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Gender as a Political Conflict: Transgender Vulnerability and LGBTQ+ Rights in Contemporary Georgia

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Abstract. This article examines the politicization of gender and LGBTQ+ rights in modern-day Georgia, focusing particularly on transgender individuals, who are among the most vulnerable social groups. It explores how political debates, legislation, and social beliefs about gender diversity affect the lives and experiences of transgender people. Adopting a qualitative approach, the study draws on interview data collected as part of a larger doctoral research project on LGBTQ+ religiosity in contemporary Georgia. The study includes interviews with two transgender women and examines how political and social pressures shape the lives of transgender women. Significant political events are linked to personal experiences. The interconnection of global anti-gender discourse and local anti-LGBTQ+ legislation has the effect of creating environments where vulnerability, fear, and social exclusion are widespread. The case of Georgia demonstrates how global discussions on gender and sexuality are localized within national political contexts and reflected in daily social realities.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ rights, political conflict, transgender, Georgia.

Lytiškumas kaip politinio konflikto objektas: translyčių asmenų pažeidžiamumas ir LGBTQ+ teisės šiuolaikiniame Sakartvele

Santrauka. Šiame straipsnyje nagrinėjamas lytiškumo ir LGBTQ+ teisių politizavimas šiuolaikiniame Sakartvele, ypatingą dėmesį skiriant translyčiams asmenims, kurie yra viena pažeidžiamiausių visuomenės grupių. Analizuojama, kaip politinės diskusijos, teisėkūra ir visuomenėje vyraujantys įsitikinimai dėl lyčių įvairovės veikia translyčių žmonių gyvenimą ir patirtis. Straipsnyje remiamasi interviu duomenimis, surinktais vykdant platesnį LGBTQ+ ir religingumą šių dienų Sakartvele tyrimą. Tekste aptariami interviu su dviem translytėmis moterimis ir nagrinėjama, kaip politinis bei socialinis spaudimas formuoja jų gyvenimą, kaip reikšmingi politiniai įvykiai siejami su asmeninėmis patirtimis. Globalių antigenderizmo diskursų ir vietinės anti-LGBTQ+ teisėkūros sąveika kuria aplinką, kuri palaiko pažeidžiamumo jausmą, baimę ir socialinę atskirtį. Sakartvelo atvejis parodo, kaip globalūs lytiškumo ir seksualumo diskursai yra įvietinami nacionaliniame politiniame kontekste ir struktūruoja kasdienę socialinę tikrovę.

Raktiniai žodžiai: LGBTQ+ teisės, politinis konfliktas, translyčiai asmenys, Sakartvelas.

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Introduction

The LGBTQ+ community in Georgia is one of the most vulnerable social groups. Within this group, transgender individuals face the most significant challenges and risks. It is a matter of record that several transgender women have been the victims of violent murder, including Sabi Beriani in 2014 (OC Media 2024), Bianca Shigurova in 2016 (Dazed Digital 2016), Zizi Shekiladze (OC Media 2017), also in 2016, and Kesaria Abramidze in 2024 (Sauer 2024). These cases show how transgender bodies have become the most visible target of gender-based violence in Georgia, where political rhetoric, legal exclusion, and social hostility come together.

Transgender individuals in Georgia frequently face psychological and physical violence, along with numerous challenges in accessing healthcare, including barriers and facilitators to HIV testing within this community (Gogia et al. 2026). To comprehend these dynamics, it is necessary to move beyond viewing violence as a series of isolated events. Instead, gender and sexuality can be approached as historically specific categories shaped by power relations and systems of knowledge, as Michel Foucault argued (1978). From this perspective, violence emerges as part of broader regulatory frameworks that determine which identities are socially recognized and which are marginalized. Similarly, viewing gender as a socially constructed category (de Beauvoir 2011 [1949]; Oakley 1972) enables us to interpret political conflicts over gender as struggles over meaning, hierarchy, and legitimacy. At the same time, gender is both socially constructed and experienced and embodied. The notion of gender performativity, developed by Judith Butler (1990), highlights how gender is produced through repeated social practices. However, this view has been challenged by scholars such as Jay Prosser (1998), who emphasize the internal and lived dimensions of gender identity. The tension between these perspectives highlights the importance of social recognition. Consequently, individuals who do not conform to normative expectations are often excluded from full social recognition.

Social recognition, therefore, depends on conforming to these norms, and individuals who challenge them may be seen as outside the boundaries of the dominant legitimacy framework. Meanwhile, theoretical critiques highlight the gap between how gender is conceptualized and transgender individuals' lived experiences, emphasizing how visibility, a sense of belonging, and social recognition shape everyday life (Bettcher 2014; Halberstam 2005). These perspectives help to explain why transgender identities frequently become central to political and cultural conflicts, being represented as a challenge to established gender norms and social limits.

The politicization of transgender identities can also be seen in relation to broader shifts in gender hierarchies. Changes to traditional ideas of masculinity can create social anxieties about changing gender roles and power structures (Edwards 2006). Greater visibility of transgender people may be linked to challenges against the established gender order, which could increase political and cultural clashes. In this context, increased visibility of transgender people may symbolically represent threats to the existing gender hierarchy, thereby intensifying political and cultural conflicts. Focusing on transgender experiences

illustrates how gender is constructed as a source of political conflict and how disputes over gender norms lead to real social consequences in everyday life.

In Georgia, these theoretical tensions unfold within a specific historical and political context. Since gaining independence from the USSR in 1991, particularly following the Rose Revolution of 2003, the country has undergone significant political transformation, while simultaneously experiencing intensified debates over national identity, tradition, religion, and geopolitics. Issues related to gender and LGBTQ+ rights have become central to these debates and are often framed as challenges to cultural and moral values. Against this backdrop, the heightened visibility of transgender individuals is often not just seen as a social presence but also as a symbolic challenge to established gender hierarchies, intensifying political and cultural conflict.

This article explores how gender is instrumentalized in Georgian political discourse and its impact on transgender individuals' lives. It examines the intersection of macro-level political dynamics and micro-level experiences. The study focuses on two questions: how global anti-gender discourses are integrated in Georgia and how these narratives affect social attitudes, safety, and access to healthcare and employment. The analytical section of this study examines the impact of the Georgian Orthodox Church's anti-gender position and actions on the social and religious lives of transgender women.

This article originated from a PhD research project titled "The Features of LGBTQ+ Religiosity in Contemporary Georgia: Living with Religion and Sexuality." Interviews were conducted from August to October 2024 and completed over three months. The main challenge was recruiting transgender individuals, for whom the snowball method was ineffective.

The main challenge relates to Kesaria Abramidze, a renowned transgender woman in Georgia who was murdered on 18 September 2024. She fought for societal acceptance and gained respect in her community, becoming a symbol of transgender identity. However, the case highlighted Georgia's lack of legal protections for transgender people. This complex case raised ethical questions and underscored the country's need for explicit protections.

The main challenge was developing effective ways to engage transgender individuals, many of whom, after the tragedy, felt insecure and hesitant to go outdoors. The priority was to ensure their safety. Organizing physical meetings required understanding their responsibilities and considering the ethical implications of involving them. However, given the community's progress and inclusivity, it was crucial to include transgender voices in the study.

Transgender individuals are the only LGBTQ+ group needing mediators due to their unique trust in them. This indicates a limited social space for transgender people, facing barriers to full participation within LGBTQ+ areas. In their micro-world, mediators are trusted figures, raising ethical questions about who can speak for the community.

Only transgender individuals were interviewed online, which may indicate that they have more limited access to safe spaces in Georgia compared to other members of the LGBTQ+ community. This highlights their marginalization.

Following fieldwork, transgender individuals often declined to share contact information or introduce themselves to community members, indicating a possible lack of trust.

This highlights a methodological limitation and shows how vulnerability affects knowledge sharing and trust building.

