception or Rule?

This biopolitical assessment of democracy in contemporary Georgia aims to contribute to broader scholarly debates about how democracy is performed and contested. Georgia is a small state situated at the crossroads of East and West in the South Caucasus, between powerful

[78] Prozorov, *Democratic Biopolitics*, 2.
[79] Shehzad Ali, "Žižek, Agamben and the Idea of Democratic Biopolitics," *Review of Human Rights* 6, no. 1 (2021): 65–73.
[80] Karsten Schubert, "Crying for Repression: Populist and Democratic Biopolitics in Times of COVID-19," *Critical Legal Thinking*, April 1, 2020.

actors such as Russia, the European Union (EU), Iran and Turkey, and was considered relatively democratic compared to other former Soviet republics.[81] Georgia is a productive state to analyse by virtue of its nascent democracy, ideational affinity for democracy,[82] and recent assessments of a suspension of democratic development and a crisis of human rights.[83]

In the field of political science, which this thesis aims to contribute to, the largest proportion of research by Georgian scholars themselves is on post-Soviet democratic transition.[84] Studies on political developments in Georgia more generally, however, are 'usually included in multi-authored volumes of a more general profile', which may overlook the 'divergent trajectories of post-Soviet political development.'[85] As such, 'post-Soviet' may not be the most effective term to contextualise Georgia today. Nonetheless, the transition from Soviet rule towards neoliberal democracy has dramatically changed how life is governed, not least in: public health, reproductive and family practices, education, religion, surveillance, policing and the potential to protest - all of which entail biopolitical logics. A biopolitical outlook 'can help us avoid simplistic binaries ('democracy' versus 'autocracy', 'West' versus 'East') and ultimately comes up with a more sophisticated understanding of political, cultural, and social issues in post-Soviet countries.'[86]

Beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union, analysing the nature of anti-democratic tendencies in the small state of Georgia is an instructive case study through which to interrogate the ways democracy is contested globally. Exploring the way Georgia is mirroring and merging both authoritarianism in its most assertive neighbour state, Russia, and the crisis of democracy in the Western states which defined the term, may provide insights into both these global phenomena. Furthermore, the precarity of Georgia's democracy has been exacerbated in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which 'vividly highlighted the global contest between

[81] Kornely Kakachia and Salome Minesashvili, "Identity Politics: Exploring Georgian Foreign Policy Behavior," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 6, no. 2 (2015): 175.
[82] Kakachia and Minesashvili (2015) qualify this ideational affinity with democracy as a foreign policy strategy beyond solely ideological self-identification.
[83] Georgian Young Lawyers' Association et al., "Human Rights Crisis in Georgia Following the 2024 Parliamentary Elections," May 2025.
[84] Archil Sikharulidze and Nino Skvortsova, "Political Science in Georgia: Epistemology and Determinants," *Journal of International Analytics* 15, no. 2 (2024): 116.
[85] Paulina Salek, "Understanding Post-Soviet Party Systems: A Comparative Analysis of Georgia and Moldova," PhD diss., (European University Institute, 2020): 12.
[86] Makarychev and Yatsyk, *Critical Biopolitics of the Post-Soviet*, xi.

autocracy and democracy and the broader threat to the global order.'[87] The spectre of the war in Ukraine is coupled with the legacy of the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, which consolidated Russian influence in two breakaway regions in Georgia's territory. Nonetheless, participation in protest against foreign influence and for democracy has been consistently strong, particularly since the 2024 parliamentary elections, and there appears to be widespread commitment to the spirit of *demos*. The privileging of security - in this case in times of war and protest - over democracy is widespread and has summarily constituted a shift towards an exceptional typology of politics, rather than classical authoritarianism.

In legal terms, the state of emergency allows 'executive power [to] effectively replace[s] legislative power, abolishing the separation-of-powers principle that democracy is defined by.'[88] Through his concept of the 'exception-as-a-rule', Agamben contends in biopolitical terms that the state of exception has 'transformed into a norm within contemporary political landscapes.'[89] Further to his theory that sovereign power is itself already biopoliticised by the constitution of 'bare life' (the sovereign exception) as the threshold of the political order, the dialectic between exception and norm collapses permanently in the paradigm of the 'exception-as-a-rule'.[90] In other words, exceptional circumstances are not so exceptional. Agamben's 'idioms of exception and exception-as-the-rule seek to understand the nature of democratic politics from the perspective of its collapse.'[91] As instructive as his interpretation of the permanent nature of the exception is, Agamben overlooks the societal realm of the political and concentrates instead on the sovereign power over life as such. Rather than reading democracy in Georgia solely from the perspective of its collapse, this research considers it in tandem with its Foucauldian constitution by diverse, discursive and mediated power relations at the level of the population.

By applying biopolitical logics and the theory of 'exception-as-a-rule' to the case of contemporary Georgia, this thesis furthers the argument that democracy can not be fully measured by institutions or data. The governance of life is characterised by illiberal biopolitical mechanisms, the potential for resistance and measures typically reserved for times of

[87] Tamar Khuntsaria, "Georgia's Fight for Freedom: A Defining Moment for the West," *European Democracy Hub*, June 10, 2024.
[88] Giorgio Agamben, *Where Are We Now? The Epidemic as Politics* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 36.
[89] Dilan Ates, "The State of Exception: An Insight into Its Theoretical Background," *Global Campus Human Rights Journal* 7, no. 1 (2023): 120.
[90] Huysmans, "The Jargon of Exception," 173.
[91] Ibid, 178.

emergency. The question therefore becomes: given that democracy has been suspended in Georgia, is this a temporary or permanent state of exception? Moreover, should Georgia be read as an exceptional case, or is it a microcosm of a broader trend?

1.4 Structure

This thesis uses a range of biopolitical theories to analyse Georgia as a critical case study. It adopts a qualitative approach and relies on critical theory to interpret political discourse, legislation, policy documents, media reports and recent events. Precisely because Georgia is so starkly deviating from the predicted path of democratic transition, it serves as a revealing investigation for interrogating what democracy is, why it may falter or fail, and how it might be reconceptualised. Each chapter applies this biopolitical lens to different sites of governance and resistance in contemporary Georgia.

Chapter Two briefly outlines the historical development of democracy in Georgia since its independence from the Soviet Union, culminating in a brief overview of the contested 2024 parliamentary elections. It also examines the two major external forces which produce biopolitical competition in the territory of Georgia: the contest between Russia and the EU over biopolitical borders, which establishes the conditions under which the concept of democracy is understood by the population.

Beyond Russia's 'imperial biopolitics' (Makarychev and Yatsyk 2018) and the EU's 'biopolitical governmentality' (Yatsyk 2018), there is little scholarship on how domestic biopolitics shapes the population of Georgia. For example, the biopolitical discourses of Georgian politicians remain to be explored. By the populist logic that 'one does not need to drastically change institutions to substantially alter the way power is understood and exercised',[92] democratic inclusion can be analysed through the normalisation and exclusion of particular bodies - as such, *Chapter Three* looks at the disproportionate (de-)politicisation of queer bodies, foreign bodies and non-Orthodox bodies through Agamben's theory of the sovereign exception (Agamben 1998). Biopolitics, then, does not simply explain governance techniques; it also sheds light on which lives are taken care of, made grievable or made disposable within populist and illiberal moral orders.

[92] Makarychev and Yatsyk, *Critical Biopolitics of the Post-Soviet*, 158.

Mass protest and war - two factors which can be grounds to declare a state of emergency - form the structure of the final two chapters. *Chapter Four* explores the protests that followed the 2024 elections as an articulation of a democratic biopolitics through the Foucauldian framework of the 'conduct of conduct' and 'counter-conducts'. The spirit of *demos* emerges here not through opposition at state level but through the constitution of a community from below, which reimagines 'care', Georgian-ness and civic spaces.

Necropolitical theory, conversely, emphasises how state practice intersects with vulnerability and mortality (Mbembe 2003). In light of the war in Ukraine, *Chapter Five* interrogates the necropolitical turn in Georgian governance: it analyses how the state instrumentalises fear, conspiracy theories and martyrdom to justify violent repression and consolidate power over life and knowledge. The symbolic fear of war is used to legitimise the sacrifice of democracy for the sake of the nation.

The Birth of a Democratic Nation

Nation-building is a biopolitical process. In Harris Mylonas' framework, elites employ three strands of nation-building policy: accommodation, assimilation, and exclusion.[93] While accommodation is the formation and reproduction of distinctions and hierarchies of rights, assimilation and exclusion map onto the biopolitical mechanisms of normalisation and exception. The birth of biopolitics was concurrent with the emergence of the nation-state, and 'the society that 'must be defended' is above all a national society'.[94] As Makarychev sets out in the introduction to the special issue 'Biopower at Europe's Eastern Margins', the authors 'go further than discussing biopolitics as a means of stabilizing and legitimizing extant relations of power, and rather argue that biopolitically regulatory practices are powerful mechanisms of constructing and shaping nations as biopolitical communities.'[95] Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, nation-building has been central to internal state policy in all transitioning post-Soviet states, and impacted by external actors.

As the governing Georgian Dream party (GD) aims to conceal single-party governance with a veneer of democratic rhetoric, moving away from binaries (of autocracy-versus- democracy, or Russia-versus-West) towards a multi-faceted approach to power relations can de-centre the definition of politics in Georgia from the level of the government to the level of the population. Although it is not the aim of this thesis to embed categorisation, a contextualising overview of the state of democracy in Georgia since its independence in 1991 will be outlined, followed by a more detailed analysis of the legal and electoral situation surrounding the 2024 parliamentary elections. Subsequently, an analysis of independent Georgia as the site of biopolitical competition between Russia and the West will be given, to begin to explore the discourses, paradoxes and realities that affect how power is exercised and experienced at the level of the population in Georgia. This approach can elucidate several fundamental questions on: how democracy is understood: how the EU and West are understood; how Russia is understood; and how analysis of biopolitical bordering can advance our understanding of political inclusion and exclusion in the national community.

[93] Harris Mylonas, *The Politics of Nation-Building: Making Co-Nationals, Refugees, and Minorities* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), xx.
[94] Joe Painter, "Regional Biopolitics," *Regional Studies* 47, no. 8 (2013): 1236.
[95] Andrey Makarychev, "Biopower at Europe's Eastern Margins: New Facets of a Research Agenda," *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 26, no. 2-3 (2018): 106.

2.1 A Brief History of Democracy in Post-Independence Georgia

The state of democracy in Georgia has fluctuated since its independence from the Soviet Union (USSR) in 1991. In Georgia's relatively short history of democratic transition (excepting the brief Democratic Republic of Georgia 1918-1921), it has seen political instability and multiple transitions of power; as such, its independent institutions, particularly the judiciary, are still underdeveloped.[96] However, Georgia has continued to express commitment to democratic narratives since it was the first non-Baltic constituent state of the USSR to hold multi-party elections in 1990. Within a year of its declaration of independence, Georgia was a 'failed state' practically on the verge of dissolution, embroiled in bloody civil war and poverty. Under President Eduard Shevardnadze in the 90s, the government 'legislated democracy, but neglected its practical underpinnings such as a fair and workable tax system, local government autonomy, the rule of law, an honest civil service, and legal economic opportunities for its citizens.'[97]

The peaceful 2003 Rose Revolution marked a new era of pro-Western neoliberal reforms under President Mikheil Saakashvili of the United National Movement (UNM) party, which he founded. Georgia emerged as an electoral democracy despite being surrounded by authoritarian powers, and the economy grew consistently until the Russo-Georgian war of August 2008.[98] Kornely Kakachia and Bidzina Lebanidze articulate, as part of their argument that Georgia 'considers itself a regionally misplaced state', that the misplacedness policy became a centerpiece of the government's foreign policy agenda in this era.[99] Misplaced states ideologically understand themselves to belong in a part of the world that is different from their geographical location, leading Georgia to pursue EU and NATO accession (as enshrined in the 1995 Constitution)[100], closer relations with the US and high socialisation of the new government with the West. As Thomas de Waal has it, however, Georgia under Saakashvili had 'undoubtedly modernized but not necessarily democratized'[101] - indeed, by the end of his

[96] Nino Tsereteli, "Georgian Dream as a Nightmare for Democracy," *Verfassungsblog*, November 21, 2024.
[97] Stephen F. Jones, *Georgia: A Political History since Independence*, 111.
[98] Maia Otarashvili, "Georgia and the Global Economic Crisis," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, May 2013.
[99] Kornely Kakachia and Bidzina Lebanidze, "Can Small States Reshape Their Regional Identities? Examining Georgia's Cognitive Dissonance between South Caucasus and Eastern Europe," *Nationalities Papers* (May 16, 2024): 2.
[100] Parliament of the Republic of Georgia, "Constitution of Georgia," art. 78 (1995).
[101] Thomas de Waal, "Georgia's Choices: Charting a Future in Uncertain Times," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (June 13, 2011): 20.

presidency, increasingly authoritarian and repressive latent tendencies consolidated Georgia into a one-party state. Zarina Burkadze terms this the 'dictatorship of democrats'.[102]

The victory of the Georgian Dream in the country's first peaceful transfer of power in 2012 brought about hopes of reform, although the government softened the misplacedness policy of Saakashvili's nine-year term.[103] After 2013, Georgia accelerated its process of democratisation, and until 2016, outperformed Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, and Ukraine in democratic developments.[104] Political pluralism and heightened competition between the government and opposition saw a peak of Georgian democracy, aided by the responsibilities that the EU Association Agreement of 2014 and post-2016 integration into the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) entailed. The GD won a constitutional supermajority in the parliamentary elections of 2016. Subsequently, and particularly since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the GD has systematically marginalised the opposition, installed loyal mass media outlets and cracked down on peaceful expressions of political discontent - notably starting with the Gavrilov's Night protests, triggered by the visit of a Russian Communist Party delegation to the Parliament in 2019.

