

Abstract for PROWEL 2025

Mélody Gugelmann

How well does democracy promotion work? Perceptions of local CSOs on EU-civil society alliances in Georgia

The 2024 Nations in Transit Report puts Georgia in the category of “*autocratizing hybrid regimes*”, posing considerable concerns for domestic and international actors engaged in Georgia’s democratization. This development has been largely attributed to the ruling party’s tightening grip on power, political polarization, problems with the independence of the judiciary, and an increasingly hostile political environment targeting opposition parties and civil society (Freedom House 2024, BTI 2024, V-dem Report 2024). Against this background, the question arises as to how can we explain the (missing?) impact of democratizing forces – internal and external – on political change in so-called hybrid regimes? And how can the EU effectively strengthen domestic pro-democracy actors and simultaneously increase the costs for authoritarian practices?

Georgia has progressed from being an Eastern Partnership country to EU candidate status in December 2023. In this context, Georgian civil society has been named the “last line of defense against the unchecked power of the ruling GD party” (BTI 2024:46), keeping the country on its democratic path. However, the literature suggests that the EU-enlargement policies have generally improved civil society’s “*procedural empowerment*” while “*substantive empowerment*”, meaning actual impact on domestic policy outcome, remains absent (Wunsch 2018), leaving CSOs powerless vis-à-vis national governments’ attacks on democratic institutions. With this theoretical differentiation in mind, we aim to unpack civil society’s ability to “use” the EU accession process for their own goals. Using original interview data with civil society stakeholders as well as official documents and policy analysis, I address the following questions: **Do CSOs perceive the EU-accession process as a framework in which they can affect political change? And how do their perceptions shape their strategies in making “usage” of the EU to achieve their goals?** This research contributes to knowledge on *substantive civil society empowerment* in EU-candidate states and feeds into the theory of “EU-usage” (Jacquot and Woll) by domestic actors.