These challenges are not just logistical; they also reflect deeper issues discussed above. Reliance on mediators, restricted mobility, and lack of participation can be understood as consequences of limited social recognition and the risks associated with visibility. In line with Michel Foucault's conception of power as embedded in everyday practices, these conditions determine who can speak, be visible, and be heard. At the same time, they illustrate Judith Butler's argument that recognition depends on conformity to dominant norms, leaving those who fall outside these frameworks vulnerable. Consequently, the research process itself becomes an empirical reflection of the structural inequalities that this article seeks to analyze.

The study also has several important limitations. Relying on accounts from only two transgender women cannot offer a complete understanding of this group's social situation. These observations reflect prevailing trends but do not cover the full spectrum of issues that require further research. Additionally, the perspectives of transgender men are absent from this study, leaving questions about their social experiences, networks, and feelings of safety largely unexplored. It is also unclear how interconnected the communities of transgender women and men are, whether they share common spaces, and how they perceive each other's needs. These gaps highlight the broader challenges of researching marginalized and fragmented communities, where trust, access, and representation are deeply interconnected.

This article is divided into five sections. The first examines the rise of anti-gender movements, their origins, and traits. The second places these within post-Soviet and post-communist contexts, highlighting the influence of national identity and religious institutions. The third section explores transgender rights, focusing on recognition, visibility, and control. The fourth examines Georgia's local politics and anti-LGBTQ+ laws used for political gain. The fifth presents the core empirical data on transgender women's experiences in Georgia.

1. The Rise of Anti-Gender Movements: Exploring the Roots of Anti-Gender Politics

Anti-LGBTQ movements, often associated with illiberal and authoritarian forces, present themselves as defenders of so-called "traditional values." In this discourse, the plurality of sexual and gender identities is framed as a threat to social norms and to religious, nationalist, and heteronormative "order." Such narratives are a hallmark of anti-gender ideologies disseminated on a transnational scale. They interweave moral, cultural, and political issues, positioning the LGBTQ+ community as opposed to these values (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024; Paternotte and Kuhar 2017). In addition, these processes frequently link sexuality and gender to national identity. This results in the regulation of individual identities becoming a pivotal factor in determining nationality (Puar 2007; Mizielińska and Kulpa 2011).

Religion has been shown to play a significant role in these processes. It is evident that religious organizations, through their positions and the discourse they disseminate in society, often contribute to the marginalization of the LGBTQ+ community. In certain instances, there appears to be a direct correlation between religious influence and political authority,

particularly within post-Soviet nations. In the post-Soviet context, where Orthodoxy is the dominant religion, the Orthodox Church has been known to support anti-LGBTQ+ canons (Stoeckl and Uzlaner 2022; Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024). It is crucial to acknowledge that this perspective does not represent the Orthodox Church's viewpoint in its entirety. Conservative religious organizations, including Catholic and evangelical movements, are collaborating across national and denominational boundaries and forming coalitions to mobilize opposition to gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights (Paternotte and Kuhar 2017; Ozzano and Giorgi 2015).

Another significant factor in the politicization of gender and sexuality is nationalism. Nationalist ideologies often portray diverse gender and sexual identities as foreign and threatening to nationhood, culture, and morality. This process, termed heteronationalism, has presented heterosexuality and heterosexual families as a fundamental component of national identity, while gender and sexual diversity have been stigmatized as deviant or threatening (Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Puar 2007). Consequently, the concept of sexuality becomes intertwined with that of nationalism, thereby engendering an exclusive heteronormative belonging.

Another element of anti-LGBTQ+ discourse is the mobilization of moral panic around children and families. It is commonly held that political forces frequently portray LGBTQ+ visibility as a potential threat to children and traditional family values. These arguments are potent political instruments. This phenomenon, characterized as a "moral panic," has been observed to serve a specific function in the broader societal context. By fostering heightened emotional anxiety, it effectively manipulates ideologies, catalyzing the formation of specific groups that are then presented as a perceived threat to the stability of society. This approach is employed to legitimize policies that compromise human rights and social control (Cohen 1972; Weeks 2010; Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024).

Ayoub and Stoeckl present a multifaceted explanation for this phenomenon, emphasizing several contributing factors. First, in authoritarian and illiberal regimes, targeting the LGBTQ+ community serves as a strategic political tool to increase and solidify the authorities' power within the domestic political sphere. Additionally, they are responsible for dividing society, shifting focus, and weakening civic unity. In the name of protecting so-called "traditional values," countries such as Russia and Hungary are attempting to gain status in the international political domain. Furthermore, radical ideas are employed to strengthen Christian and nationalist identities, thereby reinforcing their authority (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024).

The strategic targeting of LGBTQ+ communities at the national level, as explained by Ayoub and Stoeckl, is also seen internationally, where anti-gender actors pursue similar goals.

The European Parliament is currently engaged in several active campaigns and rhetoric that are anti-gender in nature. Julia Mariani's work, based on a social network analysis of 36 civil society organizations and 63 right-wing populist actors, shows that some of these organizations serve as bridges between civil society and political institutions. The ideological and value similarities between the two groups result in an intense cooperative dynamic. Even though the European Parliament has historically played a significant role in the develop-

ment of gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights, it is evident that political actors who consider "gender ideology" to be a threat have become part of the EU and are resisting the progress achieved by feminist and LGBTQ+ movements. Anti-gender groups are engaging with the European Parliament and right-wing populist political actors. Consequently, these actors are not merely inert and chaotic. They act strategically. This is manifested in "NGOization," which directly replicates the strategies of LGBTQ+ and feminist movements (Mariani 2025).

For instance, CitizenGO, which was established in Spain in 2013, and its fundamental principles, "life, family, and liberty," are characterized by its stance against LGBTQ+ rights and gender policies. The organization employs a variety of methods to disseminate its ideas and to expand its audience. (see the website of CitizenGo, https://citizengo.org/en-us.)

The International Organization for the Family (IOF), created in 2016, coordinates the World Congress of Families (WCF, founded in 1997 in the USA) under the direction of conservative U.S. activist Allan C. Carlson.

By encouraging local partners to recruit new members and train activists and leaders, the IOF is helping expand a transnational conservative network and fostering the creation of new organizations. The network in question includes non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Hungary, Italy, Poland, and Spain, as well as activists in Kenya, Mexico, and Nigeria. In the Russian Federation, the IOF has been instrumental in the establishment of at least four local organizations that advocate for traditional family values and are in opposition to abortion (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024).

On one of the anti-LGBTQ+ organizations' webpages, the National Organization for Marriage, we can read the following:

> Some things are so evil we do not even want to think about them. However, if we know what is right—and if we know what God demands of us—we do not have the option of looking away. The couple in the photo above were once celebrated as heroes for the same-sex "marriage" cause. However, behind the smiles, they were repeatedly molesting and abusing the children entrusted to them. The National Organization for Marriage (NOM) has been achieving significant victories for traditional values and beliefs at both the federal and state levels. Working with our close friends in the Trump/Vance administration as well as key elected officials in the states, we are eliminating the LGBT Lobby's influence, stopping the advance of their agenda, and stripping their policies from law. (https://nationformarriage.org/)

This passage highlights the ideological characteristics of anti-LGBTQ+ movements. By referring to a same-sex couple as "evil" and associating their sexual orientation with acts of child abuse, the text demonstrates how homosexuality is constructed as the cause of moral corruption. In this context, the literal truth is of little relevance; the critical point is the discursive mechanism by which violence and abuse are attributed exclusively to LGBTQ+ individuals, with the intention of demonizing homosexuality. Such rhetoric pathologizes queerness by framing it as inherently problematic, while ignoring that harmful behavior is not determined by sexual orientation or gender affiliation but is, in fact, a universal human potential. The invocation of divine authority, as articulated in the phrase "what God demands of us," further legitimizes this discourse. This fusion of religion and political power portrays the suppression of LGBTQ+ rights as a moral and sacred duty.

Regardless of the motivations behind such extreme measures, the outcome is profoundly concerning for the LGBTQ+ community. In addressing the challenges faced by the community as a whole, it is imperative to acknowledge the complexity of gender issues, which often provoke contentious debates within both the LGBTQ+ community and feminist movements.