2.1.1 Parliamentary Elections of 2024

The 2024 parliamentary elections mark not an electoral swing but the re-election of the dominant Georgian Dream party in Georgia's first ever parliamentary elections conducted under a fully proportional electoral system, with the party preserving its vote share.[105] These were the first elections since Georgia had been granted EU candidacy status in December 2023, although the accession process was *de facto* halted by the EU in June 2024, citing concerns over democratic backsliding particularly as regards the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence (Foreign Agents Law).[106] Indeed, the GD has introduced a Foreign Agents Law in the Russian model which sparked widespread protests, passed anti-LGBTQ+ laws and changed the electoral code to weaken opposition parties' ability to compete effectively.[107] Bidzina

[102] Zarina Burkadze, *Great Power Competition and the Path to Democracy: The Case of Georgia*, *1991-2020* (Boydell & Brewer, 2022), 89.
[103] Kakachia and Lebanidze, "Can Small States Reshape," 9.
[104] Ibid, 4.
[105] Pursuant to the 2017 constitutional amendments, as assessed here: Venice Commission, "Opinion on the Draft Revised Constitution," Opinion 876/2017, CDL-AD(2017)013, adopted October 7, 2017.
[106] European Council, "Conclusions – 27 June 2024," para. 36. EUCO 15/24, adopted June 27, 2024.
[107] See: European Parliament, "Resolution of 9 October 2024 on the Democratic Backsliding and Threats to Political Pluralism in Georgia," P10_TA(2024)0017, adopted October 9, 2024.

Ivanishvili, the oligarchic founder of the Georgian Dream party, has intermittently held a formal political position since 2012 (as Prime Minister 2012-2013, GD Chairman 2018-2021, and since late 2023 as honorary Chairman); he is often described as Georgia's 'de facto leader'.[108]

Following the parliamentary elections on 26 October 2024, the Central Election Committee (CEC) announced a 53.93% majority for the GD, falling short of the constitutional majority it had hoped for to 'liquidate the opposition'.[109] The alliance of opposition groups trailed behind with only 37.79% of the vote share.[110] With voter turnout rising three percentage points to 58.94%, the election highlighted the GD's success in exploiting fears of cultural erosion by Western influence and nationalist sentiment incited through campaign posters depicting war-torn Ukraine alongside 'peaceful' Georgia. There were also 'allegations of widespread manipulation'[111] which the European Parliament (EP) describes as 'violence, ballot stuffing, vote-buying, multiple voting, large-scale breaches of voter secrecy, voter coercion, undue pressure and intimidation of voters.'[112] Voter bribery was observed at 13% of polling stations, primarily in rural areas.[113]

Overall, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights' (ODIHR) Final Report on the elections states that 'the legal framework provides an adequate basis for conducting democratic elections', despite some ODIHR and Venice Commission recommendations remaining unaddressed.[114] This included mentions of recent frequent legal amendments, polarised media, limited campaign finance oversight, compromised voter secrecy, and a tense atmosphere with widespread intimidation of voters on election day.[115] In keeping with Levitsky and Ziblatt's democratic subversion formula, Georgia does retain aspects of an open society, and the GD claims to deepen the democratic principles of society through its constitutional majority, emphasis on 'transparency', and continuing rhetorical

[108] Transparency International Georgia, "Oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili - the Real Ruler of Georgia and the Architect of Georgia's Pro-Russian Shift," May 29, 2024.
[109] The Bell, "Georgia's Ruling Party Wins Key Election," October 30, 2024.
[110] Nini Gabritchidze, "Official Results of 2024 Vote," *Civil Georgia,* October 27, 2024.
[111] Laura Linderman, "What's next for Georgia?," *National Security Journal*, October 31, 2024.
[112] European Parliament, "Resolution of 28 November 2024 on Georgia's Worsening Democratic Crisis Following the Recent Parliamentary Elections and Alleged Electoral Fraud," P10_TA(2024)0054, adopted November 28, 2024.
[113] Sonja Schiffers, "The 2024 Elections in Georgia: Descent into Hegemonic Authoritarianism," *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, October 29, 2024.
[114] OSCE, "Georgia, Parliamentary Elections, 26 October 2024: Final Report," December 20, 2024, 8.
[115] Ibid.

commitment to EU accession by 2028. Directly following the elections, the GD formally postponed EU accession negotiations, although this was already *de facto* the case as of June 2024.[116] This was the trigger for widespread protest that had already started as the election results were published, and was ostensibly the main rationale behind the first months of protest.

Since then, the political situation has continued to deteriorate with only the governing party sitting in Parliament. In January 2025, the government also announced the termination of its participation in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE).[117] The European Parliament summarises that 'Georgia's self-appointed authorities have plunged the country into a fully fledged constitutional and political crisis, as well as a human rights and democracy crisis.'[118] Following earlier restrictions of freedom of assembly, such as the 2023 prohibition of assembly participants erecting temporary constructions,[119] the most recent wave of protests has triggered an accelerated crackdown on peaceful demonstrations. Given that the combination of elections and protest has thrice heralded a transfer of power in Georgia (1990, 2003, 2012) - leading the Carnegie Endowment to describe it a 'revolutionary democracy' -[120] the effect of crushing political protest is profoundly concerning.

2.2 Great Power Competition and Biopolitical Borders

Efforts to democratise have been represented by the US and the EU in the former Soviet space, while Russia plays the role of 'promoter of authoritarianism' through political, economic and military means.[121] Both poles, Europe and Russia, consider Georgia to be within its respective geography and sphere of influence. However, Burkadze finds that great power competition in the process of democratisation reduces the chance of violent state overthrow and diffuses power distribution, highlighting that pro-democracy forces have twice averted authoritarian consolidation by Shevardnadze and Saakashvili.[122] By this logic of equilibrium, it is rather the

[116] OC Media, "Georgian Dream to Halt EU Membership Bid," November 28, 2024.
[117] Robin Fabbro and Mariam Nikuradze, "Georgia Suspends Participation in Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly," *OC Media*, January 29, 2025.
[118] European Parliament, "Resolution of 13 February 2025 on the Further Deterioration of the Political Situation in Georgia," para. H. P10_TA(2025)0019, adopted February 13, 2025.
[119] See: OSCE, "Urgent Opinion on Proposed Amendments to the Law on Assemblies and Demonstrations and to the Administrative Offences Code," FOPA-GEO/487/2023, adopted November 13, 2023.
[120] Natalie Sabanadze, "Who Is Afraid of Georgian Democracy?," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 17, 2023.
[121] Burkadze, *Great Power Competition*, 2.
[122] Ibid, 10.

crisis of democracy in the West exacerbated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine that has 'failed' to maintain the balance of great power competition in Georgia at this juncture.

Foucault's theory of biopolitics was originally 'almost exclusively in relation to domestic policy',[123] but its application in contemporary Georgia often focuses on the imported biopower technologies of Russia (Artman 2013; Makarychev 2015; Makarychev and Yatsyk 2017, 2018, 2019) and the EU (Yatsyk 2018; Beridze, forthcoming). On Russia, this body of work highlights the tools of biopolitical conservatism, Orthodox brotherhood and passportisation as part of the *Russkiy Mir* neighbourhood strategy, which continues to project an 'imperial gaze' on Georgia.[124] On the EU, Alexandra Yatsyk describes the promotion of 'biopolitical governmentality', or the self-governing disciplinary techniques of liberal regimes, to Georgia as a potential EU member state.[125] In short, Russia (through the *Russkiy Mir* project) and the EU both exteriorise their biopolitical norms beyond their borders, such that neighbouring countries build their own biopolitical projects 'at the intersection of divergent EU, Russian, and the countries' own regimes.'[126]

Makarychev asserts that 'biopolitics is a strategy ultimately aimed at redefining extant borders', and it is important to note that these borders are not physical demarcations but are instead characterised by practices that construct populations in order to consolidate territories.[127] William Walters, writing about the Schengen Zone and migration, dubbed this the 'biopolitical border.'[128] The porosity of the biopolitical border between Russia and Georgia is much higher than the territorial border, which may have seemed fairly impermeable without formal diplomatic relations since the 2008 war.[129] Equally, interiorising European biopolitical governmentality to pave the way for Eastern Partnership cooperation and EU accession opened the biopolitical border with the European Union. Pervasive, competing biopolitical

[123] Mark G.E. Kelly, "International Biopolitics: Foucault, Globalisation and Imperialism," *Theoria* 57, no. 123 (2010): 1.
[124] Andrey Makarychev, "Georgia in Russian Discourses: Focal Points," in *Georgian-Russian Relations: The Role of Discourses and Narratives*, ed. Stefan Meister (*Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, 2021), 23.
[125] Alexandra Yatsyk, "'Comprehensive Approximation' with the EU: Biopolitical Governmentality and Its Spill-over Effects in Georgia," *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 26, no. 2-3 (2018): 147–63.
[126] Makarychev and Yatsyk, *Critical Biopolitics of the Post-Soviet*, xii.
[127] Andrey Makarychev, "Reassembling Lands or Reconnecting People? Geopolitics and Biopower in Russia's Neighborhood Policy," *PonarsEurasia - Policy Memos*, no. 367 (July 16, 2015).
[128] William Walters, "Mapping Schengenland: Denaturalizing the Border," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20, no. 5 (October 2002): 561–80.
[129] There were multiple attempts on the Georgian side to normalise diplomatic relations (in 2014, 2015 and 2018).

mechanisms of liberal EU governmentality and conservative Russian biopower manifest themselves at the level of the population - and they redefine the borders of the nation-building process. This fierce biopolitical competition also creates exceptional spaces, not just in Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali (hereafter referred to as Tskhinvali), but in Georgia as a whole.

2.2.1 Russia: Moral Allegiance and Military Aggressor

Russia is still widely considered to be the aggressor in Georgia and GD politicians know that it is politically imperative to emulate this rhetoric. For example, First Vice-Speaker of the Parliament, Gia Volski, stated unequivocally that 'Russia is the aggressor and the occupier' in August 2024.[130] Demonisation of political opponents as 'pro-Russian' is common in Georgia, serving as 'the main tool in the externalization of internal problems.'[131] However, mainstream perceptions of Russian foreign policy regarding Georgia fail to explore the biopolitical strategies which fetter Georgia to Russia in moral, spiritual and socio-political terms. GD strategy - seemingly paradoxically - synthesises anti-Russian discourses with a constructed moral allegiance to Russia.

In the neo-imperial sense, the biopolitical border between Russia and Georgia, and its porosity, are defined on Russia's terms. In Russian foreign relations, biopolitics is primarily a policy of 'taking care' of Russian-speaking communities beyond national borders.[132] Biopolitical borders can redefine territory through population management - by 'appealing to populations rather than to governments and [including] a humanitarian rhetoric of protection.'[133] In Abkhazia and Tskhinvali, which comprise 20% of Georgia's 1991 territory, 'creeping annexation'[134] occurs not merely through force along the Administrative Boundary Lines (ABLs), but through the quotidien hybrid warfare of administrative mechanisms which transform the existential condition of the target populations, redefining belonging and loyalty without formal annexation. These practices include the passportisation policy, access to

[130] Qeti Zantaraia, "Russia Is the Aggressor and the Occupier. This Does Not Absolve Saakashvili from Responsibility for the Reason Why All This Happened – Volski," *Rustavi 2*, August 16, 2024.
[131] Meister, *Georgian-Russian Relations*, 5.
[132] Andrey Makarychev and Sergei Medvedev, *Biopower in Putin's Russia: From Taking Care to Taking Lives* (Central European University Press, 2024), 11.
[133] Andrey Makarychev and Alexandra Yatsyk, "Imperial Biopolitics and Its Disavowals: Russia, Georgia, and Spaces In-Between," *Region* 7, no. 1 (2018): 8.
[134] See, for example, Tracey German, "Russia and South Ossetia: Conferring Statehood or Creeping Annexation?," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16, no. 1 (2016): 155–67.

Russian social welfare benefits and cultural-linguistic integration - all of which portray Russia as a 'care-taker' state.

Artman argues that 'the wholesale conversion of Abkhazians and South Ossetians into Russian citizens did not merely manufacture a *casus belli*, it also produced exceptional spaces within the territory of the Republic of Georgia, where the norms of international law and the modern state system were effectively suspended.'[135] Agamben defines the state of exception as 'neither external nor internal to the juridical order, and the problem of defining it concerns precisely a threshold, or a zone of indifference, where inside and outside do not exclude each other but rather blur with each other.'[136] Zones of indifference are spaces where the boundaries between legality and illegality, inside and outside, citizen and non-citizen collapse. In these zones, individuals are reduced to what Agamben terms 'bare life': life that is subjected to sovereign power without legal recourse.[137] Georgian villages near the ABLs are likewise drawn into the indistinction of the state of exception; even people who live within Georgia's recognised borders are exposed to legal precarity and daily insecurity as a function of the expansive logic of the exception.

