

Functional Integration of Volunteer Organizations into Georgia's Defense System: Opportunities, Benefits, and Strategic Perspectives

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Abstract

This article examines how cooperation between volunteer organizations (VOs) and the Georgian Defense Forces (GDF) can become a credible national resistance capability. It analyzes Georgia's Defence Code, defense policy documents, institutional materials, four semi-structured expert interviews, and one personal communication with the VO representative, all conducted between October 2025 and March 2026. It also compares the emerging Georgian framework with the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union and the Estonian Defence League. The article operationalizes functional integration through three dimensions: (1) legal and institutional compatibility, including authority, accountability, and organizational autonomy; (2) training and operational compatibility, including common standards and coordination; and (3) resource and logistical compatibility, including equipment, facilities, and sustainable support. The findings indicate that Georgia has created an important legal and institutional entry point through Chapter XVII of the Defence Code and the Legal Entity of Public Law (LEPL) Defense Volunteer. Nevertheless, institutional creation should not be equated with operational capability. Discussion remains on organizational autonomy, command relationships, and accountability, which may slow implementation. The Baltic cases demonstrate the value of durable legislation, territorial organization, recurring joint exercises, and predictable state support. However, they are not directly transferable because Georgia

differs in institutional structure, legislation, NATO status, and the history of its volunteer sector. The article proposes a phased compatibility model that preserves VO recruitment and civic identity while assigning the LEPL responsibility for certification, readiness validation, logistical accountability, and crisis coordination.

Keywords: Georgian Defense Forces; volunteer organizations; national resistance; total defense; civil–military relations; interoperability

Introduction

Modern conflicts have evolved into hybrid warfare and long-term confrontations, in which the civilian component has an increasing impact. In resistance theory, volunteers are seen not only as supporters of regular armed forces but also as a sign of a society's ability to organize and withstand military aggression or occupation. For small states with limited resources, such as Georgia, facing a superior adversary, the ability to mobilize society, preserve essential functions, and sustain organized resistance may contribute to both deterrence and defense after hostilities begin (Fiala, 2020; Hoffman, 2007; Wither, 2020). However, civilian contributions are not automatically effective. Volunteers can expand local knowledge, manpower, specialist skills, and social resilience, but poorly defined authority, non-standardized training, insecure communications, and weak accountability can also create operational risk.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has renewed attention to territorial defense and organized civilian participation. The defense of Kyiv showed how regular brigades, territorial-defense units, and civilian support networks could coordinate under extreme pressure, while also revealing the costs of improvising mobilization during an unfolding crisis (Collins, 2025). The lesson for Georgia is therefore not simply that volunteers matter. It is that the legal, organizational, and training arrangements governing their contributions must be established, tested, and understood before a crisis.

Georgia has taken significant steps in this direction. The Defense Code, adopted in 2023, introduced a statutory basis for defense volunteering and national resistance, and the Ministry of Defense established the LEPL Defense Volunteer in January 2024 to coordinate cooperation with volunteers. These reforms create an institutional opportunity to connect long-standing VOs with the GDF. They also create challenges. Formalization will improve standards, access to resources, and operational coordination. However, it will also reduce autonomy, privilege state preferences in training design, and impose obligations VOs cannot meet without predictable support.

This article asks: **How can cooperation between the GDF and VOs become an effective national resistance capability while preserving volunteer legitimacy and ensuring accountability?** It makes two contributions. Empirically, it offers an early assessment of Georgia's emerging framework, drawing on legal, documentary, interview, and comparative evidence. Conceptually, it treats functional integration as a multidimensional, negotiated process rather than organizational absorption.

Before analyzing the Georgian case in detail, it is essential to establish the theoretical framework and review the relevant literature on resistance movements, hybrid warfare, and legal foundations. The following section examines key scholarly works and policy documents that provide the conceptual foundation for understanding how VOs can be integrated into contemporary defense systems.

Literature Review

“The Resistance Operating Concept (ROC)” (2020) - by Otto Fiala provides a comprehensive analysis of resistance as a strategic tool for nations facing occupation or external threats. Grounded in historical examples and contemporary defense strategies, the book explains how small states can build resilience and capacity for organized, civilian resistance, led by the military, against superior military powers.