In both the UK and the US, systematic and well-funded efforts are actively restricting the rights, healthcare access, and public visibility of trans individuals. Turner's (2023) framework conceptualizes this anti-trans mobilization as consisting of three main pillars. First, ideological alliances are formed between Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs) and certain LGB factions, who disseminate anti-trans rhetoric to divide the LGBTQIA+ community. Second, ultra-right conservatives weaponize anti-trans hostility to consolidate their political power, resulting in the introduction of restrictive legislation targeting healthcare and education. Third, the movement relies on misinformation and pseudoscience, actively promoting the concept of 'rapid-onset gender dysphoria' while vehemently opposing bans on conversion therapy.

These developments show that modern anti-gender politics operate in a strategic and coordinated manner, utilizing various ideologies and methods. Although these movements differ in many ways, they share a common view of gender as a fixed, biological trait. This is evident in their portrayal of transgender identities as disorders or socially contagious threats, revealing the deliberate nature of anti-gender ideology. It underscores how individuals or groups in power define what is considered normal regarding identities. Anti-gender movements often blur the boundaries between science and ideology, which is a key part of their strategy. Examples from the US and UK illustrate that this is part of a broader, transnational trend that uses gender to limit rights.

2. Anti-Gener and Anti-LGBTQ+ in Post-Soviet and Post-Communist countries

As previously discussed, nationalism and religion have been identified as significant factors in the escalation of anti-gender and anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and movements. However, it is important to note that both nationalism and religion have distinct characteristics and roles in post-Soviet and post-communist countries.

Consequently, the ways in which LGBTQ+ issues, forms of activism, and queer discourses are approached vary across post-Soviet and post-Communist countries. There are several reasons for this. First, the Soviet Union was an ideologically driven system with closed borders to external influences. As a result, global developments, including waves of feminist movements and the ideas they promoted, did not reach the post-Soviet states until the Soviet Union's collapse.

In addition to the lack of information, collectivist and communist ideologies played a significant role in constraining the expression of individual identities. In December 1934, Stalin promulgated an article to the USSR Criminal Code that prohibited homosexual relations (Alexander 2018; 31). Moreover, during the Soviet period, the state exercised strict

control over private life, including family life, gender roles, and sexuality. Consequently, topics such as gender and sexuality were largely overlooked in Soviet academic research. This began to change in the late 1980s, when political liberalization created opportunities to study previously forbidden issues. Early work on homosexuality in Russian culture was primarily by Western scholars (Bellezza 2023; 14–15).

The impact of 70 years of homophobic policies on public consciousness is evident, and in numerous former Soviet countries, LGBTQ+ identities are still demonized, with members of the community facing persecution.

The post-Soviet context is also unique in that, in many countries, religion has grown stronger since the Soviet Union's collapse and has become part of national identity (Pew Research Center 2017). The process of secularization in post-Soviet countries, which entails the weakening of religion's influence on society, is also unique and much slower, especially in countries where Orthodoxy is the majority religion (Karpov 2010).

Secularization, that is, the sociological process by which religion loses social and cultural significance, does not guarantee the protection of LGBTQ+ rights. However, the pervasive influence of religion on societal structures fosters homophobia and transphobia, which manifest in various domains, including public spheres, political landscapes, and legal frameworks. The influence of religion is also evident in the formation of national identity, thereby strengthening the connection between a particular nationality and a specific religious identity, known as ethno-nationalism.

In post-Soviet and post-communist countries, despite the partial attainment of democratic values, nationalist and xenophobic sentiments continue to escalate (Tismaneanu 2019; 69). The influence of communist ideology on societal mentality and local cultures has been profound and enduring. Liberal democracy must be considered a potentially transient social order rather than a permanent and stable one, as it is an ongoing process (ibid.; 70).

The emergence of ethno-national forms of nationalism in post-Soviet and post-communist spaces can be attributed to several factors, including the strengthening of religion in the public sphere. Religious institutions have strategically leveraged their influence and presented their ideological narratives to society, both to address challenges and to foster a sense of unity (Juergensmeyer 1993; 24–25).

In the context of post-Soviet countries, it is important to acknowledge the role of nationalism, which was characterized by anti-colonial sentiment and the concept of liberation. Following the attainment of sovereignty, two distinct dimensions become evident: one predicated on public activity and the other a spiritual sphere oriented toward the preservation of cultural identity (Chatterjee 1993; 6).

On the other hand, nationalism, which is associated with religious ideas, is also intertwined with gender issues and permeates political processes. For instance, in Lithuania, nationalist political discourse frequently mobilizes gender as a pivotal site of ideological struggle, thereby constructing what can be described as "gendered nationalism." Within this theoretical framework, gender serves as a symbolic representation through which broader political conflicts are articulated. Progressive gender policies are often portrayed as posing a threat to national identity, sovereignty, and social stability. Political actors use expressive

language and family-centered discourse to position themselves as guardians of the "natural family," which is regarded as the fundamental basis of the nation and its identity. The process positions heteronormativity at the core of nationalist imaginaries, thereby restricting the space for non-conforming identities (Juchnevičiūtė 2023).

Before delving into a detailed analysis of Georgia, it is advantageous to consider examples from several post-Soviet and post-communist countries. This will facilitate the identification of the characteristics that distinguish these contexts from others, thereby revealing the intricate intertwining of religious identity with national identities. This discourse, which fosters national narratives, has been observed to impede the establishment of LGBTQ+ rights. Furthermore, the manner in which the globally pervasive phenomenon of so-called "gender panic" disseminates within these spaces, and the ultimate impact it exerts on individuals who do not conform to gender norms, including transgender individuals, are of particular interest.

In any discussion of the post-Soviet context, the focus inevitably turns to Russia, where Orthodoxy has exerted a profound influence on the cultural landscape. After the Soviet Union dissolved, the Russian Orthodox Church and the government worked together to forge a new Russian identity rooted in tradition. This alliance has transformed the relationship between church and state from ethnic nationalism to ethnonationalism, and the church continues to play a role in state decision-making.

Consequently, Orthodoxy has exerted a profound influence on Russia's cultural landscape, an influence initially endorsed by the church and later reinforced by the state. In the aftermath of the Soviet Union's dissolution, the relationship between church and state has been instrumental in shaping a new Russian identity rooted in tradition. The phenomenon of church-state cooperation has evolved beyond the confines of ethnic nationalism, becoming an integral component of the Russian government's decision-making process (Potts 2016).

In contemporary times, the Russian Orthodox Church has adopted a pronouncedly anti-LGBTQ+ stance. Patriarch Kirill has drawn parallels between marriage equality and Nazism (Solomon 2017). It can be argued that the Patriarch has portrayed the LGBTQ+ community as a threat to the state, a framing reminiscent of Nazism. Consequently, it can be posited that the Church does not merely receive but also actively contributes to and influences the socio-cultural milieu. The conservative ideological stance adopted by the Russian Church, which is concurrently that of the nation's political establishment, has been identified as a significant producer and distributor of nationalist and anti-LGBTQ+ ideologies.

A distinctive feature of the post-Soviet space is the prevalence of anti-gender movements and ideologies that religious and academic institutions often endorse. In Russia, "traditional values" have become one of the most significant national ideologies used to unite Russian society against the West (Moss 2017; 195–196). In 2013, the Russian Federation enacted legislation prohibiting "homosexual propaganda" directed at individuals under the age of eighteen. This sparked global censure, although the Russian media portrayed European policy negatively, calling it "Gayropa" and citing Ukraine as an example of moral decline (ibid.; 197). The 2014 Eurovision Song Contest and Conchita Wurst's victory, which the Russian media interpreted as indicative of Europe's moral decline, intensified both anti-European

and anti-gender rhetoric in Russia. In Russian discourse, the concept of national identity is understood to be distinct from its European counterpart. A pronounced emphasis accompanies this distinction on traditional gender roles, portraying Europe as morally corrupt and Russia as the defender of traditional values (ibid.; 198).