The moral allegiance with Russia that is particularly strong in the breakaway regions is also prevalent in Georgia proper - despite grassroots political rejection of Russia and its post-Soviet imperial gaze. Sergei Medvedev illuminates Russia's foreign policy in the following terms: 'Russia's biopolitical discourse has also been an export commodity trying to reach out to "moral majority" groups internationally, from paleoconservatives in the United States to far right segments in Europe.'[138] It is a channel of communication with conservative forces in neighbouring countries, such as Georgia.[139] Emphasising cultural commonalities with Russia, such as Eastern Orthodoxy, social conservatism and Soviet memory politics among older generations, works to stimulate a spirited anti-Western campaign whereby Europe represents the threat of 'moral decay' to Georgia and Georgian-ness.[140]

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[135] Vincent M. Artman, "Documenting Territory: Passportisation, Territory, and Exception in Abkhazia and South Ossetia," *Geopolitics* 18, no. 3 (2013): 682–704.
[136] Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (University of Chicago Press, 2005), 23.
[137] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 28.
[138] Sergei Medvedev, "The State and the Human Body in Putin's Russia: The Biopolitics of Authoritarian Revanche," *PonarsEurasia - Policy Memos*, no. 597 (May 30, 2019).
[139] Andrey Makarychev, "Biopolitics and Russian Studies: An Introduction," Russian Politics 3, no. 1 (March 5, 2018): 66.
[140] Roxana Wang, "Culture in Flux: The Role of Culture in Strengthening Georgia's National Identity," *The SAIS Review of International Affairs*, November 7, 2024.

In a move that likely constitutes a strategic success for Russia's neo-imperial project, biopolitical messaging simultaneously strengthens and obscures the imperial logic in Russian foreign policy. For Russia, the 'biopolitical component adds to this a strong emphasis of life-saving (in the case of Russia) and life-threatening (in the case of Georgia).'[141] For Georgia, the biopolitical component is one of few channels of exchange with Russia that is unlikely to be scrutinised by a population which very much still considers Russia 'life-threatening'. This creates a paradox where the Georgian Dream announces its rejection of the Kremlin while absorbing its moral grammar, allowing Russian actors to harness anti-liberal, 'protective' rhetoric under the guise of national care. During the exceptional case of the war in Ukraine, as is to be further examined in chapter four, the GD has been especially conciliatory towards Russia - not by allying with the aggressor, but by emulating the repressive power of President Vladimir Putin's Russia over its population, or creating a basis for Russian or 'Russian-style' rule.[142]

2.2.2 The European Union: Moral Decay and Misunderstood Democracy

Georgia, a state with lived experience of authoritarianism historically and in its neighbourhood, overwhelmingly votes in favour of EU accession, with its requisite human rights requirements and adherence to democracy. In 2021, 92% of Georgians deemed democracy 'important' or 'very important'.[143] In January 2025, a survey by the Institute for Social Research and Analysis showed that 86.3% of Georgians support the country's accession to the European Union,[144] consistent with polling since the start of the war in Ukraine.[145] Paradoxically, more than half the respondents (up to 53%) were in favour of Georgia not joining any political or military international structure and maintaining neutrality.[146] Polling by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers in 2021 showed that 74% of respondents thought joining the EU would

[141] Makarychev, "Georgia in Russian Discourses," 18.
[142] Ekaterine Basilaia and Giorgi Melashvili, eds., "The Diffusion of Authoritarian Regimes and the Russian Handbook," (Europe Georgia Institute, 2024), 7.
[143] Caucasus Research Resource Centers, "Taking Georgians' Pulse: Key Findings from December 2021 Telephone Survey," 2022, 23.
[144] Institute for Social Research and Analysis (ISSA), "Survey of the Attitudes of the Georgian Population Regarding the Current Processes in Georgia, 2025," February 9, 2025.
[145] Polled at 85% in 2022 and 89% in 2023 according to the International Republican Institute's (IRI) Center for Insights in Survey Research (CISR).
[146] ISSA Survey, 2025.

translate to more democratic institutions, and only 63% thought joining the EU would lead the government to function better.[147]

The crisis of rule-of-law and democracy in the EU - exemplified by Hungary, Slovakia and Bulgaria, but also threatening Western European institutions - has ramifications for external democracy promotion. Burlyuk et al., writing about the EU's external democracy promotion efforts summarise that: '[i]n the ENP East, the EU, its level of democracy and quality of life are associated first and foremost with its western members, while its eastern members are or used to be important sources of inspiration and even role-models to follow on these countries' own path to European integration and eventually membership in the EU.'[148] Visegrad countries are 'presented as sources of inspiration for Ukraine's, Moldova's and Georgia's own paths.'[149] Although the authors conclude that the democratic image of the EU has not been eroded in the Eastern Neighbourhood during the rule-of-law crisis,[150] this itself reveals underlying discrepancies between the democratic ideals espoused by the EU of Brussels and understanding of democracy among the population of Georgia.

As a consequence of poor modelling of democracy, it seems that the Georgian population may adhere to the concept of democracy without full understanding of its requisite requirements. According to discussion groups held for the project 'Georgia at the Nexus of Democratization and Europeanization', participants from the regions of Georgia often argued that Europeanisation is not the same as democratisation.[151] Participants readily raised more immediate issues of unemployment, hunger and 'distrust towards the motives of those who are actively engaged' in all political processes; while democratic ideals such as freedom, dignity, and European integration are widely embraced, they are often tied to material aspirations (mobility, prosperity) rather than institutional accountability, liberalism or pluralism. Indeed, the perception is widespread that the West is imposing 'unacceptable' values and moral decay on Georgian traditional identity and patriotism.[152]

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[147] Caucasus Research Resource Centers, "Future of Georgia Survey Report," April 21, 2021.
[148] Olga Burlyuk et al., "External Democracy Promotion in Times of Internal Rule-of-Law Crisis: The EU and Its Neighbourhood," J*ournal of European Public Policy* 31, no. 3 (2023): 900–925.
[149] Alla Rosca et al., "The European Union as a Transformative Power, a Donor or a Security Provider?: The View from the Eastern Partnership Countries," *European Foreign Affairs Review* 23, Special Issue (2018): 38.
[150] Burlyuk et al., "External Democracy Promotion".
[151] Georgian Institute of Politics, "Democratization and Europeanization in Georgia: How to Lead the Process?," September 27, 2018.
[152] European Digital Media Observatory, "Anti-Western Propaganda and Disinformation amid the 2024 Georgian Parliamentary Elections," October 27, 2024.

Even on material counts, where Georgian authorities have developed biopolitical strategies to attempt to re-unite the residents of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali into the national community, the 'biopolitical governmentality' of Western EU states has not prevailed. The Georgian government has attempted to reintegrate Abkhazia and Tskhinvali since 2008 by providing European-level social and cultural services (free education and medical services etc), which should promote good self-governance and Georgia proper rather than dependence on the Russian state.[153] For Yatsyk, three forms of power coincide in Georgia 'for the sake of creating and maintaining the nation as a whole': governmentality (represented by non-state international organisations, including the EU), sovereign power and biopower.[154] In sum, the EU's biopolitical governmentality strategy failed to recognise the 'role of state-building and security in the growth of democracy, and on confusion between democracy as a process and as an end goal'; the EU effectively assumed that introducing the processes of democracy would result in a democratic society.[155]

This logic undermines the consensus among international institutions in the Euro-Atlantic community that Georgia is going through a process of 'democratic backsliding' towards Russia. In one resolution on Georgia's worsening democratic crisis, the European Parliament quotes the President of Georgia Salome Zourabichvili's assertion that acknowledging the election outcome would be tantamount to 'accepting Georgia's subjugation to Russia' and description of the election process as a 'Russian special operation'.[156] The authors specifically criticise Hungarian leader Viktor Orbán for his visit to Georgia in solidarity with the Georgian Dream - but fail to officially recognise the ironies this reveals about the GD modelling its policies on EU states like Hungary. By codifying this alleged 'Russian special operation' into an EP resolution, the EU not only overlooks the genuine successes of the GD in the elections, but also fails to hold Georgia or itself to the standards expected of functioning democracies: for example, by suggesting an official, non-partisan investigation into electoral interference by Russia.

[153] Yatsyk, "Comprehensive Approximation".
[154] Ibid, 159.
[155] Ibid, 154.
[156] European Parliament, "Resolution of 28 November 2024".

As Lucan Way writes, 'we should avoid the temptation to assume that all post-Soviet autocratic behavior is the product of Russian interference.'[157] He contends that there is no evidence that the former Soviet republics would on the whole be less authoritarian or more democratic without Russia's engagement.[158] To return to misplaced states theory, 'Georgia has employed an entire toolbox of misplaced states in its attempts to distance from the post-Soviet region' since 1991.[159] It would be misleading to describe democracy backsliding towards the imperial centre of Moscow as a consequence of being 'post-Soviet' when Georgia has so actively rejected Russia and the post-Soviet Caucasus paradigm. The National Security Concept demonstrates Georgia's self-identification 'as a Black Sea and Southeast European country…[which] is part of Europe geographically, politically, and culturally.'[160]

Recent narratives tend to promulgate the perspective that the West, 'grappling with its own democratic challenges, lacks the moral standing to instruct others on democracy.'[161] Georgia may as such mirror the disenfranchisement with liberal democracy that is on the rise in the countries that Georgia's democracy was modelled on. In a letter to US President Donald Trump, Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze proudly emphasises the 'striking alignment of values and ideology' between the Georgian Dream and the Trump administration,[162] clearly signalling a break with liberal institutionalism and commitment to the democratic rules of the game in the US' and Hungary's image. This creates fertile ground for populist actors to manipulate democratic rhetoric while undermining its foundational principles; as the following chapter explores, political actors increasingly base their policies, identity-building and normative systems on tangible, corporeal issues.[163]

[157] Lucan Way, "The Authoritarian Threat: Weaknesses of Autocracy Promotion," *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (2016): 73.
[158] Ibid.
[159] Kakachia and Lebanidze, "Can Small States Reshape," 5.
[160] Ministry of Foreign Affairs Georgia, "National Security Concept of Georgia" (2011).
[161] European Digital Media Observatory, "Anti-Western Propaganda".
[162] Georgian Public Broadcaster, "PM Kobakhidze Urges U.S. Leadership for Reset in Relations in Open Letter," May 13, 2025.
[163] Makarychev, "Biopolitics and Russian Studies," 63.

Taking Care of the Nation

3.1 Populist Biopolitics and Agamben's *Bare Life*

Shortly before the 2024 elections, GD Chairman Bidzina Ivanishvili spoke about an anthropomorphised political experience of the Georgian nation:[164]

> Winning the election is not decisive. We need a constitutional majority to ban and remove them [opposition parties]… We need to finally rid ourselves of this plague. That's why this force must be removed. If you don't cut out the tumor, it will spread, and eventually, the body will collapse.

At face value, Ivanishvili seeks to ban opposition parties and consolidate single-party hegemony. He refers to the country as a body, in which tumorous opposition parties threaten to injure or put to death the nation-body - but, in framing 'them' (the opposition) as a 'plague', Ivanishvili also claims to 'take care' of 'us'. He legitimises his power over life itself in order to totalise the population and nation-building processes; in other words, in an attempt to construct and nurture a 'self-enclosed whole'.[165] Ivanishvili's sovereign power is strengthened by the strategic 'taking care' of the living experience of Georgian-ness and creation of a 'biopolitical community'.[166]

The Georgian domestic agenda has biopolitical underpinnings outside of the normative competition over Georgia that is exported from Russian and EU/US biopower. Relations of Church parishes and parishioners; family and sexuality discourses; social movements (including labour rights, workplace conditions etc); education systems; and health and drug policies represent forces of power which operate through the body. These are strategic relations of legitimation and dehumanisation which work towards national identity construction - not a unilateral relation exercised by the 'totalitarian domination over individuals', but a network of self-regulating normative forces.[167] In contemporary Georgia, these normative forces disproportionately (de-)politicise queer bodies, non-Orthodox bodies and all bodies deemed

[164] Georgian News, "Ivanishvili on Banning Opposition Parties: One Who Is an Enemy of the People Should Be Banned," *Sakartvelo Sambebi*, October 22, 2024.
[165] Monticelli, "Wholeness and Its Remainders," 20.
[166] Makarychev and Medvedev write about 'taking care' in the context of the rhetoric of protection towards Russian compatriots abroad in *Biopower in Putin's Russia: From Taking Care to Taking Lives*. Makarychev and Yatsyk coin the term 'biopolitical community' in *Critical Biopolitics of the Post-Soviet*.
[167] Maurizio Lazzarato, "From Biopower to Biopolitics," *Multitudes* 1, no. 1 (2000): 45–57.

'foreign', necessarily forsaking their inclusion in societal and political structures in order to construct a 'biopolitical community'.