Fiala emphasizes the need for societies to prepare for resistance well before a crisis, advocating a holistic, society-wide approach to resilience. The book highlights how military, civilian, and government actors can work together to build a unified framework for national defense through irregular warfare and civilian mobilization. Fiala further explores how these concepts can enhance deterrence by signaling readiness and increasing the costs of occupation for potential aggressors. This work is particularly significant for small states with limited conventional military capabilities, as it offers practical insights into strengthening national defense through resilience, resistance networks, and comprehensive defense strategies. Although at times theoretical, Fiala's work remains firmly grounded in real-world applicability, serving as a valuable resource for defense strategists and policymakers. The Resistance Operating Concept is crucial for understanding modern resistance strategies and their role in contemporary defense planning. Therefore, the scientific work appears to be a solid theoretical source for the present research. The present study shares some of Fiala's concepts, particularly how modern resistance strategies are perceived in theoretical discourse and how they can be translated into relevant strategies through the prism of Georgia's current problem of a society-wide approach to resilience.

“Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars” (2007) -

Frank G. Hoffman introduces Hybrid Warfare as a crucial framework in strategic studies, arguing that traditional categories of warfare, conventional, irregular, terrorist, and criminal, fail to capture the evolving nature of conflict. Future conflicts will feature blended threats, in which adversaries merge military and non-military strategies, leveraging advanced capabilities alongside irregular tactics to exploit the vulnerabilities of technologically superior opponents. Hoffman's key contribution is defining Hybrid Warfare and critiquing rigid military classifications.

He claims that 21st-century adversaries will synchronize various modes of violence to achieve synergistic effects, operating at both operational and psychological levels to undermine political resolve and social unity. Hoffman states, “Hybrid Warfare presents a mode of conflict that severely challenges conventional military thinking,” urging doctrinal, institutional, and cultural changes. He critiques the “Fourth Generation Warfare” (4GW) framework for its focus on novelty and lack of historical context, noting the importance of integrating regular and irregular tactics in hybrid conflicts. His analysis foreshadows contemporary strategy discussions, emphasizing the need for defense planners to reshape force structures and programs to achieve greater flexibility, enabling military forces to counter adversaries across physical, informational, and psychological domains.

In the 21st century, a new Generation Warfare framework is a hybrid war that combines different forms of aggression; adversaries merge military and non-military strategies, incorporating political influence, modern technologies, propaganda, cyber-attacks, psychological pressure, biological means of fighting, and other paramilitary approaches. The reality of new-generation warfare calls for synchronized self-defense that involves massive mobilization of volunteers specialized in different fields of technology, science, medicine, and industry. The proposed framework for strengthening the country's self-defense and resilience aims to attract and include young volunteers with different specialties in the total defense system. From this perspective, the book has been closely considered.

“Legal Aspects of Armed Resistance” (2017) -

Marcin Konarski's article examines the legal frameworks surrounding armed resistance movements, focusing on the status of partisans and the legal nature of civil wars. It explores how international law defines and recognizes such movements, highlighting key issues of legitimacy, recognition, and the protection of resistance fighters across legal systems. Konarski traces the historical evolution of the right to resist, beginning with medieval political doctrines, its theoretical development in the 16th Century, and its formalization in frameworks such as the French Declaration of the Rights of

Man and of the Citizen and later the Hague and Geneva Conventions. He underscores the inherent tension between principles of state sovereignty and individuals' or groups' rights to resist illegitimate or occupying governments.

The analysis incorporates detailed case studies, mainly focusing on the Polish resistance movements, including the "cursed soldiers" who opposed the communist regime in Poland post-1945. The author assesses how international law has addressed their actions and legal status, highlighting the challenges of defining "legal combatants" and addressing violations of their rights. The document also examines broader historical contexts, such as partisan warfare during the Napoleonic era and the treatment of resistance fighters under German occupation during World War II.

Konarski critiques gaps and inconsistencies in international legal norms, particularly around recognizing resistance fighters as legitimate combatants. He also examines the conditions under which insurgents or partisans might gain recognition, such as controlling territory, operating under unified leadership, and adhering to the principles of war.

The paper also addresses the moral and legal dilemmas surrounding the treatment of captured partisans, analyzing the role of documents such as The Hague Regulations, the Geneva Conventions, and additional protocols. The work critiques the lack of comprehensive legal protection for combatants engaged in national liberation struggles outside the colonial context.