It is evident that the Orthodox Church, in its institutional capacity, is the single most significant driver of anti-LGBTQ+ discourse in post-Soviet countries. In nations where Christianity is not the predominant religion and religious institutions do not directly influence political processes, there is a notable conservatism in both societal attitudes and governmental policies. An example of this phenomenon can be seen in Kazakhstan.

During the Soviet period, resistance to the regime was virtually nonexistent in Central Asia, including Kazakhstan. There were no notable dissident movements or underground literature. Local elites were closely aligned with the Soviet government, and national identity in Kazakhstan was profoundly intertwined with Sovietism, despite the widespread repression during this period. The prevailing context thus determined Islam's role. In Kazakhstan, Islam retained its significance as a cultural identifier, primarily manifesting as a cultural practice with limited impact on public or political spheres (Khalid 2007; 98).

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Islam exerted considerable influence on the development of Kazakh nationalism. In building an independent state, Kazakhstan retained its Islamic heritage while maintaining a secular political framework. The Kazakh state opted for a different approach from that of its neighbors, preferring to regulate religion through specific organizations rather than establish a close institutional connection between religion and the state. This approach contributed to the emergence of Islam as part of a broad and comprehensive identity, prevented the fusion of religion with national identity, and limited the influence of politicized religious movements (Khalid 2007; Karagiannis 2009).

It can be concluded that religion in Kazakhstan represents a cultural and symbolic dimension of national identity. In contrast to the practices observed in Russia, religious institutions in Kazakhstan do not function as autonomous ideological entities. The operations of these entities are conducted within the parameters established by the state (Cornell, Starr and Tucker 2018).

However, it is important to note that Kazakhstan does not currently demonstrate a welcoming environment for LGBTQ+ individuals. The present discourse on LGBTQ+ issues is distinctly conservative. The configuration of these positions is predominantly influenced by cultural and traditional factors, rather than by religious influences. However, Islam plays an integral role in Kazakh culture.

In Kazakhstan, the law, analogous to the Russian "anti-propaganda" legislation, was deemed unconstitutional and ultimately not implemented. Homophobic political discourse and negative attitudes toward the LGBTQ+ community persist in society. The national narrative of Kazakhstan has historically portrayed traditional Kazakh identity as incompatible with queerness. This cultural and social perception has been identified as a contributing factor to the marginalization and exclusion of the LGBTQ+ community in the country. A parallel can be drawn between the situation in Kazakhstan and that in Russia, insofar as the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals are depicted as a Western import, deemed incompatible with

national values. Such a position has the potential to facilitate the denial of LGBTQ+ rights and the proliferation of homophobia and transphobia into more pervasive, anti-Western, conservative ideologies (Wiedlack 2023; 925–926).

In addition to the post-Soviet countries, similar dynamics and developments are observed in post-communist countries. For instance, in Bulgaria, which was not part of the Soviet Union but is a post-communist country, levels of religiosity and religious affiliation with the Orthodox Church are high (Pew Research Center 2017). The data indicate that 75 percent of the population identifies as Orthodox Christian. In the Bulgarian context, during the communist period (1944–1989), religion was politicized and used to achieve specific political objectives (Evstatiev and Eickelman 2022; 19). Eliminating this prevailing practice proved challenging, primarily because of the profound association of national identity in Bulgaria with religion.

As in Russia, it is no coincidence that in Bulgaria Orthodoxy plays a central role in the formation of ethnic identity. This phenomenon has historical roots, intrinsically linked to the nation's independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1878. Following this event, Orthodoxy was formally designated as the state religion (Ghodsee 2022; 53). However, it is also crucial to recognize the significant impact of the dissolution of the Soviet Union on this context. Despite not being a member of the USSR, Bulgaria's socialist legacy created an identity crisis that religion filled, resulting in a hybrid form of nationalism and historical religiosity.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Bulgaria experienced substantial social and religious transformations. Despite its lack of integration into the USSR, Bulgaria's development exhibited strong parallels with Russia. The nation's socialist heritage contributed to an identity crisis, prompting a significant segment of the population to return to Orthodox traditions. Religion re-emerged as a unifying force in public life, leading to a new form of secularism that combined nationalism with historical religiosity (Evstatiev and Eickelman 2022; 36). Consequently, contemporary Bulgarian ethnonationalism exerts a significant influence on the communist era. This concept of the church as a cultural protector and nationalist frequently has consequences for the LGBTQ+ community in the country and their rights. This cultural and nationalist image frequently eclipses its theological and Christian doctrines. This situation has particular consequences for the LGBTQ+ community in the country and their legal and rights status (Merdjanova 2000; 3).

In 2018, religious authorities, NGOs, and far-right groups in Bulgaria launched disinformation campaigns about the "third gender" and the sexualization of children to sway public opinion and block the ratification of the Istanbul Convention (Merdjanova 2000; Todorov 2013). These efforts focused on "gender ideology," a term that served as a "symbolic glue" linking nationalist and conservative groups against perceived liberal threats (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). These campaigns increased hostility toward LGBTQ+ people and NGOs, especially after Bulgaria's Constitutional Court in 2021 defined gender solely in biological terms. This legal stance, supported by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, effectively limited women's social roles to childbearing, creating major hurdles for gender equality in the region (Belov 2023; Merdjanova 2000).

These examples show that in post-Soviet and post-communist societies, ethno-national and religious ideologies are closely linked with ideas of identity. In contrast, other European nations often see these ideologies as promoting anti-gender and anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments, driven by various movements and groups. As a result, this concept has become more embedded in public awareness and intertwined with notions of identity. This phenomenon does not hinder critical thinking; instead, it reduces basic fears and perceptions of threat and reshapes identities through identity switching.

3. The Features of Transgender Rights: Recognition, Visibility, and Control

The prominence of transgender individuals in today's gender debates shows that these issues are more than philosophical discussions about existence, legitimacy, and the protection of transgender lives. Transgender identity highlights the ongoing tension between sex and gender, making it a key focus of political concern and regulation.

A salient distinguishing factor between transgender individuals and members of the LGB+ community pertains to their level of visibility. Trans bodies are frequently perceived, purely based on their public appearance, as the public visibility of gender non-normative individuals. However, this is clearly not the case.

Contemporary activism, particularly in the global Northwest, often prioritizes visibility and the process of „coming out" as essential to recognition, rights, and freedom. In contrast, invisibility or the "closet" is often seen as oppressive. However, this assumption is contested by numerous scholars and activists, who argue that increased visibility can reinforce rigid identities and expose marginalized groups to harm. Trans people, particularly trans women of color, have been at the forefront of this critique. Their heightened visibility often renders them more vulnerable to violence motivated by transphobia, racism, sexism, and xenophobia, as well as to poverty and homelessness. Beyond racialized minorities in Western Europe and the United States, activists and scholars from Eastern Europe, Eurasia, and the Balkans have also expressed strong skepticism toward visibility-based politics (Wiedlack 2023; 922–924).

The issue of gender recognition is of particular significance in the context of the human rights situation of transgender individuals. Gender recognition constitutes the pivotal element upon which the experience of transgender individuals, both in legal and social life, is founded. The concept of recognition encompasses not only the acknowledgment of identity, but also the significant social and legal processes through which individuals' identities are recognized and accepted. In the context of former Soviet and communist countries, this issue poses numerous challenges and is multifaceted.

For instance, Ukraine's legal gender recognition (LGR) was handled by a centralized commission in Kyiv that set strict medical criteria. Activists challenged these rules, leading to reform (TGEU 2017). In 2015, the Ministry of Health established a working group with trans-led involvement to develop a new procedure, resulting in the 2016 protocol, which is based on UK guidelines (Kirey-Sitnikova 2025; TGEU 2017). The new process began with a local doctor, followed by a psychiatric evaluation that could take up to two years or two weeks of hospitalization. After diagnosis and hormone therapy, a local medical com-

mission issued the LGR certificate, decentralizing the process beyond Kyiv. However, local doctors' lack of expertise and corruption often hindered implementation (Kirey-Sitnikova 2025; 9–10; ILGA-Europe 2022).