Like biopolitical strategies, the populist toolkit exists in democratic and non-democratic settings. Populist ideology, attractive due its urgent emphasis on the systematic failures of the liberal state, is paradoxically also a mechanism for its continued control.[168] It 'functions as a democratic justification for the maintenance of status-quo politics, which ultimately reproduces state power.'[169] Positively-connoted biopolitical rhetoric about care, protection from moral decay and spiritual health can be leveraged to disguise populists' illiberal aspirations of exclusion and totalisation. Following Agamben's theory of the 'sovereign exception', based on the self-reinforcing dichotomy of *bios* and *zoē*, the exclusion of certain parts of the population is indispensable for political totalisation; those inhabiting the space of 'bare life' are 'so much included for the sovereign to have a power on it, but so much excluded for this power to exceed the limits otherwise imposed on it by the politico-juridical order.'[170] This space of exception is not concealed in the populist paradigm; rather, it is disproportionately mediated and lambasted. As such, populism constitutes a 'biopolitical technology implying the (re)construction and (re)institution of 'people' through hierarchization of different forms of life.'[171] The populist biopolitical project thus aims, quite visibly, to relocate the sovereign apparatuses of exception in the corpus of the population.

This chapter maps three developments in the construction of the biopolitical community which can help to elaborate on the (self-)regulatory mechanisms which construct, and claim to 'take care' of, the Georgian biopolitical community. To follow Makarychev and Medvedev's model of 'taking care' to 'taking lives' in Putin's Russia, Agamben's theory on sovereign power and 'bare life', and the self-regulatory nexus of Foucauldian biopower apparatuses will be applied in tandem to analyse three key politicised facets of Georgian society: the anti-LGBTQ+ campaign, Foreign Agents Law and the embedded role of the Georgian Orthodox Church. These operate together to tighten the regulatory mechanisms governing the Georgian

[168] Megan Morrell and Seth Masket, "The Populist Paradox: A Critical Framework Proposal," *DU Research Journal Archive* 3, no. 1 (2022): 1.
[169] Ibid.
[170] Monticelli, "Wholeness and Its Remainders," 20.
[171] Andrey Makarychev, *Popular Biopolitics and Populism at Europe's Eastern Margins* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 29.

biopolitical community from above and below, which has wide-ranging implications for individual freedoms, human rights and democracy.

3.1.1 Anti-LGBTQ+ Legislation

The anti-LGBTQ+ legislation introduced in Georgia in 2024 marks a shift in policy since the GD's 2014 Law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination, which legislated against any form of discrimination, including on the basis of sexual orientation.[172] The core Law on Family Values and Protection of Minors prohibits non-heterosexual marriage unions (which had not been legal before the bill), gender reassignment surgery, and propaganda promoting LGBTQ+ expression together with incest.[173] Although same-sex activity was decriminalised in 2000, it has never been politically beneficial for parties to publicly promote same-sex marriage or civil unions, Pride demonstrations or queer issues.[174] Indeed, anti-LGBTQ+ protest has been the issue that most effectively mobilises the Georgian far-right.[175]

Homophobic attitudes have been consistently widespread in the country, with one 2021 survey polling opponents of sexual relations between two consenting adults of the same sex at 84%.[176] As Sandro Bregadze, leader of the Georgian March party, announced on Facebook: 'We are not fighting gay parades because those people have different sexual orientation, but we are fighting it as a concept, as an institution that wants to destroy our moral and ethical values.'[177] This rhetoric highlights an 'us-versus-them' dichotomy which includes homophobic Georgians in a morally 'healthy' community by excluding 'destructive' queer bodies and institutions. Critics of the 2014 anti-discrimination law called queer issues a 'propaganda of depravity'.[178] George Gogsadze summarises that homophobic nation-building suggests that the 'majority are

[172] Parliament of Georgia, "Law of Georgia on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination," 2391-IIს (2014).
[173] Parliament of Georgia, "Law of Georgia on the Protection of Family Values and Minors," 4437-XVIმს-Xმპ (2024).
[174] Authorities have failed to react to threats made before Pride events in 2019, 2021 and 2023, leading to violent counter-protests and events being cancelled. See, for example: Amnesty International, "Georgia: The Authorities' Failure to Protect Tbilisi Pride Once Again Encourages Violence," July 5, 2021.
[175] Tamta Gelashvili, "How Anti-LGBTQ+ Ideas Help the Georgian Dream Consolidate Power," *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, April 17, 2025.
[176] Giorgi Babunashvili, "Datablog | Georgia May Be the Most Homophobic Country in Europe," *OC Media*, July 27, 2021.
[177] Sandro Bregadze, quoted in English in: Giorgi Gogsadze, "Populism in Georgia: Discourses and Narratives against Sexual Minorities in Parliamentary Elections (2016-2020)," *European Journal of Transformation Studies* 11, no. 1 (2023): 19.
[178] Gogsadze, "Populism in Georgia," 15.

victims, therefore topos of danger is employed, to reverse victim-perpetrator strategy [*sic*].'[179] He further emphasises that populist parties, such as the Alliance of Patriots and Georgian March, construct nationalist or nativist discourses by which 'homosexuality is not characteristic of Georgians and Georgianhood'.[180] By leveraging widespread homophobic attitudes and a 'topos of danger', it is thus possible to totalise the biopolitical (ie heterosexual Georgian) community at the level of sexual practices.

Furthermore, the normative tension this propagates serves as a supplementary tool in the polarisation of the Russia-West dichotomy within GD policy. George Geguchadze emphasises a key 'manipulation myth' which embeds anti-European sentiment through the misconception that in order to join the European Union, Georgia must legalise same-sex marriage.[181] Zviad Kharazishvili, Chief of the Ministry of Internal Affairs Special Task Department, responded to a journalist asking whether the GD was conceding to Russia: 'What, should we concede to 'pederasts' instead?'[182] Thus, by inciting homophobic hatred (false equivalence of same-sex activity with incest and repeated use of the term 'pederasty'), the GD not only presents a skewed Russia-EU binary, but imitates Russian biopolitical strategies to create a moral allegiance between populations.

Makarychev and Medvedev, writing about Russia, describe the concept of 'sexual sovereignty' as a discourse 'promoting Russian "traditional values" as a favorable alternative to the "moral decay" of the West.'[183] As in Russia, EU enlargement is now portrayed as the expansion of the sphere of 'gay culture' in Georgia. This effective biopolitical logic - rooted in spiritual familial health as opposed to 'moral decay' - subjects queer bodies to sovereign exclusion from the political realm and national corpus, or 'bare life'. The reinforcement of sovereign power over knowledge also makes out LGBTQ+ bodies and Europeanness as such to be not just 'unclean' or 'perverted', but more morally dangerous to the nation than Russia itself.

[179] Ibid, 16.
[180] Ibid, 17.
[181] George Geguchadze and Maia Urushadze, "The LGBTQ Issue as a Supplementary Tool for Polarization in Post-Soviet Countries: The Case of Georgia," in *Strategies XXI: The Complex and Dynamic Nature of the Security Environment*, 2022, 90.
[182] Zviad Kharazishvili, quoted in English in: Gelashvili, "How Anti-LGBTQ+ Ideas".
[183] Makarychev and Medvedev, *Biopower in Putin's Russia*, 3.

3.1.2 Foreign Agents Legislation

The Law on the Transparency of Foreign Influence (Foreign Agents Law) that was finally adopted in May 2024, overriding the veto by President Salome Zourabichvili, and its 2025 replacement Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), also serve to protect Georgian-ness at the expense of European liberal governance spill-over. The 2024 version was reinforced by the narrative of external actors interfering in Georgian affairs and that protesters being paid by Western institutions.[184] It designated non-governmental and media groups receiving 20% of their noncommercial revenue from abroad as organisations 'pursuing the interests of a foreign power', and demanded that they register with authorities, submit an annual financial declaration and be subject to administrative liability in cases of non-compliance.[185] International democracy promotion organisations have demanded that the law be rescinded, highlighting parallels between the Georgian Law and similar Russian law of 2012.[186] Ivanishvili also attacked opposition parties and civil society groups for 'having no homeland'.[187]

By tightening the borders from 'foreign influence', the GD wages an emotive bio-territorial war on the borders of the ideologically-constructed Georgian nation. As justification, Prime Minister Kobakhidze uses the liberal European language of transparency and accountability standards against European-minded institutions: 'Being transparent means being European to me, while being non-transparent means being non-European.'[188] Although the FARA is a direct translation of the US Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938, transparency is clearly not the only aim of the bill.[189] The updated FARA extends the 2024 Foreign Agents Law's administrative sanctions to impose criminal liability, meaning that organisations who fail to register could see their management and individual employees facing up to five years of imprisonment, and expands its scope to include all 'natural persons, partnerships, associations,

[184] Parliament of Georgia, "Law of Georgia on Transparency of Foreign Influence," 4194-XIVმს-Xმპ (2024).
[185] Ibid.
[186] See, for example: European Parliament, "Resolution of 25 April 2024 on Attempts to Reintroduce a Foreign Agent Law in Georgia and its Restrictions on Civil Society," P9_TA(2024)0381, adopted April 25, 2024; Venice Commission, "Urgent Opinion on the Law of Georgia on Transparency of Foreign Influence," Opinion 1190/2024, CDL-AD(2024)020, issued on May 21, 2024; OSCE, "Urgent Opinion on the Law "On Transparency of Foreign Influence," NGO-GEO/506/2024, adopted May 30, 2024.
[187] Human Rights Watch, "Georgia: 'Foreign Influence' Bill Threatens Rights," May 9, 2024.
[188] Irakli Kobakhidze quoted in English in: Basilaia and Melashvili, "The Diffusion of Authoritarian Regimes," 13.
[189] Saba Brachveli, "Deeper Look | Foreign Agents Registration Act," *Civil Georgia*, March 4, 2025.

corporations, organizations, or other types of entities' (including the media).[190] It took Russia five and seven years, respectively, to extend the scope of the law to the media and individuals, where the GD has made these changes in less than a year. Courts which have begun to enforce the Foreign Agents Laws also demand access to personal information about citizens under the protection of civil society organisations, including victims of torture, victims of gender-based violence and whistleblowers.[191] The denial of full participation in the political realm occurs *firstly* at the level of the body: the risks of unemployment, financial sanctions and even imprisonment to human rights defenders, as well as the heightened risks posed to their beneficiaries, lay bare the threat to life itself.

Secondly, constructing a divide at the level of the population between 'foreign agents' and Georgian cultural institutions - which presumably encompass Orthodoxy, heterosexuality and ethnic Georgians - delegitimises democratic institutions and individuals through the emotive terminology of not just being untransparent, but morally wrong and 'un-Georgian'. It also plays on the pro-European attitudes of Georgians to obscure the plurality of European realities, which may also include Christianity, homophobia and nationalism. Once again, a 'topos of danger' is employed to redefine the biopolitical community of Georgian-ness. Regardless of whether organisations register - as some have decided not to -[192] the rhetoric of threat reinforces the GD's sovereign power over the moral well-being of Georgia. The laws affect not just the 'foreign' institutions but the way all residents perceive Georgian-ness, European-ness and relations with Russia.

3.1.3 Georgian Orthodox Church

Discourses around LGBTQ+ and foreign agent outsiders to the Georgian population are not just built on a series of individual speech acts but embedded and reproduced in 'networked systems of interconnected nodal points operating in conjunction with the ensuing policy practices.'[193] These networks may be diffuse or formal; the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) is one key formal system of power/knowledge relations which has particularly strong norm-building potential in Georgia. As of 2020, 84.2% of the population self-identified as

[190] Parliament of Georgia, "Law of Georgia Foreign Agents Registration Act," 399-IIმს-XIმპ (2025).
[191] Transparency International Georgia, "Ivanishvili Begins to Enforce Russian Laws with the Putin and Lukashenko Scenario," June 18, 2025.
[192] Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, "As the Foreign Agent Deadline Expires, Georgian Media Face More Threat," September 4, 2025.
[193] Makarychev and Medvedev, *Biopower in Putin's Russia*, 10.

Orthodox[194] and the equation of Georgian identity with Orthodoxy is widespread.[195] Every government since Georgia's independence in 1991 has sought to politicise the church, but the GD proposed unsuccessfully in August 2024 that Orthodoxy be recognised as the state religion.

The GOC should not be perceived as an insidious network of pro-government voices, but it is a critical playing field for conservative biopolitical narratives and 'pastoral power', or 'a technique of power that has religious roots and implies individual and collective stewardship, spiritual guidance and bodily discipline.'[196] For example, the GOC's approach to bodily discipline has the power to create animosity towards queer people.[197] The 'skepticism towards Western liberal values' that had emerged by 2018 alongside a more liberal Georgian Dream was tempered with pro-European sympathies 'in the fear of being perceived as pro-Russian'.[198] Symbolically rejecting the Anti-Discrimination Law, Patriarch Ilia II declared a Day of Family Purity and Respect for Parents in 2014 - but only since 2024 has the Georgian Dream made 17 May a public holiday.