Konarski's work is an essential resource for scholars, policymakers, and legal practitioners interested in the intersection of armed Conflict, resistance, and international law. It highlights the need for more precise legal definitions and more consistent application of norms to protect those engaged in legitimate struggles for freedom and sovereignty. This document provides historical and legal insights and highlights a frequently overlooked aspect of international humanitarian law.

“Defence Code” (2023) - The Defense Code of Georgia has been in force since September 21, 2023. This law sets out how Georgia organizes its national defense. Its main goal is to protect the country's territorial integrity, sovereignty, and security, in accordance with the Constitution and national laws. The Code covers how the country organizes its defense, plans and implements defense policies, structures the Defense Forces and the Ministry of Defense, and manages military service for both the regular army and the reserves. It also sets rules for military education and discipline, national resistance, and the involvement of civilian volunteers in defense. This legal document provides the primary framework for understanding how Georgia has institutionalized volunteer participation in national defense, making it a critical foundation for the analysis that follows.

Operationalizing Functional Integration

For this study, functional integration is assessed across three dimensions. First, legal status defines eligibility, rights, obligations, accountability, and the conditions under which volunteers may train, receive equipment, or perform assigned tasks. Second, training interoperability addresses minimum common standards, specialist qualifications, communications procedures, and validation through joint exercises. Third, sustainable resourcing addresses predictable access to facilities, equipment, communications, transport, and accountable storage and maintenance. These dimensions structure the documentary analysis, interview coding, comparison, and recommendations.

This framework also clarifies the article's theoretical claim. Institutionalization is necessary but not sufficient. A law may authorize volunteering without producing trained units; standardized training may exist without equipment; resources may be provided without accepted command relationships; and administrative incorporation may reduce the motivation the system depends on. An effective model must therefore produce a mutually accepted exchange: VOs accept lawful standards and accountability, while the state provides credible access to training, resources, recognition, and meaningful roles.

Methodology

Research Design and Sources

The study uses a qualitative single-case design with a structured comparison of two Baltic reference cases. Georgia is the principal case because its volunteer-defense framework is a new and still developing institutionally. We selected Lithuania and Estonia using a most-similar logic: both are small states exposed to Russian military pressure, maintain organized volunteer-defense institutions, and embed those institutions within national defense. They are reference cases rather than templates, because their NATO membership, institutional histories, resources, and social conditions differ from Georgia's.

Four categories of evidence were triangulated: (a) Chapter XVII of Georgia's Defence Code; (b) Ministry of Defence materials, memoranda, and public institutional information; (c) official and scholarly materials on the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union and Estonian Defence League; (d) four semi-structured expert interviews; and (e) one personal communication conducted from October 2025 to March 2026. The interview sample was purposive and role-based. It included three officials directly involved in the LEPL Defense Volunteer process and one representative of Georgian VO. This composition aimed to compare institutional and volunteer perspectives rather than estimate opinion prevalence across the wider population.

Interview Protocol and Analysis

The interview guide covered three recurring themes: legal status and organizational reform; training curricula and certification; and resources, incentives, and implementation risks. The interviews were treated as expert testimony on an evolving process, not as independently verified proof that planned reforms were complete. Participants agreed in advance that their opinions and assessments would serve as primary sources for the article and support its findings. One VO participant is identified as VO-01 to preserve anonymity; other participants appear as attributed personal interviews. Personal interviews are cited in the text and, consistent with APA style, are not included in the reference list.

Analysis proceeded in two stages. First, we coded documentary and interview material deductively against the three dimensions of functional integration. Second, we examined divergent claims through negative-case analysis: we compared statements predicting rapid progress with evidence of legal uncertainty, resource constraints, and volunteer skepticism. We then assessed the Baltic cases through the same dimensions to identify mechanisms, contextual prerequisites, and transfer risks. This approach reduces reliance on a single institutional narrative, although it cannot eliminate it.