In Belarus, legal gender recognition (LGR) was formalized in 1996 with an interministerial commission to oversee "sex denial syndrome." Approved in 1999, its structure and rules drew heavily on Ukrainian regulations but retained a Soviet-style approach: psychiatric evaluation first, medical interventions optional. The minimum age was 21. Reforms, especially in 2010, removed Ukrainian influences, basing the process on "transsexualism," requiring psychiatric and sexological assessments. LGR procedures were based on government decrees. In 2008, a legal provision allowed adults to change sex via state medical institutions. Name change regulations shifted from referencing "transsexualism" to neutral language. However, the system remained centralized in Minsk, with at least a year-long evaluation period, creating barriers to LGR (Kirey-Sitnikova 2025; 10–11; ILGA-Europe 2024).

In Russia, legal gender recognition (LGR) began in 1997, enabling individuals to change their gender with a medical document confirming a "change of sex" (Kirey-Sitnikova 2025). Procedures varied over the years—some needed interventions, others refused without court decisions. In 2017–2018, a standardized process requiring a medical certificate from a commission was introduced, removing the earlier 1.5-year psychiatric evaluation. Without clinical guidelines, requirements varied; some commissions issued documents quickly, while others demanded lengthy evaluations. In 2023, driven by anti-Western and anti-gender rhetoric, the State Duma restricted LGR to intersex people and banned gender-affirming care for trans individuals, ending access for transgender people. Some remained eligible if they had already transitioned or if there were court decisions (Kirey-Sitnikova 2025; 12).

Issues surrounding gender recognition are inextricably intertwined with the politics of control. The processes of gender recognition and classification are often driven by political motives rather than grounded in biological or ontological factors (Currah 2022; 1–3). This approach holds that gender recognition is contingent on institutional practices, which determine who is eligible for recognition and who is not.

Access to healthcare is also one of the most significant challenges in the lives of transgender people. The provision of gender-affirming healthcare is significant for two principal reasons. First, it is an issue of individual well-being. Second, it functions as a mechanism of institutional control. Administrative and medical systems frequently fail to recognize and anticipate the needs of queer and transgender individuals (Spade 2011; 32–33). The World Health Organization's reclassification of gender incongruence, which has resulted in its removal from the category of mental disorders, is indicative of the ongoing shifts in the conceptualization of transgender health. However, it should be noted that access to healthcare remains disproportionate and is significantly influenced by national contexts (WHO 2019; Chapter HA60).

Nevertheless, numerous challenges persist within the healthcare sector, including discrimination, a paucity of specialized services, and financial constraints, which collectively contribute to the suboptimal health of transgender populations (Reisner et al. 2016). Medical needs cannot be understood solely in clinical terms; rather, they are contingent on

a multitude of social and political processes, the distribution and dynamics of power, the sociocultural environment, and the contexts in which specific identities are recognized as legitimate and those in which they are not.

While transgender individuals are frequently categorized within the broader LGBTQ+ umbrella, the challenges faced by the transgender community are distinguished by a range of specific issues, as evidenced by the discussion that has transpired.

The presence of internal hierarchies within the LGBTQ+ community has been a subject of active research discourse. Consequently, members of this community find themselves in markedly disparate positions regarding access to resources and the degree of social recognition. Within the community itself, these hierarchies and differences are also evident, thereby increasing both solidarity and conflict. This is particularly evident when cisgender, gay, and lesbian identities are perceived to hold greater legitimacy than transgender identities (Nagoshi and Brzuzy 2010).

This internal hierarchy was clearly evident in my PhD research project. This assertion is substantiated by the conspicuous absence of transgender men among the interviewees. Furthermore, mediators were required to engage with transgender individuals, underscoring the prevailing lack of trust and the dearth of relationships with other members of the community. This dissociation from the community indicates that the LGBTQ+ community is less cohesive and that even within the marginalized community, structural inequalities persist. This has consequences for the extent to which the voices of different individuals are recognized and heard within the LGBTQ+ community itself.

4. Instrumentalizing Gender: State Politics and Anti-LGBTQ+ Legislation in Georgia

As outlined in the case study on post-Soviet countries, religion, particularly Orthodoxy, is strongly correlated with national identity in Georgia. Georgia has long been closely linked to Orthodoxy, as evidenced by the adoption of Christianity in the 4th century. Consequently, this history has become intertwined with national pride and identity. Nevertheless, in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse, this national narrative has taken a significantly modified form. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Georgia's independence in 1991, the nation was compelled to redefine its national identity and construct a new national narrative. The prevailing confusion and emptiness that pervaded society were, over time, superseded by religion and religious ideas. In contemporary Georgia, there is a pervasive sense of nationalism, a close interconnection between religion and politics, and a marked intensification of religious expression in the public domain. It is important to note that such developments carry the potential for radicalism and confrontation.

Moreover, while Georgian national identity is intrinsically linked to Orthodoxy, it is almost equally associated with European cultural integration. The majority of the Georgian population supports joining the European Union and NATO (*Georgia Today* 2023). Following the Rose Revolution in 2003, Georgia aims to join the EU and align with European values. Its core principles are: first, Georgia must remain separate from Russia and ensure

its safety from Russian aggression; second, Georgia's unique cultural identity and worldview make it more aligned with European principles. The question is which European values Georgia is willing to integrate into its legal system, especially concerning human rights. The European Union is diverse, with member states adopting different policies, particularly on LGBTQ+ rights. The Georgian Orthodox Church continues to play a central role in shaping nationalism and national identity, serving as the main voice on various issues.

An agreement between the Georgian Orthodox Church and the government was ratified during Eduard Shevardnadze's tenure (1992–2003). This agreement, formally known as the Concordat, set out the terms of the relationship between the two entities. According to the Concordat, the Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia is granted inviolable status, and the state formally acknowledges the material and moral harm inflicted upon the Church during the period of loss of state independence, from 1921 to 1990. The state committed to providing partial compensation for the material damage caused during this period (Constitutional Agreement of Georgia 2002). Clearly, this agreement increased the Church's power and influence, not only by granting it social authority but also by strengthening its institutional standing.

During Mikheil Saakashvili's presidency (2004–2013), the Concordat remained in force. The government of the country in question transferred substantial quantities of state-owned land and real estate to the Church for a nominal fee of 1 GEL (Georgian lari). The state budget was used to finance the restoration of significant religious landmarks, thereby treating them as national heritage initiatives. The Church received its most substantial annual financial contribution from the budget, amounting to 25 million GEL (Ghoghoberidze 2017).

In the 2012 election shift that brought a new government, the political coalition Georgian Dream, led by oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, assumed power. A significant part of the party's rhetoric highlighted Ivanishvili's support for religious infrastructure, exemplified by his contribution to the construction of the Trinity Cathedral in Tbilisi, the country's largest Orthodox Church. He was also portrayed as a family-oriented man with many children and as a supporter of the arts, elements used strategically to shape his public image. This political messaging was intertwined with efforts to portray Ivanishvili as a deeply religious figure with strong ties to the Church.

The description of these historical developments is not incidental. The contemporary anti-LGBTQ+ environment in Georgia is the result of a long and interconnected process, shaped by political, religious, and social dynamics. Throughout history, political actors have played an instrumental role in consolidating religious institutions, thereby establishing a close association between national identity and Orthodox Christianity. Moreover, the Georgian Orthodox Church has sought to strengthen this bond by promoting narratives that link "Georgianness: with Orthodoxy and "traditional family values." These narratives, when considered in isolation, appear to exclude LGBTQ+ individuals, effectively situating them beyond the confines of both religious and national affiliation. Moreover, they appear to construct a paradigm of Georgian identity that is inextricably linked to heterosexual and gender norms.

This mutually reinforcing relationship between political and religious institutions reflects "gendered nationalism," which has evolved gradually rather than emerging from a single event. It is firmly embedded in Georgia's historical development and continues to influence contemporary discourse, legal frameworks, and policy. To understand the present context, it is necessary to acknowledge the impact of historical events, institutional alliances, and dominant narratives that have contributed to the current homophobic and transphobic environment.