The increasing inextricability of the church and state presents concerns about the dispersal of pro-government narratives. Mirroring the politicised role of the Russian Orthodox Church, the GD capitalises on the GOC's normative role by equating Orthodoxy with belonging to the biopolitical community - to the exclusion of not just non-believers, but also non-adherents to the regime. Ivanishvili has stated on Facebook that 'the attacks on the Orthodox Church do not stop, the purpose of which is to shake the identity of Georgia.'[199] The GD claims to 'take care' of Georgian-ness through 'policies intended to protect religious believers from offense', in the Russian paradigm.[200] The Russian Orthodox Church plays a political role in transforming 'the pro-LGBT vs. anti-LGBT dichotomy…into a pro-EU vs. pro-Russian dilemma.'[201] As such, the Russian Orthodox Church and Putin's illiberalism more broadly benefit from the

[194] Todd M. Johnson and Brian J. Grim, eds., "World Religion Database" (Boston: Brill, 2022).
[195] Shota Kakabadze and Andrey Makarychev, "A Tale of Two Orthodoxies: Europe in Religious Discourses of Russia and Georgia," *Ethnopolitics* 17, no. 5 (2018): 495.
[196] Makarychev, "Georgia in Russian Discourses," 24.
[197] Gogsadze, "Populism in Georgia," 8.
[198] Kakabadze and Makarychev, "A Tale of Two Orthodoxies," 500.
[199] Georgian Dream Official / ქართული ოცნება, Facebook Post on August 31, 2022, https://www.facebook.com/GeorgianDreamOfficial/posts/pfbid02hkBNLbXnumGgxFGJJ9ZsKMWBUpbZWWAdicEXHLPE2SjLvM3dvxFjJ6bqWzhdxC86l.
[200] Maria Snegovaya et al., "The Ideology of Putinism: Is It Sustainable?" (Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 27, 2023): 3.
[201] Andrey Makarychev and Alexandra Yatsyk, "Biopolitical Conservatism and 'Pastoral Power': A Russia – Georgia Meeting Point." (Tbilisi: Georgian Institute of Politics, 2017): 12.

strengthening of its Georgian counterpart's conservative biopolitical discourse in the neighbourhood.

The Georgian Dream's manoeuvres to strengthen the role of Orthodoxy reinforces the party's broader strategy to consolidate political power by leveraging religious and cultural identity through 'networked systems of interconnected nodal points'.[202] While there is still pluralism of attitudes towards Russia and Europe among priests, Makarychev and Yatsyk assess that both those who ascribe to theories of Western conspiracy against Orthodox beliefs and those who accept liberal values see Russia as an empire.[203] That notwithstanding, parishes may reproduce localised perceptions of both religious and political paradigms, contributing to the polarisation of discourses about East and West.

3.2 The Strengths and Weaknesses of the Biopolitical Community

'Bare life' ultimately strengthens sovereign power. This chapter has outlined three distinct exclusionary narratives which enable the Georgian Dream's anti-European sentiment and othering tendencies to permeate society from the bottom up. It is evident that populist biopolitics work not just to exclude, but by excluding. Unlike a typical expression of populism that directs criticism at the 'corrupt elite',[204] often in tandem with discriminatory rhetoric about minorities, GD elites have nurtured a culture which lends itself to the sovereign exclusion of perceived others. Mats Ekström et al. have established that 'mainstream politicians may adopt a populist political style, while maintaining a non-populist agenda.'[205] Populist style, especially in the hands of those in power, clearly functions as an illiberal justification for the maintenance of status-quo politics. Through the emphasis on 'taking care' of heterosexual, Orthodox ethnic Georgians, the tool of exception is imperative to the construction of traditional Georgian-ness - but its origins can be traced to both Russian conservative biopolitics and EU populist biopolitics.

[202] Makarychev and Medvedev, *Biopower in Putin's Russia*, 10.
[203] Makarychev and Yatsyk, "Biopolitical Conservatism," 11.
[204] Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," 544.
[205] Mats Ekström et al., "Right-Wing Populism and the Dynamics of Style: A Discourse-Analytic Perspective on Mediated Political Performances," *Palgrave Communications* 4, no. 1 (2018): 3.

Populist style opens the door to post-factual democracy.[206] The biopolitically-coded narratives of populist nation-building legitimise the erosion of liberal democracy by making it seem beneficial to the nation - or even the will of the people. Michael Freeden deems such diffuse ideologies, characterised by 'vagueness and indeterminacy', 'phantom ideologies'.[207] Populist strategic relations produce phantom dichotomies of 'us' and 'others' at the level of the population - but this is merely a symbolic distinction. Ernesto Laclau terms this phenomenon the 'empty signifier', or symbols which can take on multiple meanings depending on social context.[208] As such, the instruments of totalisation are empty signifiers, which breed discursive inconsistencies and paradoxes. This may offer up weak points in the construction of the biopolitical community - or even nodal points against which people mobilise. Snegovaya et al. deem the strengths of Putinist ideology its flexibility, simplicity and passive audience: but while 'societal political passivity has been one of the main assets allowing Putin to hold onto power',[209] mass political mobilisation has become an active part of daily life in Georgia. The next chapter analyses resistance in Georgia through a biopolitical lens: how do protesters claim to 'take care' of Georgian democracy?

[206] Michael Bossetta, "Fighting Fire with Fire: Mainstream Adoption of the Populist Political Style in the 2014 Europe Debates between Nick Clegg and Nigel Farage," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 19, no. 4 (2017): 733.
[207] Michael Freeden, "After the Brexit Referendum: Revisiting Populism as an Ideology," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 22, no. 1 (2017): 10.
[208] Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London; New York: Verso, 2005), 69.
[209] Snegovaya et al., "The Ideology of Putinism," 20.

Protest and The Spirit of *Demos*

4.1 Power and Resistance

Power is ubiquitous and relational.[210] Although Foucault's scholarship on resistance to sovereign, disciplinary and bio-power conveys 'such a strong sense that power is ubiquitous and all-encompassing' that he may 'ultimately paralyze, rather than promote, resistance',[211] he was also clear that power and resistance coexist and are interdependent.[212] In other words, power presupposes resistance, and vice versa. As such, resistance should not be seen as an attempt to escape power, but rather, embodied protest makes visible alternative sources of power and epistemologies; 'individuals are the vehicles of power, not its point of application.'[213] Where the body and visibility are combined, protest is thus both an effect of power and the condition of possibility of alternative power.[214] Put differently, where there is power, there is resistance potential.

In the case of the protests in Georgia beginning in October 2024, it is vital to destabilise the power/resistance binary because of the allegations of foreign funding in empowering opposition parties and protest, and the role of civil society in promoting hegemonic European discourses.[215] Where opposition parties, or US- and European-funded civil society, may each resist the Georgian Dream government, their sources of power and stated aims vary. As Nikolas Rose has it, under governmentality, 'the distinction between government and non-government actors holds little analytical value: actors on both sides of this purported divide are implicated in…the conduct of conduct "at a distance".'[216] The 'will not to be governed thusly, like that, by these people, at this price'[217] is as such expressed through 'counter-conducts'[218], which goes

[210] Michel Foucault, "Omnes et Singulatim: Towards a Criticism of Political Reason," in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, ed. S. McMurrin, Vol. II, 225-254 (University of Utah Press, 1981).
[211] Brent L. Pickett, "Foucault and the Politics of Resistance," *Polity* 28, no. 4 (June 1996): 445.
[212] Foucault, *Will to Knowledge*, 95.
[213] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (The Harvester Press, 1980), 98.
[214] Neve Gordon, "On Visibility and Power: An Arendtian Corrective of Foucault," *Human Studies* 25, no. 2 (2002): 132.
[215] Laura Luciani, "The EU's Hegemonic Interventions in the South Caucasus: Constructing 'Civil' Society, Depoliticising Human Rights?," *Cooperation and Conflict* 56, no. 1 (2021): 101–20.
[216] Nikolas Rose, cited in: Carl Death, "Counter-Conducts: A Foucauldian Analytics of Protest," *Social Movement Studies* 9, no. 3 (2010): 238.
[217] Michel Foucault, "What Is Critique?," in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer and Lysa Hochroth (New York: Semiotext(e), 1997), 72.
[218] Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, and Population. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-1978*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 201.

beyond social movement theory to focus on 'practices and mentalities of resistance' and highlights the mutually-constitutive relations of power between government and resistance.[219]

This chapter focuses on a series of protests after October 2024, predominantly in Georgia's capital Tbilisi. A nationwide public opinion survey conducted by Institute for Social Research and Analysis in January 2025 found that nearly 60% of respondents supported the ongoing protests in Georgia, with 45% identifying as active supporters.[220] Despite having no overall coordinator, protesters generally have *three demands* in common: renewed free and fair parliamentary elections (which 62% of survey respondents support), genuine commitment to the steps required for EU accession (67.1% support), and release of the political prisoners taken in the early months of protest (76.3% support).[221] It is clear that resistance is popular and acts of counter-conduct have mainstream support.

While the GD's governance may not be categorised as liberal governmentality, analysing this series of widespread protests in support of democratic governance through a liberal framework can demonstrate two things. *Firstly*, it demonstrates the commitment to the liberal paradigm and peaceful democratic transfer of government on the side of the protesters. *Secondly*, rather than locating some 'pure form of revolutionary resistance', a Foucauldian reading of protest can provide insight into the 'new identities and subjectivities…performatively constituted' by demonstrations.[222] While demonstrators would likely argue their complete opposition to the government, the multitude of ways this resistance is performed is pivotal to the achievement of its various stated aims.

As Brent Pickett outlines, 'since power is spread through society and not localised in any particular place, the struggle against power must also be diffuse.'[223] If power is always diffuse, in this case it is also disparate - as such, this chapter aims to cover a variety of resistance methods and representations. However, it bears repeating that, under biopolitical structures, all life is made political - not just through active participation in resistance, but through bodily and administrative procedures. Proceeding from this, a range of counter-conduct actions will be

[219] Death, "Counter-Conducts," 240.
[220] Civil Georgia, "Poll: Majority of Georgians Support Demands of Ongoing Protests, Blame Ruling Party for Political Crisis," February 10, 2025.
[221] Ibid.
[222] Death, "Counter-Conducts," 245.
[223] Pickett, "Foucault and the Politics of Resistance," 458.

analysed through the lenses of spatiality, ritual and 'taking care' in Georgia since the October 2024 elections with the aim to elucidate their potential to perform a democratic biopolitics.

4.2 The Spaces of Resistance

Although biopolitics shifts the focus on the apparatuses of power from territory to populations, the diffuse manifestations of biopower and the 'conduct of conduct' necessitate a renewed localisation of counter-conduct strategies. The most persistent act of protest since October 2024 has been in conventional sites of political engagement: convening outside the Parliament Building and the pro-GD Public Broadcaster building in central Tbilisi.[224] However, this section also analyses the exploratory, de-centralised sites of protest that may strengthen the impact of resistance, including commoning in seemingly un-political locations, and democratising space as such. Analysis of these varied spaces, unconventional sites, and the dissonances between protest in the capital and regions may equally help to evaluate the success of resistance actions against their manifold aims.

4.2.1 Standing on and Diverging from Rustaveli

The significance of 'standing on' Rustaveli - marching down and closing Rustaveli Avenue, the main artery of Tbilisi where the Parliament sits - is well-documented.[225] Rustaveli has occupied a 'prominent place in the public consciousness' as an 'arena of resistance' in independent Georgia since the brutal crackdown on anti-Soviet, pro-independence protesters on 9 April 1989.[226] Nightly manifestations in front of the Parliament Building insert opposition into the government which opposition parties are boycotting.[227] Few opposition party politicians are to be seen at the protests - rather, these have been assemblies of citizens convening in the same place each night. The body of protesters, which reached a peak of an estimated 100,000 participants,[228] reclaims power over the central avenue, blocking vehicular

[224] I would like to extend particular thanks to Anna Dolidze, chairman and founder of the For the People! party and human rights lawyer, for her insights on reclaiming space, community-building as a key facet of protest, and the ritualised practice of closing Rustaveli Avenue.
[225] Mariam Nikuradze, "Fourteen Years on Rustaveli Avenue — Documenting Georgia's Descent into Authoritarianism," *OC Media*, November 1, 2023.
[226] Tinatin Gurgenidze and Natalia Nebieridze, "Resistance and Collective Space," *Mautskebeli*, April 18, 2025.
[227] Gigi Kobakhidze, "Treason or Opportunity – Opposition Squabbles over Municipal Elections," *Civil Georgia*, June 17, 2025.
[228] Gabriel Gavin, "Unprecedented Protests Sweep Georgia after Government Scraps EU Bid," *Politico*, December 1, 2024.

access and slowing pedestrian traffic; as a platform for political engagement it is symbolic and ritualised.

The concepts of the 'conduct of conduct' and 'counter-conducts' are central to Foucault's understanding and critique of rights.[229] 'Standing on' Rustaveli is in itself emblematic of a counter-conduct claim to all three stated aims of the protests: as a will to democratic participation in Parliament, constitutionally protected EU accession and as an embodiment of civil liberties in contrast to the rising number of political prisoners. Furthermore, reclaiming space in front of the Parliament makes visible the condition of possibility of alternative power - one protester visually juxtaposes competing claims to the nation by silently holding up the Georgian flag each night in front of the blockade of police cars. Where rituals are a 'type of embodied discourse',[230] occupying Rustaveli daily is a large-scale performative constitution of an alternative Georgian identity; or a competing discursive claim to the Georgian flag, identity and governance.