Ethics, Limitations, and Researcher Bias

The study minimizes disclosure of operationally sensitive information and does not describe plans, capabilities, vulnerabilities, or personal details beyond those already used for scholarly attribution. Its limitations are substantial. The sample is small, purposive, and weighted toward actors engaged in the reform process; it therefore cannot represent all volunteers, officials, or Georgian society. Interviewees may have institutional incentives either to present reform positively or to protect organizational autonomy. Public documents describe formal intent more readily than implementation outcomes. The LEPL is also too new for a longitudinal assessment of readiness, retention, or crisis performance. Finally, the author's policy interest in strengthening national resistance may create confirmation bias. The authors use triangulation, explicit coding criteria, cautious causal language, and attention to contrary evidence to mitigate these risks. Read the findings as an analytically informed assessment of an emerging system, not as proof of operational effectiveness.

Georgia's Volunteer-Defense Framework: Development and Legal Foundations

Modern warfare and military operations have fundamentally transformed their character, progressively blurring the distinction between

war and peace while simultaneously elevating the significance of nonmilitary elements in strategic defense planning. The Russian invasion of Ukraine exemplifies the critical role of civilian volunteers, particularly in contexts where regular military forces face numerical disadvantage. In Kyiv, the 72nd Mechanized Brigade and the 4th Rapid Reaction Brigade of the Ukrainian National Guard assumed primary defense responsibilities (Collins, 2025). Nevertheless, volunteers from territorial defense groups and other civilians without official military status constituted a significant dimension of the defensive posture. When Russia initiated its assault on Kyiv with approximately fifty thousand soldiers, the two Ukrainian brigades confronted a numerically superior adversary. The substantial participation of civilians in the defense effort proved instrumental in offsetting the asymmetry in battlefield force strength.

Ukraine's experience offers particularly salient lessons for small states with limited resources, especially those bordering Russia. Consequently, establishing a functional national resistance force requires systematic cooperation between the regular army and civilian VOs. American scholar and retired Army Colonel Otto Fiala articulates the theoretical foundations of resistance and its constituent elements in his book "The Resistance Operating Concept (ROC)," which outlines measures governments should implement in peacetime to cultivate an effective national resistance force (Fiala, 2020). A critical component of this theoretical framework is the degree of interoperability between VOs and regular armed forces, particularly with Special Forces.

Because of its small size, strategic geopolitical position, and history of Russian military aggression, the Republic of Georgia offers a relevant case study for examining the development and implementation of resistance capabilities. The 2008 war in Georgia prompted a civilian movement to form organizations that would unite individuals committed to training and preparation during peacetime. These organizations aimed to offer functional support to the regular army in the event of future aggression. This initiative marked the initial creation of a nonmilitary component, driven by volunteer motivation and operating independently from official state structures. Former military personnel founded the "Public Organization AISI," using their expertise to establish a structured framework and train members. Over several years, the organization expanded its influence, training many civilians in basic military and civil defense skills (AIS, n.d.). In 2013, certain members of the "AIS" leadership decided to expand their activities by establishing a new organization, the "General Giorgi Mazniashvili Youth Legion". Two primary differences distinguished these organizations: "AIS" operated exclusively in the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, and accepted only individuals aged 18 and above, whereas the "Youth Legion" intended to

establish regional branches throughout the country and, in addition to adults, also offered limited training opportunities to individuals aged 14 to 18 (Legion, n.d.).

The rise of hybrid threats, the increased likelihood of Russian military aggression, and the growth of VOs prompted state officials to develop a national resistance vision and establish corresponding structures. Within this framework, VOs were identified as a supporting component of the Georgian GDF in the event of military aggression or, more critically, partial or total occupation of the state. In 2016, the Georgian Army National Guard signed a memorandum with the "Youth Legion" and the public organization "AISI," thereby establishing a precedent for the formal affiliation of civil organizations with state institutions (Legionerebi, 2016). The subsequent phase involved integrating members of these organizations into joint training with limited participation. The primary objectives were to identify individual capabilities, assess potential roles in immediate situations, and develop future training plans aligned with GDF-established standards. In 2021, the memorandum was renewed and signed directly with the Ministry of Defense, thereby creating new opportunities to enhance resistance capabilities (Ministry of Defence of Georgia, 2021).

Despite several years of partnership under the memorandum, significant limitations persisted, indicating the need for a more comprehensive approach. The primary concern was the legal status of civilians designated as Defense Volunteers, which affected related procedures, such as equipping and providing military training, typically reserved for military personnel. In response, the government adopted a new approach by developing the "Georgian Defence Code," specifically Chapter XVII, which regulates all critical aspects related to volunteers and, most importantly, establishes the legal foundation for building National Resistance Capabilities (Defence Code, 2023).