However, these top-down processes have not been without challenges. Civil society actors, comprising activists, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and educational institutions, have assumed a pivotal role in counteracting exclusionary narratives and policies. Through various forms of mobilization and advocacy, they have created a counter-discourse that challenges dominant constructions of national identity and promotes inclusivity. These bottom-up efforts, characterized by a sequence of significant events, underscore the persistent contestation surrounding the conceptualizations of nationhood, identity, and rights in contemporary Georgia.

The first organization founded in Georgia to advocate for the rights of transgender and queer women was Women's Initiatives Supporting Group (WISG), founded in 2000 (WISG.Org, https://wisg.org/en).

The inaugural public event in Georgia associated with May 17, the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia (IDAHOBIT), took place in 2011, when several dozen people gathered at the Metekhi Bridge and released colored candles into the Mtkvari River. LGBTQ+ individuals and supporters carried out this act as a nonviolent protest and an expression of solidarity with the oppressed community. The release of the candle into the river symbolized a yearning for peace and served as a poignant reminder of those who had fallen victim to violence. In each subsequent year, any public manifestation of May 17 was marked by violence and scandal (JAMnews 2025).

In 2013, a much larger-scale attack took place when the Georgian Orthodox Church and religious groups mobilized thousands of citizens against several dozen LGBTQ+ people and their supporters, resulting in injuries to several participants (BBC News 2013). In relation to this incident, the Court of Strasbourg found that the state failed to implement adequate measures to ensure the demonstrators' safety (Civil.ge 2021).

In 2014, the former Patriarch Ilia II of Georgia declared May 17 to be "The Day of Family Sanctity and Respect for Parents," thereby effectively excluding the LGBTQ+ community from this day. This controversy has taken different forms each year. The visibility of LGBTQ+ symbols in multiple contexts, including protests and the cultural and artistic spheres, has provoked significant opposition from the church and the Georgian populace (Orthochristian.com 2019).

Cultural production has also become a site of conflict. In 2019, the premiere of the Swedish-Georgian film "And Then We Danced" faced significant challenges. The film was written and directed by Levan Akin, a Swedish filmmaker of Georgian descent. Akin conceived the idea for the film in the aftermath of the 2013 anti-homophobia protests in Tbilisi, where a small group of LGBTQ+ activists was subjected to a violent attack. The film chronicles a same-sex relationship that originated within a Georgian dance ensemble.

Georgian dance is widely regarded as a fundamental element of Georgian culture. However, exposure to this dance form has provoked outrage among a segment of the population that harbors homophobic sentiments. The screening was under threat from violent groups who were opposed to the screening, and who gathered outside the cinema in an attempt to disrupt it (McCague and Lobzhanidze 2019).

In 2021, the Pride festival was scheduled to culminate in a "March of Dignity" attended by members of the LGBTQ+ community, organizations, and supportive politicians. Far-right groups mobilized a significant proportion of the population. The "March of Dignity" was unsuccessful. It has been observed that violent groups have been known to capture journalists and subject them to physical violence. The year 2021 is of particular significance due to the death of Lekso Lashkarava, a cameraman who sustained injuries on that date and subsequently passed away two days later from head injuries (McCague and Lobzhanidze 2021).

In 2024, a critical change occurred in Georgia. Despite persistent and widespread street protests, the Georgian government adopted a new stance, shifting from passive reluctance to active emulation of Russian legislative models. Evidence of this transformation included the introduction of legislation such as the "foreign agents" law and restrictions on what is termed "LGBTQ+ propaganda" (Tolkachev and Tolordava 2020). The consequences of this legislation have been substantial, as it has been used to subdue civil society, meticulously dismantle the NGO sector, and categorize any entity that does not align with the ideological framework propounded by the church and the political elite as "foreign" (Loftus 2024). In Georgia, earlier legal frameworks already reflected restrictive approaches to gender recognition. The 1998 law modified the 1969–77 Soviet formulation to include changing sex if a person wants to change their name or surname accordingly. Despite not being legally mentioned, gender-affirming surgery was required for LGR (Bakhtadze 2022). In 2024, amid a conservative, authoritarian shift, Georgia's parliament passed anti-LGBT+ laws modeled after Russia, banning LGR and gender-affirming healthcare (Law No. 4437-XIVMS-XMP, 17 September 2024) (Kirey-Sitnikova 2025; 14). This transition signifies not only continuity but also an escalation in the regulation of gender, moving from conditional recognition to outright prohibition.

The display of any representation of the queer community, including items or accessories inscribed with the queer flag, was prohibited. The terms "gender" and "sexual orientation" were removed from the law (Parliament of Georgia, n.d.). In Georgian, the distinction between sex and gender is not clearly institutionalized. The issue of gender poses significant challenges, both social and linguistic. In Georgian, there is no noun gender, nor are there pronouns like in English (He, She, They). Consequently, for speakers of Georgian, the conceptualization of gender in the Western context is somewhat confusing. A single term (სქესი, sqesi) is commonly used to denote biological sex, and the concept of gender is often absent from legal discourse or introduced as a borrowed term. This shift in language and meaning narrows the focus of recognition by prioritizing biologically motivated definitions over socially constructed understandings of identity.

The NGO "Center for Social Justice" (2025) states that focusing only on biological sex undermines equality policies by ignoring social, historical, and structural causes of inequ-

ality. They argue that removing gender from law hampers efforts to combat gender-based violence, as legal mechanisms for addressing inequality are lost. Additionally, excluding gender terminology makes transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming people legally invisible, leading to increased discrimination, violence, and social exclusion.

These developments are deeply connected to broader political goals. The Georgian Dream party has been accused of using gender and LGBTQ+ issues as tools in its political messaging, especially during and after the controversial 2024 elections. Despite constitutional commitments to European and Euro-Atlantic integration (Constitution of Georgia 1995, art. 78), there is a growing trend in political rhetoric to frame LGBTQ+ rights as undermining European values. For example, Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze justified new restrictive laws by emphasizing the need to protect children from what he called "LGBT propaganda" and to uphold traditional gender roles (1TV Channel 2024).

Such statements are not neutral but rather serve as part of a "gender panic" strategy that aims to mobilize public fear and strengthen conservative social norms. By portraying LGBTQ+ rights as an external imposition, political actors seek to delegitimize European integration and reframe national identity in opposition to liberal values (Civil.ge 2022). Moreover, this discourse mirrors both Russian narratives and Western anti-gender populist ideology.

The growing emphasis on gender issues in Georgian political discourse signifies a strategic shift. Despite the gradual improvement in public attitudes towards sexual minorities in recent years (United Nations in Georgia 2022), political actors have intensified the framing of gender as a site of crisis. This suggests that gender is being instrumentalized not only because of its societal urgency, but also because of its political benefit.

As demonstrated in the preceding section, nationalism has frequently taken distinct forms in post-communist and post-Soviet contexts, a phenomenon shaped by the historical experience of imperial domination and the need for cultural and political liberation. In many instances, religion and nationalism have coalesced into an integral part of national identity, historical continuity, and cultural heritage. Even though every country's context is unique, Georgia, as a post-Soviet country, is no exception. The profound impact of almost 70 years of Soviet governance has left an imprint on social consciousness, rupturing cultural continuity and weakening the social and institutional frameworks that once existed.

These developments suggest Georgia's gender and sexuality regulation is rooted in religious nationalism. Orthodoxy's historic link to national identity has created a framework where belonging depends on adherence to cultural and religious models of family, gender, and morality. As a result, LGBTQ+ exclusion is linked to systemic boundaries, not just prejudice. Ongoing opposition from civil society shows this remains a human rights issue, not a static situation.

5. From Context to Experience: Transgender Narratives in Georgia

Instead of a detailed review of the research's methodological and ethical aspects, this chapter concentrates on the lived experiences of transgender individuals. It examines how they interpret and interact with the social, religious, and cultural factors outlined earlier.

While the stories of these two transgender women are not representative of the entire community, their perspectives provide insightful and nuanced understanding.