The mass protests alone, however, have not proven effective beyond their symbolic output. The disadvantage of ritualised protest is it may actually 'diffuse discontent'.[231] In the context of yearly Washington marches, Jessica Kulynych writes that using a 'legitimate outlet for protest' may 'verify system legitimacy by focusing protest toward the formal legal structures of government.'[232] Indeed, the protests reinforce the central Parliament Building as the locus for 'where politics happens', and the centralised authority of the Georgian Dream in the Parliament Building. Ritualising a protest action is two-fold in impact: on the one hand, ritualised protest is a powerful re-assertion of the demand for change; on the other, it may render protest quotidien or normalised, thus obstructing the potential for mobilisation. As explicated, however, power is ubiquitous and all lives are made political: correspondingly, convening on Rustaveli is but one expression of the 'will not to be governed thusly'.

At its zenith, the demonstration ritual outside the Parliament Building was in fact a convergence of smaller protests, specific to professions, demographics and political aims. For one, there

[229] Costas Douzinas, *States of Exception* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023), 26.
[230] Madeleine Hurd, "Introduction: Social Movements: Ritual, Space and Media," Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research 6, no. 2 (2014): 289.
[231] Jessica J. Kulynych, "Performing Politics: Foucault, Habermas, and Postmodern Participation," *Polity* 30, no. 2 (1997): 342.
[232] Ibid.

have been nightly marches from the Public Broadcaster to the Parliament Building since the elections, originally as a demand that protests be broadcasted live without propaganda. The building of the Public Broadcaster has been the location of graffiti and source of the protest slogan 'broadcast to the people, buildings to the city'.[233] The call to reclaim the media is not only made audible, but physically realised as the building is altered, urban space is occupied and the city itself is transformed.

More broadly, there have been marches in various groupings around the city, speaking on behalf of, among many others: students, teachers and academic staff; fathers, mothers and children; lawyers; social workers; actors; workers' unions; families of victims of Soviet repressions; residents of various administrative districts of Tbilisi and regions; election observers; emigrant families; the clergy's children; veterans; fishermen, hunters, and hikers; and even tattoo artists.[234] The convergence of protest actions from various backgrounds and spaces in the city, often towards the end point of Rustaveli, is impactful - it reveals not only the convergence in support from different arenas but also the diffuse networks of people through which power operates and can be resisted. The 'will not to be governed thusly' is shared, but the rationale for counter-conduct varies across mentalities of resistance.

Tinatin Gurgenidze and Natalia Nebieridze write that 'collective action reclaims the notion of commonality in urban space and establishes a right to the city.'[235] Diversifying spaces of opposition reinstates public meaning to streets, squares and buildings which are not, at first glance, the site of 'politics'. Marches and congregations have to 'adapt to the topography of the city', in turn transforming the city itself.[236] For example, a congregation of protesters on the transit roundabout of Heroes' Square, with its towering motorway flyovers, briefly pedestrianised a symbol of metropolitan transport efficiency. In such spaces, the location itself is made political by the act of convening or 'commoning'.[237] In line with Stavros Stavrides' theory, the authors contend that 'such unity has the power to transform urban space and change its meaning, and the transformed environment has the power to influence society.'[238]

[233] Gurgenidze and Nebieridze, "Resistance and Collective Space".
[234] For a detailed rundown of actions, see the Civil Georgia liveblogs: Civil Georgia, "Liveblog: Resistance 2024"; "Liveblog: Resistance 2025 Vol. 1"; "Liveblog: Resistance 2025 Vol. 2".
[235] Gurgenidze and Nebieridze, "Resistance and Collective Space".
[236] Ibid.
[237] Stavros Stavridis, *Common Space: The City as Commons* (London: Zed Books, 2016).
[238] Gurgenidze and Nebieridze, "Resistance and Collective Space".

As such, it is the conjunction of collective power through commoning and the distribution of protest across spaces which produces change within the city. By diverging from the expectation that democracy is carried out solely in the Parliament and institutions, the spaces of the city themselves become transformed and transformative. As a type of 'embodied discourse', physical manifestation in seemingly un-political spaces highlights a mentality of resistance that recognises the ubiquity of power relations. The diffusion of protest across Tbilisi's diverse spaces performs a spatially democratic form of resistance, challenging the centralisation of political authority and expanding the loci of civic participation beyond formal institutions. In doing so, it reclaims the city as a site of democratic possibility, where everyday spaces become arenas for constituting new political subjectivities and collective agency.

4.2.2 Unreached Regions?

Alongside Tbilisi, other cities such as Batumi, Kutaisi, Poti, Zugdidi and Khashuri have joined in mass protest. Protest in the regions has been less active and more disparate, perhaps due to an understanding that Tbilisi is 'where politics happens'. In fact, it seems that the 'politics' that 'happens' in rural areas is understood very differently. In Chiatura, a manganese mining town, 'protesting miners…were quick to dissociate their grievances from those of Tbilisi', perhaps 'trying not to alienate the authorities they depended on'.[239] In an area hit with heavy snowfall, the stranded residents of Guria showed 'little gratitude or sympathy' for the cause in Tbilisi when protesters mobilised to send aid to the community.[240] Meanwhile in Tbilisi, 'solidarity to Chiatura' is chanted on marches from the Public Broadcaster to the Parliament Building and 'Thanks to Khulo' was projected on the Parliament.[241] Demonstrators in Khulo, a small town in the Autonomous Republic of Adjara, protested in alignment with the principles of the Tbilisi protesters but added local concerns about gas pipelines, the poor condition of roads and ongoing frustrations over the government's failure to build a second mosque.[242] In these cases, the 'right to the city' assumes a more fundamental, economic basis.

This is exemplary of a weakness in the resistance: protest actions in the regions are less likely to associate local grievances with national power structures. Additionally, the concentration of

[239] Jaba Devdariani, "As Democracy Falters Globally, Georgian Protest Mood Turns Somber," *Civil Georgia*, March 10, 2025, https://civil.ge/archives/668145.
[240] Ibid.
[241] Khulo / ხულო, Facebook Post on December 5, 2024, https://www.facebook.com/watch/?mibextid=wwXIfr&v=2005340476572580&rdid=Y293ajsZJSOixK%209N.
[242] Katharine Khamhaengwong, "Georgia Protests: The View from Adjara," *Eurasianet*, January 6, 2025.

power in Tbilisi means protesters in the capital can clearly identify with an 'us-versus-them' parallel, whereas the rural dimension may exacerbate the feeling that 'they' (government, institutions *and* Tbilisi protesters) do politics and 'we' do not. This regional divergence illustrates the uneven distribution of power and its internalisation across different spaces; the conduct of conduct 'at a distance' is in fact impacted by the level of distance itself, which in turn means the traction gained by the protest's aims is mediated through spatial and socio-economic proximity to power structures. This reveals a key apparatus of biopolitical governance: the decentralised, often invisible ways that populations are governed through infrastructures, dependencies and localised economic constraints, which in turn shape the limits of political imagination. As such, the protest movement's challenge is not just opposing the government but reconfiguring how politics is understood and enacted outside the capital, extending the spirit of *demos* to places where democratic engagement has been disaggregated from everyday life.

4.3 Reimagining 'Taking Care' of the Nation through the Spirit of *Demos*

In opposition to the sovereign creation of a 'biopolitical community' and claim to 'take care' of Georgian-ness, protest networks perform the rejection and replacement of the care-taker role of the state. Rather than being some 'pure form of revolutionary resistance',[243] or an equal and opposite reaction to governmental power structures, there are many common and complementary points in their discourses and aesthetics. However, resisting the 'conduct of conduct' in this case seems to be centred on inclusion, protection and tradition in a reimagined 'biopolitical community'. Protesters also claim to protect Georgian traditions and ideals - indeed, many of the same ideals that the GD lays claim to. This produces a reimagined nationalism, which is expressed through the performance of traditions, leveraging online platforms to reimagine urban spaces, and the physical act of 'care-taking' as an exercise in trust, unity and reinterpreted 'spiritual health'.

The age of the internet heralds a concerning expansion of the biopolitical logics of conduct control through (perceived) self-regulation.[244] Conversely, it means that counter-conduct strategies can be disseminated online to a greater audience, faster, and without taking up space.

[243] Death, "Counter-Conducts," 245.
[244] Adam Sitze, "Biopolitics and Political Space," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 9, no. 2 (2012): 221.

One output of online convening is the Facebook group *Daitove* (Let them Stay), which acts as a forum to arrange protest strategies, carpooling to urban protests and accommodation for protest participants from rural areas. At its peak, it was a support network which worked to provide food, medical help and shelter to those dissatisfied by the direction of Georgian politics. With 255,000 group members,[245] the platform 'allows individuals to bypass traditional structures and create decentralised, horizontal movements.'[246] More so than this, it exemplifies a retaliatory mode of 'taking care' of Georgian people as defined autonomously; taking care of the nation first necessitates taking care of each other.

The group's co-founder Ilia Ghlonti 'views the protests as a return to the fundamentals of democracy, much like in ancient Greece, when citizens took part in decision-making through assemblies.'[247] He states:

> The reason there's no microphone or stage is because these people don't want that, no one wants to speak down to others, because we're all equals, and that's how we see it. This is the spirit of Demos, maybe a lot of time has passed since ancient civilisation, but I have the feeling that democracies were built like this. Today, we're doing this, just like in Greece, only with a bit of a different form.

The 'different form' that Ghlonti refers to is one that centres care, horizontality and accessibility as the organising principles of democracy. The spirit of *demos* as practised here becomes a grassroots social democracy - not in the narrow electoral sense, but as a lived experience of political equality. Through the Daitove network, the act of providing shelter, food, transport and assistance to fellow protesters transforms care itself into a defiant political act, and platforms like Facebook are used as decentralised hubs of political strategy.
It is a politics not of opposition alone, but of composition: rather than operating as an opposition party or counter-state, it suggests a way of being a community that is not merely governed, but actively co-created.

Furthermore, the 'care' that underpins these protests is material: hot drinks have been continuously provided, as well as crowd-funded food at larger protests. Notably, on festive occasions, the protests continue as spaces of defiant celebration, in which participants not only

[245] Transparency International Georgia, "How Activist Groups Are Being Fought against in Georgia the de Facto Government's Repressions against the Group 'Daitove,'" January 9, 2025.
[246] Mchedlidze, "How Social Media Has Shaped Georgia's Protests".
[247] Ibid.

share food and space, but equally honour Georgian traditions in communal spaces. On Orthodox Christmas Eve, protesters carrying Georgian and European flags marched from five different churches to convene in the central Kashveti Church opposite the Parliament building.[248] New Year celebrations the week before saw the Georgian traditional feast table, 'supra', spread out along Rustaveli with communal food and drink.[249] This common table creates an 'accessible, non-commercial and equal environment',[250] which not only reimagines the civic space of central Tbilisi, but demonstrates a resistive interpretation of the same traditional nodal points as leveraged by conservative forces.

Celebratory actions demonstrate the claim of the Georgian people to the collective traditions which the GD aims to use as totalising mechanisms over the community. At Easter protests, two protesters were arrested by masked police, after allegedly greeting them with 'Christ is risen!'.[251] The competing claim to 'Christian' and 'Georgian values' in these circumstances reveals the strategic and hypocritical employment of moralistic discourses by the state. Protesters also reframe the traditional ritual of the Khorumi war dance, which beyond its obvious interpretation as a battle cry against the government, is '[h]eld as a metaphor for protest, the fight against injustice and unity.'[252] Such rituals function as 'embodied discourses', allowing protesters to assert claims over national symbols otherwise monopolised by state narratives. Folk songs and dances, Christian greetings and public feasts are redeployed not in rejection of tradition, but to contest the conditions they are performed in and reimagine 'taking care' of Georgian identity.

4.4 The Potential for a Democratic Biopolitics

As trivial as these theatricalities may seem, they have powerful implications for agency, visibility and redefined nationalism. As Malafaia et al. write, 'bodies are visually constructed to operate as sites of imagination.'[253] Disrupting the existing bodily order in itself has been characterised as an expression of democratic politics.[254] Democracy, for Jacques Rancière, is then 'the system of forms of subjectification through which any order of distribution of bodies

[248] Civil Georgia, "Liveblog: Resistance 2025 Vol. 1," January 7, 2025.
[249] Civil Georgia, "Liveblog: Resistance 2024," December 31, 2024.
[250] Gurgenidze and Nebieridze, "Resistance and Collective Space".
[251] Civil Georgia, "Liveblog: Resistance 2025 Vol. 2," April 20, 2025.
[252] Gurgenidze and Nebieridze, "Resistance and Collective Space".
[253] Carla Malafaia et al., "Visual Bodies, Ritualised Performances: An Offline-Online Analysis of Extinction Rebellion's Protests in Finland and Portugal," *Visual Studies* 40, no. 2 (2024): 381.
[254] Ludwig, "Body Politics and Democracy," 538.

into functions is undermined, thrown back on its contingency.'[255] Rather than simply reimagining Georgian-ness, the protest movement seeks to reconfigure the conditions and spaces under which bodies ritually perform and reproduce it. In doing so, they enact what can be described as a democratic biopolitics - not life governed by the ideal of democracy, but a population actively constituting its own 'biopolitical community' through the embodied practices of care, the occupation of space and rituals.

This chapter has demonstrated that care, for both people and traditions, can become a mode of counter-conduct. Embodied discourses, performed in defiance of dominant state sovereignty, reclaim national symbols and cultural practices to make visible alternative identities and subjectivities. Yet these protest actions are not guaranteed to achieve their three main aims of renewed free and fair elections, steps towards EU integration and the release of political prisoners. As the analysis of Rustaveli Avenue shows, ritualised protest can become both a powerful re-assertion of the demand for change and indeed 'diffuse discontent'.[256] Similarly, regional disparities in engagement reveal the uneven experience of 'where politics happens' and where it does not.