As previously noted, the establishment within the Ministry of Defense of the structural element, the Legal Entity of Public Law (LEPL) Defense Volunteer (Ministry of Defence of Georgia, n.d.), represented another significant step toward deepening cooperation with VOs and, most importantly, toward the formation of a genuinely functional support component. Accordingly, such reforms have established a legislative and institutional foundation for effective, coherent, and positive cooperation. However, the reform's significance should nevertheless be stated cautiously. A statutory mandate establishes authority, but operational capability depends on secondary rules, accepted procedures, trained personnel, equipment, exercise validation, and institutional trust. Publicly available evidence does not yet show that all VOs have completed formal affiliation, that certification is applied uniformly, or that crisis command relationships have been tested at

scale. The legal foundation is therefore an enabling condition and an important achievement, not evidence that integration is complete.

Volunteer Organizations and the Georgian Defense Forces: Current Cooperation and Opportunities for Deeper Integration

Following the Ministry of Defense's transition to a more systematic approach to developing a civilian component within the defense system, primarily through VOs intended to support and serve as a force multiplier for the Georgian Defense Forces, the Ministry has implemented numerous reforms and taken concrete steps to strengthen cooperation. At present, cooperation with volunteers is in a transitional phase for both parties: VOs and the GDF. Naturally, this phase began with cooperation under memoranda, which has progressed in a highly positive and successful manner. However, this was neither sufficient nor adequate to achieve the GDF's objectives.

Since 2016, memoranda have enabled the Defense Forces to increase volunteers' involvement in various joint training exercises. In this regard, the primary focus was on the Special Operations Command and the National Guard, as their specific tasks made the volunteer component most relevant at that stage (Ministry of Defense of Georgia, 2021). The resistance movement's foundational logic determined the emphasis on these two commands. As a rule, the Special Operations Command serves as the primary effort in resistance operations. At the same time, the National Guard is expected to assume the principal coordinating role for reserve elements and their associated volunteers. These interactions and coordination between the GDF and VOs continued over the years, with varying degrees of intensity, yielding tangible results. However, these results created a desire for even better outcomes.

This led to the creation of the Legal Entity of Public Law (LEPL) Defense Volunteer. Its main goal was to unite VOs under a single umbrella and develop a functional support system for the Defense Forces that could include all parts of society. The systemic models expected to be effective in the Georgian context were those of the Baltic states. The Lithuanian Riflemen's Union (Lithuanian Riflemen's Union, n.d.) and the Estonian Defence League (Kaitseliit) (Estonian Defence League [Kaitseliit], n.d.) are organizations whose roles and goals make them useful, as both connect voluntary participation to state defense, though they represent different institutional arrangements. The LRU is a state-sponsored paramilitary civilian organization comprising approximately 19,000 members, supervised by Lithuania's Ministry of National Defence and regulated by dedicated legislation. The organization's primary objective is to protect the state's territorial integrity, sovereignty, and community resilience (Lithuanian

Riflemen's Union, n.d.). In contrast, the EDL is more directly embedded in Estonia's national-defense structure and has territorially assigned functions. The EDL comprises approximately 22,000 active members and is Estonia's national voluntary defense organization (Estonian Defence League [Kaitseliit], n.d.). Under the leadership of its military commander, the organization trains, prepares, and integrates Estonian citizens willing to serve their homeland into the national defense system without remuneration. In this respect, it serves as a structured institutional mechanism for channeling voluntary civic commitment into the state's formal defense architecture. The principal distinguishing feature of the Estonian Defence League, compared with its Lithuanian counterpart, lies in its markedly more militarized institutional character and training system. However, both benefit from long institutional histories, broad public recognition, recurring cooperation with armed forces, and the security architecture of NATO membership (Andžāns & Veebel, 2017; Estonian Defence League, n.d.; Lithuanian Riflemen's Union, n.d.; NATO, 2019; Wither, 2020).

The comparison reveals transferable mechanisms: durable legal authorization, a territorial structure, common certification, joint exercises, resource allocation, and a clear command formation. It also highlights conditions that cannot be replicated quickly. Baltic organizations are embedded in long histories of national mobilization and enjoy institutional continuity. NATO membership provides planning, interoperability, exercises, and collective-defense expectations that Georgia lacks.