The primary question posed to the first interviewee concerned her sentiments following the incident involving Kesaria and whether she perceived an increase or decrease in her personal security. She responded as follows:

> *Kesaria's murder was devastating. I have felt horrible, and we are scared. Although she did not consider herself part of this community and tried to distance herself from it as much as possible, that no longer matters now that she is no longer here. She was someone who set an example for us, showing that we could be who we truly are* (Sesili, 22-year-old transgender woman).

It is important to clarify several points from this response. For example, the precise meaning of the statement "she did not consider herself a member of the community and was distant from it" should be established. From the perspective of this particular transgender woman, Kesaria was seen as someone in a position of privilege, as she did not have to engage in survival struggles caused by financial hardship and had achieved a certain level of success. The interviewee suggests that Kesaria held a higher social status and was less aware of, and less involved in, the needs of other members of the transgender community.

This narrative highlights a specific community dynamic where many transgender women engage in sex work due to limited job opportunities or attempt to emigrate to survive. Meanwhile, fewer people can find employment. This presents a significant challenge for researchers trying to engage with the transgender community, especially in choosing the correct language and communication methods to build trust and have meaningful dialogue. In this context, the interviewee stated the following:

> *It is complicated to communicate with trans people in Georgia. You will probably have a good impression of me; I am not like others, and my mental state has not deteriorated as much as theirs. You should not be surprised by them, as they must endure considerable hardship. Even going out on the street requires them to fend off many people. Hormone therapy is a separate challenge, and those involved in sex work… It is tough to balance and overcome these challenges if things are not working for you, and often it is because nothing is working for you* (Sesili, 22-year-old transgender woman).

The interviewee emphasized that communication and dialogue with members of the transgender community are often a challenge, citing their difficult social conditions and lack of security as the reason. She distinguished herself from other transgender people, explaining this as follows:

> *I do not experience many problems in society, except that people do not understand that I am trans. When I am with my friends, they find it easier to understand. I have recently become fearless, but that is not entirely the right approach; nothing is more important than life. Secondly, how much should I fear someone? Everyone is potentially dangerous. Therefore, I think I am doomed to be lonely. No one is treated as badly as a trans woman, especially by men* (Sesili, 22-year-old transgender woman).

The interviewee's appearance and voice are both consistent with feminine norms, thus affording her a degree of mobility within the public sphere that societal perceptions of her as a transgender woman would otherwise constrain. When she states that she perceives in-

creased attention in the company of friends, she implies that her visibility to others in her immediate environment increases the perceived risk. Her words: "I think I am doomed to be lonely. No one is treated as badly as a trans woman, especially by men," fully describe the internal or social situation in which transgender people have to live.

Given the points above, it is clear that the anti-LGBTQ+ laws adopted since 2024 and "gender panic" worsen the situation for community members, leaving them vulnerable to homo-transphobic or gender-based violence. It is the responsibility of laws and government institutions to reduce violence. Since 2024, graffiti has appeared on the streets of Tbilisi bearing the slogan: "And who will protect you when the police become violent?" The spread of this graffiti has been linked to the violent suppression of protest rallies that were against pro-Russian politics. However, for transgender people, this situation remains both well-known and ongoing.

The interviewee, originally from one of Georgia's regions, emphasized the brutality of law enforcement agencies:

> *The police can be particularly evil in small towns. They deliberately spread rumors that the West funded me and that I was destroying the town. It was very demoralizing* (Sesili, 22-year-old transgender woman).

In this response, it is essential to highlight that the police circulated rumors claiming that this transgender woman was "funded by the West." The fact remains that this approach has been broadly adopted and is now common nationwide. Additionally, politicians and law enforcement agencies are effectively spreading anti-gender and anti-LGBTQ+ narratives. This process creates a chain reaction. The claim that anti-gender policies are a top-down, carefully planned effort suggests that the methods, language, and messages used in anti-gender propaganda are intentionally designed to achieve specific goals.

As demonstrated in the preceding subsections, religion and gender nationalism have a significant impact on the exclusion of the LGBTQ+ community from religious spaces, where they are frequently perceived as a threat. This observation, however, does not imply an absolute absence of religiosity among the LGBTQ+ community, particularly among transgender individuals. The interviewee reflects on her path of searching for her religiosity:

> *I had many internal battles. I wondered if God existed at all. I was an atheist for a while, but I remember that period as being empty. Maybe I was just a headstrong child. If I felt that way now, I would not see the point of this country's existence. I think there is something supernatural. Maybe it is the God that Christians and Muslims tell us about. Maybe we do not know this God at all, and these beliefs are just ideas* (Sesili, 22-year-old transgender woman).

The interviewee's reflections illustrate an individualized form of religiosity that exists independently of institutional frameworks. Despite moments of doubt and distancing from organized religion, she maintains a persistent belief in a higher power, suggesting that spirituality remains meaningful even in the absence of institutional belonging. Her discourse suggests that while formal religious institutions may exclude LGBTQ+ individuals, this exclusion does not necessarily result in the loss of faith. Conversely, belief transforms at the individual level. She continues:

> *I think a lot about the relationship between the queer community and religion, but it is the question marks raised by society that bother me. Why would you judge someone standing in a church, mosque, or synagogue and tell them to leave because they have their own beliefs? However, homophobia and transphobia are so prevalent that they make me think, and I want to distance myself from them* (Sesili, 22-year-old transgender woman).

The interviewee's reflections highlight a clear distinction between faith as a personal relationship with the divine and religion as an institutional authority. While she expresses trust in a compassionate and understanding God, she questions the legitimacy of religious authorities, particularly those rooted in Orthodox doctrine. She further reflects:

> *I believe the issue is with the priesthood. To me, if Christ is real, he is a very good person. If I stand in front of him, I trust God will understand my transformation. However, does not religion also forbid certain things? I do not want to deceive myself. Orthodoxy forbids what I do, but how can that be? Is this a mental disorder? Then I must be crazy, and it would show in other ways too. If I am alone in this, then a mistake has truly been made, and God can understand that. Maybe the restraining power of religion is at work here* (Sesili, 22-year-old transgender woman).

By situating the identified "problem" within the priesthood itself rather than in the belief system, she challenges the authority of religious institutions without rejecting spirituality in its entirety. In addition, the narrative reflects an ongoing internal struggle to understand religious and medical discourses. The questions, such as whether her identity is a "mental disorder," are indicative of the internalization of stigmatizing discourses that exist in the society of Georgia. This inner conflict illustrates how exclusionary religious norms not only operate externally but also become part of an individual's self-reflection.

When the interviewee discusses her gender identity in relation to spirituality, it is significant and intriguing. The interviewee's response offers a unique approach to reconciling gender identity with prevailing biological narratives, drawing upon a spiritual framework. She says:

> *If I did not believe this (in God) and were an atheist, viewing it only biologically, I would not be able to see myself as a woman. Biologically, you are a man, and that is the truth. I explain this by saying that I have a feminine soul and feminine energy. Many people notice that, including me. However, of course, we cannot escape biology altogether* (Sesili, 22-year-old transgender woman).

While acknowledging the social authority of biological definitions, she does not reject them entirely; instead, she offers an alternative explanation grounded in the notions of a "feminine soul" and "feminine energy." This suggests an effort to legitimize her gender identity within a context where biological determinations remain dominant. The interviewee's engagement with spirituality serves as a foundation for her self-understanding, creating a space in which her gender identity becomes meaningful and valid, despite the lack of formal recognition from institutions or society. This finding suggests that religious beliefs can function as a tool for self-acceptance that allows transgender individuals to express their gender identity beyond the established biological categories.

The second interviewee, also a transgender woman, expresses an interesting opinion regarding religion:

> *The church and politicians use us, the LGBTQ+ community, when it suits them. When something terrible happens, state representatives immediately involve the church, which then begins serious "work." If you speak to individuals, very few are genuinely hostile toward the community. The church and politicians use us during elections and at rallies to cover up their mistakes and crimes, fulfill their mission, and influence the public* (Anita, 34-years-old, transgender woman).