Where the state refuses to enter into discourse with protesters, it not only entrenches illiberalism, but risks accelerating repression, which Christian Davenport terms the 'Law of Coercive Responsiveness'.[257] To return to Agamben's pessimistic view on sovereign power, he finds that the 'security paradigm implies that each form of dissent, each more or less violent attempt to overthrow the order, becomes an opportunity to govern these actions into a profitable direction.'[258] Still, the spirit of *demos* suggests the possibility of a political culture that is not merely oppositional but compositional. What emerges is not just resistance to being governed 'thusly', but an active assertion of the right to govern otherwise - through bodies, rituals and spaces that insist democracy is not something delivered from above, but constituted from below.

[255] Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (University Of Minnesota Press, 1999), 191.
[256] Kulynych, "Performing Politics," 342.
[257] Christian Davenport, "State Repression and Political Order," *Annual Review of Political Science* 10, no. 1 (2007): 7.
[258] Giorgio Agamben, "From the State of Control to a Praxis of Destituent Power," in *Resisting Biopolitics*, ed. Stephen E. Wilmer and Audronė Žukauskaitė (New York: Routledge, 2015), 27.

Death, Fear and the Nation

5.1 The Spectre of Death: Mbembe's *Necropolitics* and Ukraine

'Choose peace, no to war!'[259]

The Georgian people are no strangers to war with Russia, and this fear was amplified by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. A controversial propaganda campaign commissioned by the GD exploited fears of war by deploying posters across the country with black-and-white pictures of destroyed cities in Ukraine juxtaposed with images of peaceful Georgia. Found on billboards, the sides of buses, in the metro and dramatised on TV adverts,[260] the spectre of war - both the Russo-Georgian war of 2008 and the war in Ukraine - looms large over Georgia, and inciting security fears gives the state the authority to adopt exceptional measures. The Georgian Dream effectively positioned itself as the sole guarantor of peace with Moscow. The Copenhagen School's highly cited conception of securitisation assesses that 'when a securitizing actor uses a rhetoric of existential threat and thereby takes an issue out of what under those conditions is "normal politics," we have a case of securitization.'[261] Like the Copenhagen School's approach, Foucaldian security dispositifs aim at what has not yet happened,[262] but rather than focussing on moments or 'speech acts', security dispositifs in Foucauldian terms bring into focus the micro-level of 'locally embedded security concepts, practices, and emotions that are invoked in the name of potential future threats.'[263]

How, then, does Foucault's conception of security apply to war and death, as conceptualised at the macro-level? Foucault contends that 'politics is the continuation of war by other means' (an inversion of Clausewitz's aphorism).[264] While Foucault centres his analysis on the micro-level of security practices, it coexists with the macro-level, at the intersection of geopolitics

[259] Slogan found on billboards sponsored by the Georgian Dream around the country. For more information and images: Jam News, "Ruined Ukraine vs Prosperous Georgia - 'Georgian Dream' Banners, Which Caused Widespread Outrage," September 29, 2024.
[260] Joshua Kucera, "Georgia's Ruling Party Plays the Ukraine War Card," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, October 15, 2024.
[261] Barry Buzan et al., *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 1997), 24–25. See also: Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 491.
[262] Ricky Wichum, "Security as Dispositif: Michel Foucault in the Field of Security," *Foucault Studies* 1, no. 15 (2013): 167.
[263] Beatrice de Graaf and Cornel Zwierlein, "Historicizing Security - Entering the Conspiracy Dispositive," *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung* 38, no. 1 (2013): 52.
[264] Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 15.

and biopolitics.[265] The micro-level of security serves the macro-level and vice versa.[266] Under biopolitics, Foucault finds that 'death is outside the power relationship'; where biopower is the power to 'make live', it has 'no control over death.'[267] Under sovereign power, death had been within the realm of the state, and this framework is closely applicable to illiberal states and colonised states. Here, Mbembe is instructive: he regards war 'as much a means of achieving sovereignty as a way of exercising the right to kill.'[268] In the necropolitical paradigm, sovereignty is ultimately expressed as the power to dictate 'who may live and who must die'.[269]

The war in Ukraine is 'necropolitics in its purest form.'[270] Ultimately critical of Foucault's liberal paradigm due to its almost exclusive focus on Western states, Mbembe's postcolonial approach is applicable to the conditions of Georgia and Ukraine. Their linkage is founded on their shared history as Soviet republics, non-linear democratisation struggles and loss of territories to Russia since their independence. By analysing across the networked relations of necropolitics in two countries, one can see Georgia's ties to and disavowals of Russia as imperial centre and occupier; begin to explain the inclusion of Russian-style tactics in Georgia despite rejection of Russia as the aggressor; and consider a quasi-imported state of exception from Ukraine. The spectre of death can be invoked to reduce people to precarity and justify violence and killing. This can help to analyse how democratic norms are suspended or strategically redefined during times of military emergency and during protests - for example, during times of exceptional politics. In other, more abstract terms, necropolitical governance creates '*death-worlds*', or 'new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*' (emphasis in original).[271]

In the case of Georgia, the spectre of the war in Ukraine can be leveraged to exploit security fears and legitimise the suspension of democracy. With fear casting a shadow on political epistemology, the symbol of the lost lives of Ukrainian civilians and troops walks as the 'living dead' through security relations in Georgia. As Makarychev writes, a necropolitical reading of

[265] Michael Dillon and Luis Lobo-Guerrero, "Biopolitics of Security in the 21st Century: An Introduction," *Review of International Studies* 34, no. 2 (2008): 275/6.
[266] Ibid, 275.
[267] Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 248.
[268] Mbembe, "Necropolitics," (2003): 12.
[269] Ibid.
[270] Makarychev and Medvedev, *Biopower in Putin's Russia*, 34.
[271] Mbembe, "Necropolitics," (2003): 40.

Russia's war on Ukraine 'factors death into the political calculus' and as such includes death as a symbol in contemporary 'regimes of truth'.[272] This is not to say that liberal regimes do not 'factor in death' - but illiberal regimes 'systemically practice physical violence towards political opponents and glorify the sacrifice of life for the sake of the nation.'[273] In line with Makarychev's mapping, the first section of this chapter reads physical violence towards political opponents and illiberal policing through a necropolitical framework, followed by the symbolic violence of fear-based governance, rooted in anti-West conspiracy theories, the prevention of the level of political rupture seen in Ukraine before the annexation of Crimea, and the instrumentalisation of war memory. In sum, it glorifies the sacrifice of democracy for the sake of the nation.

5.1.1 The Physical Violence of Illiberal Politics

The paradigm of politics in Georgia is increasingly violent. The necropolitical potential of illiberal regimes reads in close parallel with the conventional definitions of authoritarianism, as utilised by the state to kill or maim political opposition. As such, authoritarian measures of repression are used not just to secure the GD's status as the primary care-taker of the nation, but to demonise all opposition figures as active threats to the existential security of the nation. In a Georgia symbolically beyond 'normal politics', the invocation of an existential threat means the opposition is accused of warmongering, and labelled as part of the 'collective National Movement', 'Local War Party' and 'war lovers', equating opposition parties with the unpopular Saakashvili UNM government who oversaw the 2008 war.[274] The prescient Tagliavini Report also established that the UNM government had fired the first shot in Tskhinvali in 2008; as a consequence, the GD accuses the UNM and all opposition parties of angling to open a second front on Russia.

Cases of violent repression of opponents have also been recorded: former GD Prime Minister and Founder of the For Georgia party, Giorgi Gakharia, suffered an allegedly politically-motivated physical attack in a hotel in Batumi in January 2025; Nika Gvaramia of the Coalition for Change party was knocked unconscious while detained in Tbilisi in December 2024;[275]

[272] Makarychev and Medvedev, *Biopower in Putin's Russia*, 11.
[273] Ibid, 17.
[274] Shota Gvineria, "FAQ and Misconceptions about Georgia," *GEOPolitics*, November 8, 2024.
[275] Paul Kirby, "Georgian Opposition Leader Beaten up and Blames Governing Party Members," *BBC News*, January 15, 2025.

furthermore, opposition leaders and journalists are being successively imprisoned without due process.[276] The escalation of violence occurs both as the direct result of state practice and through the deployment of semi-autonomous masked thugs or *titushky* (named after the mercenaries who brutalised peaceful protesters on behalf of the pro-Russian Ukrainian President Yanukovich during the Euromaidan protests of 2014).[277] The *titushky* exemplify the illiberal security dispositif as paid agents of the state who blur the lines between formal state violence, and the illusion that violence and loyalty emerge organically 'from below'. In doing so, they extend the state's capacity to govern through precarity - not simply through overt coercion, but by diffusing fear, destabilising trust in civic space, and reinforcing the message that dissent places one outside the zone of protection.

The exposure of life to the precarity of death is also carried out through systematic violence against protesters. The repression of protest is ultimately the repression of bodies: in the last two months of 2024 alone, Amnesty International reported 300 cases of protesters being subjected to torture and ill-treatment in detention.[278] The violation of human rights standards that this entails is well-documented by Amnesty International[279] and the Georgian Young Lawyers Association;[280] needless to say, police brutality is suggestive of authoritarian tendencies, and indeed it matches Levitsky and Ziblatt's democratic subversion formula (rejection of the democratic rules of the game and opponents, as well as toleration of violence and limiting freedoms of opponents).[281] Even within those suffering state brutality, however, there are hierarchies: 'humiliation, sexist rhetoric and physical violence' is disproportionately directed at women protesters, generating a pattern of gender-based violence.[282] Ultimately, physical violence in Georgia is not an aberration of the system but a technique of illiberal governance that sustains power by rendering dissenting certain bodies more vulnerable, punishable and disposable than others; a necropolitical performance of who may be protected, and who must be exposed to harm.

[276] Civil Georgia, "Giorgi Vashadze Sentenced to Seven Months for Defying GD Commission," June 24, 2025.
[277] Committee to Protect Journalists, "Masked Men Assault Georgian News Crew Covering Pro-EU Protests," December 9, 2024.
[278] Amnesty International, "Georgia: Brutal Crackdown on Protestors and Journalists in Georgia,'" Report EUR 56/8845/2024, December 13, 2024.
[279] Ibid.
[280] Georgian Young Lawyers' Association, "10 Days of Terror against the Peaceful Protest," December 8, 2024.
[281] Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*.
[282] Amnesty International, "From Insults to Assaults: Weaponizing Gender-Based Violence against Women Protesters in Georgia," Report EUR 56/9417/2025, May 22, 2025.

5.1.2 The Symbolic Violence of War

The war in Ukraine has produced a 'myriad of necropolitical discourses regarding the justification of death and the subjugation of lives to potential death.'[283] These external discourses permeate Georgian politics to empower fear-based governance; as a result, Georgia strategically withholds its population from active participation in war to maintain internal stability while invoking the spectre of war to justify internal repression. It achieves this by legitimising conspiracy theories about warmongering, emphasising the continuity between internal instability and invasion, and exploiting the politics of war memory.

The dissemination of conspiracy theories by the state is a strategy aimed at reinforcing the sovereign power over knowledge. Two key Georgian Dream conspiracies - notably more prevalent since the start of the war in Ukraine - of the Global War Party and Deep State frame the West as the primary threat to security in Georgia. The former goes further than accusing the UNM of being the 'Local War Party', rather blaming the US Ambassador, Ukrainian government and West for pressuring Georgia to open a second front.[284] The Global War Party itself is an unspecified international network which makes these political players its victims.[285] The latter is an intensification of the logics of the former and follows Trump's lead in designating all bureaucracy and institutions to have been secretly co-opted by saboteurs.[286] Unlike its manifestation in the US, the Georgian Dream's redefined Deep State conspiracy focuses on actors external to Georgia -[287] hence, on foreign civil society and Western representatives like US Republican Congressman Joe Wilson who has taken a strong stance on democracy promotion in Georgia since his proposal of the MEGOBARI Act.[288]

[283] George S. Terry, "Martial Necropolitics: The Position of the Combatant in the Russo-Ukrainian War," *New Perspectives* 32, no. 3 (2024): 307–24.
[284] Interpress News, "Irakli Kobakhidze - If the 'Global War Party' Does Not Get Involved, We Will Most Likely Be Granted the Status of a Candidate Country for the European Union," June 13, 2023.
[285] European Digital Media Observatory, "The Fearmongering 'Global War Party' and Other Tools of the Georgian Ruling Party's Propaganda to Discredit the US and the EU," October 14, 2024.
[286] Irakli Machaidze, "Georgian Government's 'Deep State' Bromance with Trump Remains Unrequited," *Eurasianet*, May 19, 2025.
[287] Civil Georgia, "Georgian Dream Strongmen Double down on Deep State Conspiracy Narrative," March 14, 2025.
[288] U.S. House of Representatives, *MEGOBARI Act*, H.R. 36, 119th Cong., 1st sess., introduced in House January 3, 2025.