Potential undesirable modes must therefore be considered. Rapid standardization may reduce participation before the state can replace lost capacity. Territorial assignment may improve local readiness but create uneven regional capability if recruitment and resources are concentrated in one location. Finally, official affiliation with the state can increase legitimacy while also making organizations targets for disinformation or cyber intrusion. The key lesson from the Baltic countries is the importance of maintaining institutional consistency over time: volunteers become dependable defense actors when law, training, command, resources, and civic legitimacy are developed together. Since its founding, the LEPL has focused on ensuring that, as in the Baltic states, VOs in Georgia are formalized, integrated under unified leadership, and receive maximum institutional support.

This process is relatively new for both the LEPL and the VOs. The system remains in the developmental stage, and despite available international experience and relevant knowledge, various challenges and implementation difficulties are expected to arise. These challenges share a common foundation that should be examined in the context of formal civil–military cooperation. To better understand the subject, it is useful to

categorize the current situation into several key aspects and analyze each separately. Within this context, the analysis will focus on three key areas: the legal dimension of civil–military relations, the training and preparedness of VOs, and mechanisms to support these organizations through resource provision.

Effective systems, particularly those operating under state patronage, cannot be established without a sound legislative framework. In the current context, the primary challenge is that VOs operate exclusively as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and almost all maintain distinct internal regulations and governance structures. By contrast, the LEPL is a state institution and, as such, operates within and is strictly governed by the existing legislative framework. Naturally, as in any effort to achieve interoperability and effective cooperation, both parties must make certain compromises. However, in this context, the VOs bear primary responsibility for implementing the necessary reforms, aligning their organizational structures and, in general, their internal order with the state-established regulatory framework. Both the Defense Volunteer LEPL and the VOs have shown strong institutional commitment to this process and are actively implementing the reforms needed for closer integration. According to Colonel Davit Tielidze, a representative of the Defense Volunteer LEPL, significant progress has already been achieved, and the VOs are expected to attain full compliance with the state's legal and regulatory framework in the near future (D. Tielidze, personal interview, March 24, 2026). This development marks an important milestone in strengthening institutional cooperation and integrating the volunteer component into Georgia's national defense system.

The degree of compatibility between the Defense Forces and VOs largely depends on the volunteers' training curricula and the standardization process. However, this topic is also the subject of the greatest discussion between the two sides and, it may be said, occupies a central place among the matters requiring agreement. As noted above, VOs have existed for many years and have accordingly conducted various training courses. Beyond their practical component, some of these courses also carry traditional significance for certain organizations. Consequently, they approach any potential changes in this area with particular caution. A clear illustration of this is the opinion expressed by one of the leaders of a particular organization: "Our training programs have been developed over the past fifteen years based on our members' needs and our organizational mission, and we are confident that we have created effective programs for volunteers. We are concerned because we do not know why we should change something that already works well" (VO-01, personal communication, October 2025).

However, this cautious approach to change cannot change the fact that some level of standardization is unavoidable to improve compatibility. In the future, civilians, through VOs, should become part of the LEPL structure, which, for the Defense Forces, means establishing a third segment alongside the Regular Army and the National Guard to perform a supporting function during times of crisis or war. Accordingly, the Defense Forces need to know the qualifications of the personnel they entrust with this supporting function. In this process, of course, the LEPL remains the principal actor. It bears the considerable responsibility of identifying the optimal solution in such a situation. According to Lieutenant Colonel Bidzina Tsereteli of the LEPL Defense Volunteer (B. Tsereteli, personal interview, December 9, 2025), in coordination with the relevant services of the Defense Forces, they have developed a volunteer training system that ensures the coverage of the entire volunteer segment and, most importantly, maintains an appropriate balance between the requirements of the Defense Forces and the existing training programs of the VOs. Accordingly, there are very positive expectations that tangible progress in this area will be achieved in the near future.