The interviewee's statement demonstrates a critical understanding of religion, conceptualized as an instrument of power. By emphasizing that "the church and politicians use us," she reframes the position of the LGBTQ+ community from passive subjects of exclusion to objects of strategic mobilization. Furthermore, her distinction between "individuals" and institutional entities is significant. The assertion that "very few are genuinely hostile" suggests that negative attitudes are shaped and intensified by organized discourses and practices. This standpoint underscores the capacity of religious authority to be mobilized during specific events, such as elections or public crises. In this sense, the interviewee's account provides a valuable illustration of how anti-LGBTQ+ narratives are not only socially embedded but also strategically reproduced.

The interviewee recounts her experiences more broadly, which relate to religion and the church as an institution:

> *I have been going to church regularly since I was a child. When I was little, I was an altar server for a while. I left the Church when I discovered my different gender identity. No one knew; I have not told anyone, but I left because I felt I no longer belonged there. When I moved to Tbilisi, I occasionally attended services. Later, after I had grown a bit and started wearing women's clothing, I entered the church one day, only to be expelled by the priest, who said, "You do not belong here." I was not insulted; I felt ashamed, and I never returned afterward* (Anita, 34-years-old, transgender woman)

The interviewee describes a transition from belonging to exclusion within the religious setting, not due to a loss of faith but to institutional rejection. Her long involvement, including serving as an altar server, demonstrates strong religious ties. Even after her gender identity was recognized, her attendance remained intermittent, indicating that her desire for spiritual participation persisted despite feeling different. The pivotal moment arises from external exclusion, as the priest explicitly rejects her presence in the church. Her shame, not anger, reveals the deep impact of institutional rejection. Exclusion is seen as social displacement and a loss of personal belonging. Her withdrawal from religion is caused by alienation, not a voluntary choice. The story shows how religious institutions can actively disrupt individuals' faith connections, even when spiritual needs remain. Regarding her current personal belief, she says:

> *I believe in God and am a Christian, but I do not believe in priests or clergy. I have my own personal faith. I light candles at home; I do not go to church. They do not let us in and, to tell the truth, I do not even want to go in, because there is so much evil in that church. I really do not want to stand and listen to it. If I want to pray, I have icons at home, where I can pray in peace alone* (Anita, 34-years-old, transgender woman).

The interviewee's account shows a clear separation between personal faith and institutional religion, similar to the first interviewee. She identifies as a devout Christian but

rejects priests and the Church, indicating a move toward individualized religiosity. Faith is not abandoned but shifted from public institutions to private practice, such as praying at home, using icons, and engaging in solitary practice, to reclaim spiritual agency amid restricted access to religious spaces. Her use of "evil" to describe the Church signals disillusionment with exclusion and moral rejection. Like the first interviewee, this does not lead to a loss of belief but to a personal, self-defined practice. These accounts reveal a broader pattern: transgender individuals often hold strong faith while distancing themselves from institutions that deny their belonging.

The narratives of the two transgender women interviewees demonstrate how macro-level social, religious, and cultural dynamics are translated into micro-level individual experience. Their experiences demonstrate that marginalization operates on multiple levels. First, there is the external level, characterized by exclusionary institutional practices. Second, there is the internal level, characterized by processes of self-reflection, self-discovery, and identity exploration.

Both interviewees actively engage in the process of reinterpretation and reconstruction of established discourses. This phenomenon is especially evident in their relationship to religion, where institutional exclusion does not lead to a loss of faith; rather, it leads to its transformation into individualized, self-defined forms of religiosity.

Furthermore, the narratives demonstrate how gender identity is expressed through alternative interpretations, including spiritual and personal understandings that go beyond the limitations of biological definitions. Their responses show the presence of internal differences within the LGBTQ+ community and even in transgender community, which are shaped by unequal access to resources, safety, and social recognition.

The purpose of these narratives is not to provide a comprehensive representation of all transgender experiences in Georgia. Rather, they seek to elucidate how structural inequalities, gendered norms, and religious authority are embodied, contested, and renegotiated in the quotidian lives of individuals.

The section on the features of transgender rights highlights key aspects, including visibility, healthcare access, and legal gender recognition, as major issues worldwide. The Georgian example shows a clear gap between these frameworks and actual realities. While these topics often drive activism and policy discussions elsewhere, they are rarely seen as immediate or achievable goals in this context. Instead, stories of transgender women tend to emphasize basic concerns like physical safety, protection from violence, and living without persistent fear.

Empirical material shows priorities shift due to vulnerability. Issues like visibility, seen as empowering elsewhere, pose risks here. Access to healthcare and legal recognition remain distant, so interviewees focus on survival and on negotiation strategies, such as staying invisible and seeking safety. Religion serves as a resource, helping them maintain a sense of belonging and moral legitimacy despite exclusion. It serves as both a spiritual practice and a form of resistance, preserving symbolic ties when social connections are marginalized.

Conclusion

The present article has demonstrated that contemporary debates on gender and LGBTQ+ rights cannot be understood in isolation but must be situated within transnational processes of anti-gender mobilization. As the extant literature shows, anti-gender movements operate strategically across contexts, using religion, nationalism, and "moral panic" to portray gender diversity as a threat to social order, morality, and national identity (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). These dynamics demonstrate that gender has become a significant domain of political conflict, in which struggles over identity are connected to power, legitimacy, and social control.

In post-Soviet and post-communist societies, these processes are marked by distinct historical and cultural dimensions. The legacy of Soviet governance, which encompassed the suppression of individual identities and the long-term impact of institutionalized homophobia, continues to shape public attitudes and social structures. Moreover, the post-Soviet resurgence of religion and its integration into national identity have strengthened the link between national belonging and gender roles. As comparative examples demonstrate, this has contributed to the formation of ethno-national frameworks in which LGBTQ+ identities are positioned as incompatible with national values and often framed as foreign or externally imposed (Tismaneanu 2019; Wiedlack 2023).

The analysis indicates that transgender individuals occupy a particularly vulnerable position within these processes. Issues such as visibility, legal gender recognition, and access to healthcare are not simply administrative problems, but are connected to systems of power that decide which identities are recognized and which are denied (Currah 2022; Spade 2011). The visibility of transgender bodies has been increased, and this is often associated with recognition. However, this also exposes individuals to increased risk, which causes their marginalization both within society and, at times, within the LGBTQ+ community itself.

In Georgia, these global and regional dynamics are localized and strengthened by the close interconnection of religion, nationalism, and political discourse.

The historical alliance between the Georgian Orthodox Church and the state, fortified through institutional arrangements and political discourses, has contributed to the consolidation of a form of gendered nationalism in which belonging is defined through adherence to heteronormative and religiously sanctioned norms (Constitutional Agreement of Georgia 2002; Ghoghoberidze 2017).

Furthermore, the transition from macro-level analysis to individual narratives demonstrates how these structural dynamics are experienced at the individual level. The case studies of the two transgender women demonstrate that marginalization operates both at external and internal levels. This influences access to resources and public space, as well as processes of self-understanding and identity formation. The experiences of transgender women demonstrate that institutional exclusion does not necessarily lead to the loss of faith; rather, it often results in individualized forms of religiosity, where belief is maintained while authority is questioned. Furthermore, the narratives demonstrate how gender identity is expressed through alternative frames, including spiritual interpretations, in response to dominant biological and social norms.

These processes indicate dynamics of power and recognition, in which social norms define the boundaries of acceptance and inclusion, while individuals seek to define their identities within and against these limitations (Foucault 1978; Butler 1990).

The findings don't represent all transgender experiences in Georgia but show how political, religious, and cultural processes shape individual identities, emphasizing the importance of combining macro analysis with real evidence. This highlights that gendered political conflicts have tangible and significant effects on marginalized individuals.

The case of Georgia shows how global anti-gender discourses adapt to local contexts, linking with history, religion, and nationalism. This influences public discourse and policy, shaping how people seek recognition, belonging, and safety. Understanding these processes is crucial for engaging with debates on gender and human rights, revealing that gender struggles are ultimately about national borders and inclusion.

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