Mirroring Western conspiracy theories, which are 'not a curious addition to the populist rhetoric; they are rooted in and emerge from the very logic of populism itself',[289] the emphasis on Georgia's proximity to war is an attempt to influence political knowledge. Conspiracy functions as a 'legitimizing argument, serving and fuelling a larger, encompassing security regime.'[290] Unlike fringe conspiracy theories, circulated by individuals, 'leaders have greater influence than typical conspiracy theorists because they reach a wider audience than most people, their positions lend greater credibility to misleading claims, and they normalize the spread of misinformation.'[291] Further to this, the Georgian state fosters a 'regime of truth' (the historically specific ways in which a society determines what is considered true and false) in which fear displaces deliberation and the West is refigured as the primary existential threat. The state's dissemination of conspiracy theories consolidates its control over political knowledge, discredits dissent and collapses the distinction between internal disorder and external invasion. In this environment, sovereign power is not merely exercised through the monopoly on violence, but increasingly through the monopoly on meaning: a war over epistemology.

In the post-truth paradigm, given that securitisation always aims at that which has not yet happened, the threat of 'Ukrainisation' is framed to begin with the pro-democracy protests of Ukraine's 2014 Euromaidan, which were followed by Russia's annexation of Crimea in the same year. The threat of 'Ukrainisation' is, as such, used as grounds for the repression of widespread protest in Tbilisi: Prime Minister Kobakhidze announced that '[s]ome people want a repeat of that scenario in Georgia. But there will be no Maidan in Georgia.'[292] Where performing protest like Ukraine means turning out like Ukraine, war is strategically invoked as the existential threat caused by democratic peaceful assembly, which provides legitimising narratives for the repression of protest. As well as widespread police brutality, the December 2025 amendments to the Law on Assemblies and Demonstrations introduced administrative and criminal liability for wearing face masks, engaging in symbolic acts of protest (such as placing stickers on public property) and granting the police the power to carry out

[289] Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 32.
[290] de Graaf and Zwierlein, "Historicizing Security," 55.
[291] Zhiying Ren et al., "Authoritarian Leaders Share Conspiracy Theories to Attack Opponents, Galvanize Followers, Shift Blame, and Undermine Democratic Institutions," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 46 (2022): 3.
[292] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Fresh Protests Erupt in Georgia as Demonstrators Block Public Broadcaster Building," December 1, 2024.

'preventative' arrests.[293] The escalation of security fears only serves to justify violence and control mechanisms.

It is hard to say to what extent Russia holds direct influence over Georgian politicians in 2025. Georgia's conscious acknowledgement of (its fear of) Russian power is perhaps best demonstrated by its responses to aggression towards Ukraine: it clearly aimed to avert reciprocal steps by not joining Ukraine and Western countries in imposing sanctions on Moscow in 2014 and 2022, despite its condemnation of the Russian annexation of Crimea and diplomatic support for Ukraine after the full-scale invasion. Further to this, Russia's prevention of the instigation of 'colour revolutions' (pro-democracy protests in Russia's 'near abroad' states), as codified in the 2023 Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, is a key priority in near-abroad states.[294] In this case, Russia was not actively - at least not militarily - involved in quelling protests in Georgia. As such, the protests ultimately dissipated without direct Russian intervention.[295] The government's pre-emptive alignment with Russian red lines, coupled with increasingly punitive laws and policing, ensured that dissent was neutralised before it could rupture the political order. In this context, the state of exception is not a temporary measure but an enduring mode of governance, sustained by the anticipation of external threat and the internal erosion of democratic space.

The instrumentalisation of war memory and martyrdom in the hands of the state limits public dissent while sacralising state-aligned narratives. By controlling how death is remembered, the state asserts its authority to define sacrifice and 'glorify the sacrifice of life for the sake of the nation'.[296] The Georgian Dream notably avoids invoking the name 'Russia' or 'Soviet Union' when commemorating national traumas such as 9 April 1989, when 21 people died by Soviet intervention.[297] Although the date holds profound significance in Georgia's national consciousness, and was subsequently the date of the 1991 declaration of independence, state-led commemorations of the martyrs in 2025 were obstructed by family members of those detained during the protests, revealing the contested terrain of memory politics. For Mbembe,

[293] Amnesty International, "Georgia: Authorities Using Draconian New Laws to Crack Down on Dissent," January 13, 2025.
[294] Lauri Mälksoo, "The Rise and Fall of Regional International Law in Post-Soviet Eurasia," J*apanese Yearbook of International Law* 66 (2023): 329/30.
[295] Alex Scrivener, "Why Georgia's Pro-Democracy Protests Failed," *Atlantic Council*, November 28, 2024.
[296] Makarychev and Medvedev, *Biopower in Putin's Russia*, 17.
[297] Mikheil Gvadzabia, "Georgian Dream Officials Compare Its Critics to Soviet Troops on 9 April Massacre Anniversary," *OC Media*, April 9, 2025.

martyrdom is embodied in the political suicide bomber, whose 'body is transformed into a weapon' in the 'truly ballistic sense'.[298] While Georgia has no such cases, the logic of necropower remains: in conditions of political death - marked by detention and imprisonment - the body itself becomes the site of resistance. Hunger strikes exemplify the weaponisation of the body without arms: the 38-day hunger strike of prominent journalist Mzia Amaghlobeli illustrates how the state's control over life and death is mirrored by acts of self-sacrifice.[299] In this necropolitical framework, death is no longer external to the power relationship; rather, it is inextricable from the politics of memorialising martyrs, war and protest.

5.2 The Vulnerability of Bodies and Democracy

This chapter has examined how necropolitical governance in Georgia manifests both through the repression of bodies and the construction of 'regimes of truth'. The spectre of death - materialised through the memory of the 2008 war, the ongoing occupation of the two breakaway territories and the war in Ukraine - is invoked not to declare a state of emergency, but to normalise it. The threat of war becomes a justification for the violent repression of the opposition, protesters and journalists, which in turn creates a fear-based political climate ultimately based on the bodily vulnerability of protesters, epistemological vulnerability of subjects and the precarity of the nation. Necropolitical reasoning serves to legitimise not only the selective, and often gendered, deployment of life-threatening violence - but the symbolic governance of sacrifice, martyrdom and war memory.

The body becomes a site where sovereignty is performed, whether through police brutality, hunger strikes or the ritualised commemoration of selectively narrated deaths. These dynamics operate through what Foucault conceptualised as security dispositifs - at the micro-level, specifically as 'emotions that are invoked in the name of potential future threats'.[300] At the macro-level, the dissemination of conspiracy theories, such as the Global War Party and the Deep State, plays a central role in consolidating the state's 'regime of truth'. The reframing of democratic mobilisation as 'Ukrainisation' collapses the distinction between civic participation and existential threat. In doing so, the state enacts not only a monopoly on violence, but also a monopoly on meaning. Furthermore, the vulnerability of bodies in Georgia reflects a deeper

[298] Mbembe, "Necropolitics," (2003): 36.
[299] Kristina Pitalskaya, "'Freedom Is Dearer than Life' Says Jailed Georgian Journalist," *Center for European Policy Analysis*, February 20, 2025.
[300] de Graaf and Zwierlein, "Historicizing Security," 52.

vulnerability of democratic practice itself - one that can be co-opted by fear and epistemological control as much as by formal repression.

Conclusion: Towards a Biopolitical Assessment of Democracy

Measuring democracy by a minimalist approach fails to capture the *living experience* of democracy. The playbook of democratic subversion works in such a way that façade democracies may be included in counts despite compromised elections, illiberal governance and coercive security narratives. In Georgia, for example, populist and illiberal forces leverage democratic language to erode civil and political rights and representation. While classical political theorists discuss the emergence of liberal democracy as a shift in sovereignty, Foucault views it as a transformation from sovereign power to more subtle forms, dispositifs and apparatuses of power.

Biopolitical theory has two key implications relevant to this thesis: *firstly*, it can reveal the asymmetric power relations that operate through the formal freedoms and liberty of democratic institutions, which have given rise to populism as a 'biting critique' of democracy itself. *Secondly*, the Foucauldian transformation from sovereign to bio-power includes nuances, bodily practices and overlaps inherent to each form of power - as such, assessing governance biopolitically illuminates a spectrum from absolute power, concentrated in one sovereign (corresponding to autocracy), to diffuse mechanisms of population regulation in the liberal democratic paradigm of governmentality. By the thick conception of the biopolitical approach, the prevalence of power relations discussed in this thesis which are concentrated on the sovereign (the internalisation of Russian-style rule, Agamben's 'bare life' and necropolitical theory) demonstrates that life in Georgia is far from being governed democratically.

Measuring democratic standards biopolitically can provide vital insights into: intersectional normative discourses on gender, sexuality, religion, ethnicity and 'foreignness' as such; methods of creating belonging, care and the national community; the visibility of alternative bodies and epistemologies; and the disproportionate disciplining of certain bodies and populations. It also reveals how the conditionalities of politics influence decision-making. Since the eastward shift of the governing Georgian Dream party, the condition of being pro-EU has been depicted as incompatible with conservative and Orthodox attitudes, and democracy and national security are increasingly posited as antithetical. Beyond theories of 'great power competition', biopolitical competition provides insights into the competing normative regimes which powerful neighbouring entities externalise as hegemonic projects, such as the EU's liberal governmentality to promote democracy as a universal value or Russia's

neoimperial *Russkiy Mir* project. Further research on Georgia might examine how other marginalised groups - such as ethnic minorities, Adjaran Muslims, and people from low-income backgrounds - internalise, contest and reappropriate competing biopolitical orders, including those projected by other actors, such as China, Turkey, Iran and the UAE.

Exclusion occurs through the weaponisation of care, spiritual health and morality. Agamben argues that the exclusion of certain bodies subjected to 'bare life' creates the conditions for all politics to operate in a state of exception. His theory of the sovereign exception has controversially since been expanded to a theory of 'destituent power', or the eschatological end of politics. Ultimately, Georgia represents not a complete suspension of democracy - and, as demonstrated by protest in the streets, certainly not its abandonment - but rather its repressive reconfiguration under the conditions of chronic precarity. This exceptional state, produced by the shadow of existential threat cast by the war in Ukraine, mass protest and its law of coercive responsiveness, and the vulnerability of role model democracies, has been expanded from the breakaway territories to Georgia as a whole. It seems that there are two eventualities: (1) Georgia repeats its cycle of 'revolutionary democracy', likely aided by the achievement of a just peace and democratic security in Ukraine; (2) more permanent illiberal governance is consolidated through populist biopolitics, Russian-style rule and a fear-based 'regime of truth'. Regimes of truth are historically contingent and as such can be produced and reproduced.

Georgia reflects broader political trends. The Council of Europe's 2025 report 'Towards a New Democratic Pact for Europe' highlights that democratic erosion occurs via populism, polarisation and the privileging of security (the integrity of both populations and national territory) over democracy, which has been exacerbated in European states such as Moldova, Romania, Serbia and Hungary since the start of Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine and its influence war on fair elections and liberalism. Georgia also mirrors illiberal developments in countries which do not orientate themselves towards the imperial centre of Moscow - most prominently, the US - which delegitimises these countries' authority in external democracy promotion and hollows out the term democracy itself. The Council of Europe outlines that 'new realities demand innovative ways to protect democracy - not only as a system of governance, but as a living, responsive project that serves people's needs.'[301]

[301] Council of Europe, "Towards a New Democratic Pact for Europe" (Strasbourg, May 12, 2025), 45.

Democracy should be measured by how it governs lives, which lives it governs, and how intensely. Biopolitics is instructive not just as an ideological prism through which to measure democracy, but as a potential theoretical basis for the re-enervation of the democracy project, as demanded in the New Democratic Pact. If liberal democracy is to remain a potential form of governance in contexts like Georgia - where democratic institutions are being hollowed out from within, and yet where mass protest continues to reassert the spirit of *demos* - it must be understood not only as a system of governance, but as a living process defined by community, collective agency and equality.

Glossary

Bare life	The power to designate a life worth neither saving nor killing. The *bios* comprise politically-qualified life, while bare life (*zoē*) is politically constituted by exclusion, or the mechanism of the sovereign exception (Agamben 1998)
Biopolitics	The power to make live and let die. Diffuse mechanisms which regulate and optimise human life at the level of the population (Foucault 2003), used interchangeably with *biopower* (Lemke 2011, 34)
Dispositif	The strategic configuration of networked discourses, institutions and practices that shape how power operates within a given context, also translated as mechanism and apparatus (Foucault 1980)
Governmentality	The liberal 'art of government', which emphasises the 'conduct of conduct', or self-regulation of a population, rather than direct force or law (Foucault 1991)
Necropolitics	The power to dictate who may live and who must die (Mbembe 2003)
Populism	In the sense of *authoritarian populism*: a thick ideology emphasising the 'will of the people' and social cleavages which has the potential to erode democratic institutions (Wajner, Destradi and Zürn, 2024)
Regime of truth	A historically contingent mechanism in which truth is produced by and reinforces a power structure (Foucault 1980, 131)
Russkiy mir,* or *'Russian World'	A neoimperial foreign policy doctrine that promotes cultural, linguistic and religious unity among Russian-speaking populations abroad, increasingly through military intervention (Orzechowski 2024)
Sovereign power	The power to take life or let live. The ultimate authority of the ruler who wields the right to kill (Foucault 2003)
State of exception	A zone where the suspension of law as a permanent technique of governance is normalised (Agamben 2005)
Titushky	Individuals paid by the state to act as violent provocateurs at political protests, particularly during the Euromaidan protests of 2014

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