In Georgia, VOs are nonprofit organizations, and accordingly, their financial resources are very limited. As a result, they operate with limited resources, which they primarily supplement through various alternative means; however, these are insufficient. One of the VO's leaders, Paata Gigaauri, states: "The organization relies heavily on volunteer contributions and personal resources. This limits our ability to expand infrastructure and procure high-tech equipment, such as drones." (P. Gigaauri, personal interview, February 2, 2026). The Defense Forces require volunteers who are not only well-trained but also properly equipped. Through the LEPL, the Ministry of Defense of Georgia firmly confirms its readiness and full support. However, challenges also exist. The principal issue here is the official status of the VOs, which remains the main obstacle to receiving full logistical support. Accordingly, once the VOs become official members of the LEPL structure, the Defense Forces will have the legal authority to provide volunteers with full logistical support. As Lieutenant Colonel Nikoloz Khachidze states, the LEPL has already completed the necessary preparatory work and carried out the required planning. Accordingly, once the official status issue is resolved, the volunteers will receive full support (N. Khachidze, personal interview, November 19, 2025).

Interviews with representatives of volunteer organizations indicate some skepticism about the process. This skepticism largely stems from the anticipated changes needed to achieve compatibility and establish a formal legal framework. Particular attention should be given to concerns about the degree of autonomy and freedom of action of volunteer organizations, as

reflected in various aspects of their activities. However, the findings show that the current situation reflects the Georgian Defense Forces' considerable efforts and the significant progress made in laying a solid foundation for greater compatibility between civilian volunteers and the Defense Forces. Although certain challenges remain at this stage, as discussed above, efforts are already underway to address them, and VOs are expected to be incorporated into the LEPL structure in the near future.

Building an Operational National Resistance Model: Policy Recommendations for Volunteer–Georgian Defense Forces Cooperation

Conceptually, the national resistance movement is a highly complex system that naturally requires a comprehensive, threat-based approach. Although the Ministry of Defense of Georgia has already made significant progress, several important changes are still needed to further improve and strengthen the system. First, we need to address the existing legislative framework and the changes required. As noted above, Chapter XVII of Georgia's current Defense Code regulates volunteer activities; however, the legal framework still needs to incorporate several key aspects. Neither the law discussed above nor any other existing regulation defines volunteers as a distinct component of the national defense system. Without such a legal provision, any volunteer who joins a volunteer organization and, through it, becomes affiliated with the LEPL will still be regarded as an ordinary civilian. Consequently, in the event of war conditions, such an individual would need to be formally called up to acquire official combatant status and thereby be legally entitled to participate in the defense of the state. At the same time, women constitute a significant proportion of volunteers. Under Georgian legislation, however, they are not subject to mobilization or call-up, meaning their potential cannot be fully utilized, and this valuable resource would remain largely untapped (Defence Code, 2023). Introducing such a provision would address these issues and, most importantly, better prepare the system to initiate and sustain national resistance if necessary. In addition, no existing legal provision regulates arming volunteers. In other words, even if volunteers acquire the official status recognized by the Defense Code, it remains unclear how and through what legal mechanism the state would assign combat weapons to them when necessary. Therefore, if these individuals are to participate fully in combat operations or a national resistance movement, the law must clearly regulate this issue.

Alongside legislative changes, the LEPL must establish an appropriate internal structure. This structure should include units of defined size (for instance battalions), with volunteers assigned to them. These units are commonly referred to as cadre-based units. As a rule, apart from the command and staff elements, positions within these units remain unfilled

during peacetime and are reserved for volunteers, who would fill them when required. Establishing such formations would enable the LEPL to develop a system to call up, equip, train, and manage volunteers. Unit commanders would plan and implement these functions. In particular, they would manage sensitive and critical issues, such as standardizing training programs, in close coordination with volunteer organization leadership. Each unit commander would ensure these processes were carried out effectively and to a high professional standard. Lastly, the concept of building up volunteers suggests that the exact number of volunteers cannot be determined in advance. Consequently, such a unit structure would provide the flexibility to accommodate as many willing volunteers as possible.

One key aspect is volunteer support; therefore, it is essential to develop a clear resource support concept that defines support standards for volunteers and outlines how their training and cultural activities will be supported. The underlying principle is straightforward: plans for cadre-based units should align with the level of support the logistics system can realistically provide. Accordingly, determining the resources to be allocated and ensuring their effective management will be critical to the successful establishment and operation of this system. In addition, the LEPL should develop a volunteer support package to address its additional needs.

Both legislative changes and internal systemic reforms should help preserve a certain degree of autonomy for volunteer organizations. This is essential to ensure these organizations retain their role and continue their primary function of providing volunteers to the Defense Forces. Accordingly, volunteer organizations should continue independently recruiting new volunteers and providing initial training. This would allow each volunteer to maintain a certain degree of affiliation with their respective organization while also being formally enrolled within the LEPL. Furthermore, allowing volunteer organizations to manage their allocated resources independently would significantly increase their operational flexibility and reduce bureaucracy. This, in turn, would speed up overall system development.

Taken together, the measures discussed above would ultimately lay the foundation for a system that can effectively integrate the military and civilian components when necessary. If required, such a system would also enable the state to conduct a national resistance movement to defend its sovereignty, territorial integrity, and legitimate constitutional order.

Conclusion

This study examined how cooperation between volunteer organizations (VOs) and the Georgian Defense Forces (GDF) can become an effective national resistance capability while preserving VOs' organizational

identity and autonomy and ensuring institutional accountability. The findings suggest that achieving this objective requires more than establishing formal cooperation or incorporating volunteer organizations into state structures. Rather, effective integration depends on developing functional compatibility between the military and civilian components of the national defense system across three interconnected dimensions: legal and institutional compatibility, training and operational compatibility, and resource and logistical compatibility.

Regarding **legal and institutional compatibility**, Georgia has established an important foundation for strengthening cooperation between volunteer organizations and the GDF. The 2023 adoption of the Defense Code, particularly Chapter XVII, and the subsequent establishment of the Legal Entity of Public Law (LEPL) Defense Volunteer represent significant developments in institutionalizing civilian participation in national defense. These measures have created a formal framework for coordinating volunteer activities and developing closer cooperation with the Defense Forces. Nevertheless, the research identifies several issues that require further clarification and development, particularly regarding the formal affiliation of volunteer organizations and the distribution of institutional responsibilities.

Regarding **training and operational compatibility**, the findings indicate that cooperation between volunteer organizations and the GDF has already created opportunities for joint training and the exchange of practical experience. Furthermore, interviews with representatives of the LEPL Defense Volunteer suggest that efforts are underway to develop more standardized training arrangements consistent with the operational requirements of the Defense Forces. However, differences between existing volunteer training programs and state-established requirements remain an important challenge. Some volunteer organizations are hesitant to modify programs developed over many years, particularly when those programs form part of their organizational identity. Therefore, further progress requires mutually agreed training standards, appropriate certification procedures, regular joint exercises, and clearly defined supporting functions.

The third dimension, **resource and logistical compatibility**, reveals another essential condition for effective integration. The study shows that Georgian volunteer organizations operate under considerable financial and material constraints, limiting their ability to expand training activities, improve infrastructure, and acquire necessary equipment. Although LEPL Defense Volunteer representatives have expressed institutional readiness to strengthen logistical support, implementing these arrangements remains closely tied to developing appropriate legal and organizational mechanisms. Accordingly, sustainable integration requires predictable resource allocation,

clearly established support standards, effective logistical coordination, and transparent accountability procedures.

The comparative examination of the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union and the Estonian Defence League further shows that effective volunteer participation in national defense depends on long-term institutional relationships, standardized preparation, and sustained state support. Although Lithuania's and Estonia's institutional models cannot be transferred directly to Georgia because of differences in their security environments, organizational histories, and defense structures, their experiences offer relevant lessons for developing Georgia's volunteer-defense framework. In particular, they illustrate the importance of combining institutional coordination with the continued motivation and active participation of civilian volunteers.

Taken together, the findings indicate that **Georgia has made meaningful progress in establishing the legal and institutional foundations for closer cooperation between volunteer organizations and the GDF, but developing a fully functional, operationally compatible volunteer component still requires further actions.** The main challenge is no longer recognizing the importance of civilian participation in national defense, but translating that recognition into an effective, sustainable system. This requires continued legislative and organizational development, clearly defined responsibilities, compatible training standards, adequate logistical support, and mechanisms for evaluating volunteer preparedness.

Ultimately, the study concludes that **effective integration means achieving functional compatibility rather than fully incorporating volunteer organizations into military structures.** By addressing the remaining challenges across the three analytical dimensions, Georgia can strengthen cooperation between its military and civilian components and establish more credible foundations for organized national resistance. However, the system's effectiveness will ultimately depend on implementing, practically validating, and sustaining the reforms over the long term, not on their formal adoption alone.

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